



The platformization of the news : publishers' relationships with messaging platforms and the adoption of these tools for news distribution and audience engagement

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Délivré par l'Université Toulouse 3 - Paul Sabatier

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Giuliander CARPES DA SILVA

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**La platformisation de l'information : les relations des éditeurs
avec les plateformes de messagerie et l'adoption de ces outils
pour la distribution des nouvelles et l'engagement du public**

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THE PLATFORMIZATION OF THE NEWS: PUBLISHERS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH MESSAGING PLATFORMS AND THE ADOPTION OF THESE TOOLS FOR NEWS DISTRIBUTION AND AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

Presented by Giuliander Carpes da Silva

In partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) at the University of Toulouse 3 Paul Sabatier

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Abstract

Under the framework of political economy and considering the multidimensional process of *the platformization of the Internet*, this research seeks to understand the relationships between news publishers and digital platforms such as Google and Facebook and how they influence news organizations' adoption of messaging applications such as WhatsApp, Messenger and Telegram for news distribution and audience engagement in the aftermath of Facebook's algorithmic changes implemented between the end of 2016 and the beginning of 2018, which caused publishers to lose the connection with parts of their audiences and the migration of part of the news consumption to other platforms such as messaging applications. This study employed a qualitative dominant mixed method research (multiple case studies with the collection of documents and observations, expert interviews with editors and executives of news organizations in Brazil, Chile, Guatemala, Mexico, Spain and France, and quantitative content analysis of messages sent by publishers on WhatsApp and Telegram) to find that publishers' dissatisfaction with Facebook has spilled over news organizations' relationships with messaging applications, affecting the adoption of WhatsApp, the leading chat app in the countries addressed. Facebook's contingent policies and WhatsApp's structural and technical limitations to news work function as barriers for the wide adoption of this tool by publishers, forcing them to stay away or even *deplatform*. Messaging apps' affordances such as *efficiency* and *reaching audiences*, national contexts (e.g., the ubiquity of WhatsApp in Brazil), and specific characteristics of some news organizations such as their focus on local news or fact-checking are reasons for publishers' insistence on maintaining a presence on the platform. Although partnerships with fact-checkers show a limited approach from Meta/WhatsApp to deal with disinformation, focused mostly on countering rumors and not on the larger circulation of information from credible news sources, they also seem unique in the larger panorama of platform-publisher relationships: instead of targeting only well-established partners like Google and Facebook have originally done every time they released new features, WhatsApp looked to newly founded, independent, and early stage growth initiatives (i.e., fact-checking news startups). Although beneficial at first, these news initiatives create considerable dependencies on the messaging app not only in terms of connection to their audiences but also financial as WhatsApp

had already become one of the main sources of revenue for fact-checking organizations: changes to the platform's policies could affect their practices on the chat app and have drastic consequences to their sustainability. This study also finds that specific aspects of news consumption on messaging applications such as *news snacking* (i.e., several short checks of messages throughout the day) shape the content sent by news organizations on chat apps, but, in comparison to open social media, publishers also enjoy larger autonomy to define news subjects that get distributed in accordance with their own journalistic criteria. Research carried out after the changes implemented by Facebook claimed that news outlets have sought to increasingly use news content as a bait to eventually convert readers into subscribers or paying members. This study notes the limited use of this type of strategy in the realm of messaging applications, despite publishers' increasing 'product orientation', which is reflected in the emergence of new editorial functions and staff positions connected to the business side of the companies.

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1. Introduction

During much of the 2010s, the media has gradually delegated more power over news distribution to digital intermediaries such as Google and Facebook in exchange of potential larger shares of online advertising revenues (E. J. Bell et al., 2017; Rashidian et al., 2018; Smyrnaio & Rebillard, 2019). According to *Parse.ly*, a firm providing online publishers with analytics tools, the peak of this trend occurred in early 2016, when together both platforms responded for up to 80% of the traffic driven to news websites¹. By that time, news media reached the point of being called 'the platform press' by Emily Bell for their position of constant submission to digital intermediaries, almost automatically accepting to experiment with their features (e.g., native videos, live streaming, etc.) every time something new was launched on the technological front. As in a chain effect, relinquishing control over news distribution caused the cession of other editorial functions (and the revenue derived from them) to platforms:

“There is a rapid takeover of traditional publishers’ roles by companies including Facebook, Snapchat, Google, and Twitter that shows no sign of slowing, and which raises serious questions over how the costs of journalism will be supported. These companies have evolved beyond their role as distribution channels, and now control what audiences see and who gets paid for their journalism, and even what format and type of flourishes. Publishers are continuing to push more of their journalism to third-party platforms despite no guarantee of consistent return on investment. Publishing is no longer the core activity of certain journalism organizations. This trend will continue the news companies give up more than the traditional functions of publishers” (Bell et al., 2017, p. 9).

However, things change fast on the digital landscape intermediated by platforms (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Between the end of 2016 and the beginning of 2018, attempting

¹ Richter, F. (2016, June 30). Facebook’s importance to online publishers. *Statista*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/chart/5143/referral-sources-for-online-publishers/>. May 23, 2022. VanNest, A. (2015, December 4). Facebook continues to beat Google in sending traffic to top publishers. *Parse.ly*. Retrieved from <https://blog.parse.ly/facebook-continues-to-beat-google-in-sending-traffic-to-top-publishers/>. May 23, 2022.

to recover falling engagement rates in its main social medium, Facebook made some algorithmic changes that eventually cut a considerable part of the connection between news organizations and their audiences by privileging posts from friends and family in its newsfeed at the expense of news content (Cornia et al., 2018; Rashidian et al., 2019). As traffic from Facebook declined, publishers' distrust in the platform increased, and news consumption has progressively migrated to other mobile tools, specially messaging applications such as WhatsApp (see figure 1) – interestingly, also owned by Facebook or Meta, as the holding company that controls some of the most popular social media recently rebranded to² (Newman et al., 2021).

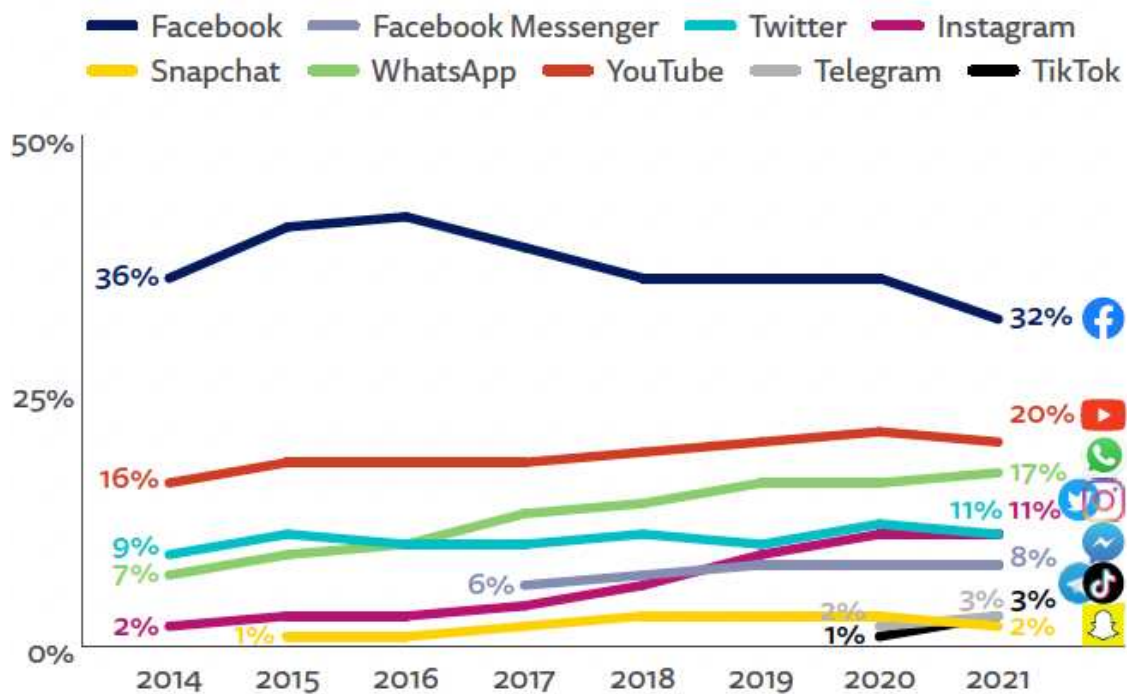


Figure 1. Proportion of respondents that used each social network for news in the last week from 2014 to 2021 – average of 12 markets covered by the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report 2021 (Newman et al., 2021).

Early in 2019, almost at the same time Facebook was dealing with a remarkable loss of reputation caused by the Cambridge Analytica scandal and escalating accusations that the manipulation of its algorithms helped Donald Trump to be elected for the

² Zuckerberg, M. (2021, October 28). Founder's letter 2021. *Meta*. Retrieved from <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/10/founders-letter/> on September 23, 2022.

presidency of the United States³, the company's CEO announced what the media has called a 'pivot to privacy'⁴. According to Mark Zuckerberg, all Facebook's platforms would eventually follow 'a privacy-focused vision' based on what it has accomplished with the development of WhatsApp in recent years: "focus on the most fundamental and private use case – messaging, – make it as secure as possible, and then build more ways for people to interact on top of that, including calls, video chats, groups, stories, businesses, payments, commerce, and ultimately a platform for many other kinds of private services" (Zuckerberg, 2019, par. 7). Besides obviously increasing the importance of private interactions and interoperability with Instagram and Messenger, the main principles fostered by this change included enhancing encryption, reducing permanence (traces of users previous actions, such as message logs), reenforcing safety, and securely storing data (Zuckerberg, 2019).

Without previous notice, news organizations were faced with a challenging new scenario in which they were forced to make decisions on how to recover their lost online audience, review their strategies with the focus on maintaining their businesses' sustainability, and define if it was worth keeping recent years path of utilization of social media, following the news consumers onto whatever the next platform they would move to. All of those actions should have been taken without losing sight of consequent dependencies created on such a partner as Facebook, often linked to scandals, and whose ability to deal with mis- and disinformation has been increasingly put to the test lately, including by regulators (Rashidian et al., 2019).

Privileging a political economy framework, this study is aimed at understanding how news organizations have reacted to this complex situation with the specific intention of addressing their stance on the adoption of messaging applications', considering these tools' increasing importance for news consumption. After Facebook's algorithmic changes and the media completed the inventory its effects, news publishers have reported the intention of using social media more pragmatically, adjusting their

³ Weisbaum, H. (2018, April 18). Trust in Facebook has dropped 66% since the Cambridge Analytica scandal. *NBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.nbcnews.com/business/consumer/trust-facebook-has-dropped-51-percent-cambridge-analytica-scandal-n867011> on September 23, 2022.

⁴ Rothman, J. (2019, March 6). Mark Zuckerberg announces Facebook's pivot to privacy. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/news/current/mark-zuckerberg-announces-facebooks-pivot-to-privacy> on September 23, 2022.

employment for news distribution to better fit news organizations' own business goals (e.g., also using news content to promote subscriptions or membership programs besides only posting links on platforms with the aim of increasing click rates) (Cornia et al., 2018; Rashidian et al., 2019). However, there is a lack of research focusing specifically on media's strategic use of chat apps, making broader examinations that could be generalizable outside the borders of developed countries, and taking into consideration more data besides the personal accounts of a few editors and executives. Jenkins (2020), for example, mentioned *en passant* that a couple European local news organizations have attempted to use WhatsApp to recover at least part of the audience lost on Facebook, but she did not provide further details on the reasoning from news editors and executives to adopt this tool beyond that nor discussed practical challenges of its implementation in newsrooms still largely focused on producing content for print (and where, consequently, traditional perspectives on the role of journalism tend to remain strongly ingrained).

1.1. Messaging applications and the platformization of the news

Messaging applications are embedded in a broader process that has affected the whole digital economy in the last couple decades, which is the *platformization of the Internet*. This complex phenomena refers to “the penetration of the infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental frameworks of platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life. And (...) the reorganization of cultural practices and imaginations around platforms” (Poell et al., 2019, p. 5-6). According to the authors, platformization is composed by three institutional dimensions: (1) the reorganization of economic relations around multi-sided markets, (2) the development of data infrastructures, and (3) platform governance.

The first relates to the platforms' capacity of optimizing, in the digital realm, the matchmaking of different market sides that can benefit from each other – task already performed with smaller capacity by other types of intermediaries such as newspapers (which bridge gaps between readers and advertisers) and video game console manufacturers (which connect video game producers and consumers) in the physical realm (Rochet & Tirole, 2003, 2006). Benefiting from a larger prevalence of network effects

allowed by the increasing access to the Internet, digital intermediaries manage to include several different types of stakeholders (e.g., all kinds of cultural producers, developers, etc.) in the same platformed ecosystems (Evans & Schmalensee, 2016).

The second dimension of platformization refers to platforms' capacity of turning every interaction from users of the Internet into data as they have become the dominant infrastructures of the digital economy (Van Dijck, 2014). On the one hand, platforms lower costs of innovation by allowing their complementors to build products and services on top of their infrastructures (Bodle, 2011; Gawer, 2014); on the other hand, they provide partners with analytics tools that afford the prediction of user behavior to some extent (Couldry & Turow, 2014; Turow, 2013). Through boundary resources, platforms can strategically target specific sectors of the digital economy such as advertisers with this kind of integration, constantly expanding their operating markets and the revenues derived from them (Gerlitz et al., 2019; Helmond et al., 2019).

The third important element of platformization concerns platforms' power to establish and enforce the rules that users and other stakeholders should follow to interact through their interfaces. In the absence of stronger State regulation, platforms are largely responsible for regulating themselves and, consequently, shape the content that can be created, distributed, marketed and monetized on their infrastructures, affecting the direction of entire industries (Gillespie, 2018a, 2018b). Platform governance is enforced by standards, guidelines and policies, content moderation and content curation (Gorwa, 2019; Poell et al., 2021).

Messaging applications can work as platform instances such as Messenger and WhatsApp or standalone platforms such as Telegram. In the first case, these applications serve different kinds of usages and users but still accomplish in various levels to integrate their data into Facebook's macro infrastructure (Nieborg & Helmond, 2019). In the second case, Telegram works as a platform free from parenting infrastructures still in its infancy: in search of greater scale and forms of monetization it allows users and eventual complementors freedoms that have long been targeted (even if insufficiently) by platforms owned by Facebook – for example, the tool still does not perform any form of content moderation on its open channels with unlimited number of members, becoming a popular destination for propagators of mis- and disinformation (Rogers, 2020).

The platformization of the Internet has contributed to the creation of dependencies and obligating players from various sectors of the digital economy to conform to platforms' frameworks (Poell et al., 2021; Smyrnaio, 2018; Van Dijck et al., 2018a; Van Dijck, 2020). The news industry is just one of these sectors. The platformization accelerated the unbundling of news, making news pieces live and die on their own on the digital environment and not as parts of a larger product such as the editions of daily newspapers or magazines (Carr, 2008). Supposedly to privilege the free and open character of the Internet, platforms such as Google encouraged news producers to keep their online content free, making it difficult for the media to monetize news in the digital environment or even for readers/viewers to get used to paying for news consumption as they had been used to do offline (Rashidian et al., 2018). Scholars have shown that, so far, mainly a few elite news players have been able to revert this logic to some extent and manage to maintain sustainable revenues through digital subscriptions or memberships (Chyi & Ng, 2020; Myllylahti, 2016).

If nowadays it is clear that people increasingly consume news through messaging applications and that a good part of this content contains mis- and disinformation (Evangelista & Bruno, 2019; Garimella & Eckles, 2020; Yamamoto et al., 2018), the role of professional news publishers in these structures still needs further clarification. Facebook has been sending mixed signals to the media about their utilization of its tools. In the case of Messenger, the platform made available a series of features such as free sending of messages and tools for producing chatbots exclusively for pages registered in its News Page Index – registration, however, is not automatic and depends on Facebook's approval according to criteria that have a certain level of subjectivity⁵. On WhatsApp, at the same time that it threatened to ban accounts that used content automation and mass messaging⁶, the platform has earmarked resources and training for organizations that work with fact-checking to carry out and distribute their work through

⁵ Cohen, D. (2020, February 6). Facebook News Page Index for media and publishers comes to the Nordic region. *AdWeek*. Retrieved from <https://www.adweek.com/performance-marketing/facebook-news-page-index-for-media-and-publishers-comes-to-the-nordic-region/> on September 27, 2021.

⁶ Hazard Owen, L. (2019, June 21). As of December, publishers will be no longer allowed to send newsletters on WhatsApp. *Nieman Lab*. Retrieved from <https://www.niemanlab.org/2019/06/as-of-december-publishers-will-no-longer-be-allowed-to-send-out-newsletters-on-whatsapp/> on July 13, 2019.

the mobile application⁷. Telegram, on the other hand, presents itself as a platform with mixed characteristics between a traditional messaging application, which allows private conversations, and an open social medium, with its channels (R. Rogers, 2020). The application has also facilitated the account validation process, which could be an attraction factor for the media always seeking to use credibility in its favor. However, the platform's still incipient popularity, its opaque governance and the consequent almost complete freedom for users to spread disinformation may weigh against its adoption by newsrooms.

1.2. Research questions

In this scenario, this study places considerable attention on examining if prior relationships with a platform such as Facebook influence the developments of news organizations' strategies for news distribution on messaging applications – not only ones owned by the company but also emerging ones such as Telegram, which can benefit from potential disagreements between publishers and their usual partner in the field of platform content sharing. In this line of inquiry, this research initially seeks to answer the following research question and sub-research questions:

RQ1. What kinds of relationships are news organizations and platforms building in the domain of messaging applications?

Sub-RQ1.1. How important are digital platforms, in general, to the business models of news organizations, according to their own editors?

Sub-RQ1.2. How satisfied are news organizations with the return on investment they make in content distribution across platforms?

Sub-RQ1.3. How does a news organization's satisfaction level with a platform such as Facebook affect the adoption of the company's messaging applications such as Messenger and WhatsApp and a competitor such as Telegram?

⁷ Bealor, S. (2022, April 7). \$800,000 is available to help fact-checkers fight misinformation on WhatsApp. *Poynter*. Retrieved from <https://www.poynter.org/from-the-institute/2022/800000-is-available-to-help-fact-checkers-fight-misinformation-on-whatsapp/> on May 13, 2022.

These tools' affordances for publishers is another aspect that can influence their adoption or not for news distribution. The concept of affordances has gained traction lately as scholars noticed that platforms provide different kinds of users with different interfaces, allowing them to perform different kinds of actions (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). In this sense, it seems important to investigate publishers' motivations for adopting messaging applications and this research use the following set of research questions as a guidance:

RQ2. What are the main motivations for news organizations to adopt a messaging application for content distribution?

Sub-RQ2.1. Which are the most adopted messaging applications by news organizations?

Sub-RQ2.2. Why are news organizations (if they are) privileging specific messaging applications over others?

In addition to being able to provide direct traffic to publishers' websites, as noted by Jenkins (2020), chat apps in theory also potentiate new forms of relationship between news outlets and their audiences, as they privilege interpersonal communication in private conversation spaces (Boczek & Koppers, 2020). That is, unlike open social media, where comments need to be controversial to attract attention and generate interactions, the content of dialogues between all users of messaging applications remains, most of the time, private only to its participants (Masip et al., 2021). In this research, I evaluate the extent to which these kinds of affordances are valued by editors and news executives and if, in practice, engagement is stimulated on their channels on messaging applications.

Moreover, this study analyzes news publishers' active channels on messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram with the intention of describing and classifying their strategies for these kinds of platforms. I evaluate the frequencies news outlets are sending messages, their formats, types of content attached (links, pictures, videos, audios), their language (for example, if there is the use of expressions characteristic of online communication such as emojis, stickers and GIFs), as well as the main news topics covered. Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2013) noted that the subjects traditionally

privileged by journalists are not those that, in principle, most interest readers. This news gap would have been narrowed in recent years by the more preponderant role of social media and their content curation algorithms with harmful consequences for democracy, as some scholars assume (Bail et al., 2018; Bakshy et al., 2015; Valenzuela et al., 2021). Due to the almost complete absence of algorithms in the selection of message content, journalists may have regained preponderance in the gatekeeping role of deciding which matters are of greater relevance to their audiences.

And, finally, this research attempts to confirm or reject in practice news editors and executives' discourses around their strategic utilization of platforms in general and messaging apps in particular by examining if there are mentions to their business models on the messages they actually send on their channels on chat applications. Thus, the last set of research questions that guide this study is formulated as follows:

RQ3. What are news organizations' strategies for reaching news audiences on messaging applications?

Sub-RQ3.1. To what extent are news organizations adapting to the specific characteristics of news consumption on messaging applications?

Sub-RQ3.2. To what extent are news organizations using messaging applications to engage with their audiences?

Sub-RQ3.3. To what extent are news organizations strategically using messaging applications to promote their own business models?

1.3. A qualitative dominant mixed methods research

Expert interviews have been researchers' preferred method for the analysis of the complex and tense relationships between news organizations and platforms and to examine the strategies adopted by the media to distribute content on social media (see Bell et al., 2017; Nielsen & Ganter, 2018; Rashidian et al., 2018, 2019; Smyrnaio & Rebillard, 2009, 2019). Hence, it seems natural to employ this methodology to answer the research questions proposed above. However, the sole application of this methodological approach would present some important limitations, such as the difficulty of accessing important professionals from the staff of media companies, their limited time

available to meet a researcher and possible overestimations of their decisions and positions on the issues they are directly dealing with on a daily basis. Furthermore, as the adoption of messaging applications for news distribution is not yet a fully institutionalized practice among publishers, there are few people within each organization capable of addressing this question. Thus, the adoption of expert interviews as a single method would bring difficulties in triangulating the results based on the individual accounts of interviewees.

Given the largely experimental nature with which most news organizations still adopted messaging applications back in the end of 2018, from the beginning of the research it was essential to integrate (multiple) case-study research and documental analysis as methods for monitoring the practices of these publishers in relation to these platforms. These two methodologies enabled the research to collect initial information in addition to the scarce literature on the subject, organize it into a mixed method study, and allowed the researcher a better preparation for fieldwork – a very important condition for conducting expert interviews, because professionals tend to respect more the researcher and engage more in the conversation when they realize they are not the only ones with knowledge on the subject (Bogner et al., 2009). Case studies are a common method for research about organizations, for answering exploratory and explanatory research questions such as the ones proposed, and also for conducting comparative research through the selection and analysis of several cases (Yin, 2017), an objective of this study.

Case selection is obviously an essential part of comparative case study research. A first step in this direction was noticing that there are considerable variations in the use of messaging apps for general purposes and for news in different regions and countries (see figure 2). WhatsApp is the undisputed global market leader with over 2 billion unique users worldwide, but its overall popularity is larger in the Global South and the news consumption on the chat app in Africa (55% of the respondents), for example, already rivals with the use of Facebook (57%), while in Europe (16%) and North America (6%) its usage for this purpose seems to be still incipient (Newman et al., 2022). WhatsApp is also popular for news consumption in Latin America (35%, rivaling with YouTube), while a significant percentage of Africans already use Telegram (18%), which has been gaining ground in some Latin and Asian countries as well. Messenger appears

to be an exception to this trend of heterogeneous usage of chat apps by regions, keeping an average (low) rate of usage between 11% and 15% everywhere (Newman et al., 2022).

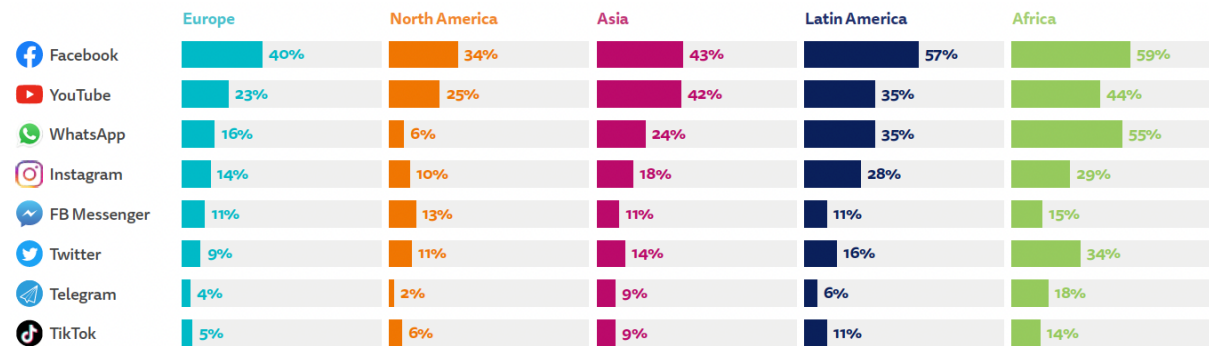


Figure 2. Proportion of respondents of the Digital News Report 2022 that used each social network for news in the last week – selected regions (Newman et al., 2022).

Cases in this research are considered news organizations that have at least experimented with messaging applications for news distribution before deciding to quit them. It would be impossible for a PhD thesis conducted by a single researcher to select cases from all regions, especially in the context of the covid-19 pandemic that broke out in early 2020, during the start of fieldwork. Hence, I focused on seeking for news organizations from the contrasting regions – higher and lower usage of chat apps for news consumption – I am from (Brazil and Latin America) and I was at for the development of the research (France and Southern Europe). Eventually, this research conducted 40 interviews with experts in 28 media cases and three companies that intermediated the adoption of messaging applications for news distribution for publishers.

Finally, participation in a European program such as JOLT, which had 16 early-stage researchers from different backgrounds, made it possible to integrate a quantitative element into the research with a view to better triangulating the results of the interviews. My colleague Enric Moreu, PhD candidate at the Dublin City University's School of Computing and Insight Center for Data Analytics, assisted me in developing Python scripts for performing a computational quantitative analysis on over 15,000 messages sent by cases on WhatsApp and Telegram and collected during a four-month period between late 2020 and early 2021. This analysis helped me confirming if news publishers' actual strategies for news distribution on both platforms matched the descriptions made by editors and executives interviewed. A last step was conducting a manual

content analysis on a smaller sample of the messages to understand the most common news topics addressed by the cases and if they stimulated audience engagement. All these methodologies combined make this research adopt a qualitative dominant mixed method approach (Johnson et al., 2007)

1.4. Thesis plan

Before focusing on the role of messaging apps for communication in general and how they have been influencing news consumption in particular, it seemed necessary to make a historical reconstitution of how the media in general has developed, from its emergence in the 17th century to its peak in the turn of the 21st century, a highly commercialized industry with broad economic and political concentration around a few national and international conglomerates. That is the aim of chapter 2 of this study. Obviously, differences between media systems exist and are largely addressed – the development of public press institutions and the influence of political actors on the media are just two of them.

Chapter 3 is focused on explaining the complex process of the platformization of the Internet on all its dimensions and how it has been affecting the cultural industries in general. I attempt to comprehend the role of messaging apps in this process, also explaining fundamental differences in relation to social media. In chapter 4, I seek to deepen the analysis on the influence of platforms specifically in the news industry without forgetting to include messaging applications in the discussion. This theoretical chapter is particularly important because it serves as a basis for the analysis of this research. I give more detail on the methodological approach to this research in chapter 5 before finally presenting the results of my study in chapter 6.

2. The mass media and the monopolies of public opinion

Several scholars consider the political economy of communication the most appropriate framework to analyze and describe the increasing dominance of digital platforms over different sectors of the society in general and the media in specific (Albornoz, 2015; Helmond et al., 2017; McChesney, 2013; Smyrnaio, 2018; Smyrnaio & Rebillard, 2019; Van Dijck, 2020; Van Dijck et al., 2018b; Winseck, 2017). Mosco (2009) added that “history, along with a commitment to study the social totality, to moral philosophy, and to praxis, is one of the pillars of political economic theory. One simply cannot do good political economy without an historical dimension” (p. 110). Hence, in this chapter, before describing how the news industry has been affected by the broad process of platformization since the early 2000s, I present a historical reconstruction on how the mass media has been structured in America and Southern Europe by providing a longitudinal retrospective since the emergence of the newspapers in the 17th century until their move to the Internet in the 1990s and the first platforms in the 2000s.

In this task I go through *critical junctures*: brief historical moments in which social forces clash, opening a wide range of possibilities for structural and institutional changes (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; McChesney, 2013; Pickard, 2015). These rare spans tend to last no longer than a decade or two, but their effects are felt for lengthy periods of stability in which transformation is slower and more difficult. Critical junctures occur in the presence of at least two of the following conditions: 1) the emergence of a new revolutionary communication technology; 2) growing skepticism over and even delegitimization of media content and especially journalism; and 3) an imbalance in the political and social order that challenges dominant institutions (McChesney, 2013). The inventions of the cylinder press, the radio and the television triggered crucial moments for the media: in the United States, especially in the 20th century, media organizations and their owners managed to co-opt reform movements, repelling state interventions, to remain politically influent and deeply entangled with monopoly capitalism, a system where individual – and business – freedoms often override the collective interest (McChesney, 2013; Pickard, 2015).

The state managed to retain larger control of the economy, politics and society as a whole for much longer in France, Spain, Brazil, Mexico, Guatemala and Chile,

countries in which this research is mostly focused on. As we will see in more detail, in general, this situation also did not lead to the construction of media systems where the public interest was the number 1 priority, but realities in which the media acted in tow of the political interests of ruling governments and economic and political elites and still largely depended on them to develop to a greater or lesser degree (Barrera, 2004). The democratic opening of these countries, which took place at different times and during different intervals of time, of course generated differing realities. Especially since the 1980s, with the process of globalization and the more intense importation of American models, these realities have gradually converged towards systems of high commercialization, greater economic concentration and the development of communication monopolies or oligopolies: a structuring that obviously had implications for the production and distribution of news and the balance of democracy (Winseck & Jin, 2011).

2.1. The first print newspapers: Distributing news to exert political power

Historically, there are essentially three main justifications for endeavoring a journalistic initiative: first, *exercising power*, using the means of communication to create an influence “to change the world, or to keep it exactly as it is, to get a bigger slice of the pie, or to defend what one has” (Nielsen, 2017, p. 33). Second, *providing a public service*: when news organizations are given a formal or informal public mandate to provide information to the audience financed in part or entirely by the state. And, finally, *making profit*, when owners invest in private print, radio, television and/or even online companies aiming at extracting future financial returns from these transactions (Nielsen, 2017).

Political interests remained as the number one motivation for news distribution at least until half of the 19th century – therefore, for most of the history of the press. First, news was disseminated by word of mouth and manuscript pamphlets. The first print newspapers appeared only in the early 1600s in Strasbourg (Pettegree, 2014), Antwerp (Altschull, 1984) and Venice (Stephens, 2007), almost 150 years after the invention of the printing press by Johannes Guttenberg, which was initially used only for printing books. Still a result of the work of individuals printers, who performed all the job of collecting reports and aggregating them into the final product of a weekly edition,

newspapers soon started to be distributed all over the Dutch Republic, the Great Britain and the region that today is known as Germany (Pettegree, 2014).

In France, *La Gazette* was published weekly for the first time only in 1631 by Théophraste Renaudot and commissioned by the king Louis XIII and his cardinal Richelieu: soon it became the model of state informative press that would be copied in other countries, including Spain (Bellanger et al., 1969a). Unlike the French newspaper, though, *La Gaceta de Madrid*, founded in 1661, was not sponsored by king Philip IV, but by his bastard son Juan José de Austria, who aspired to occupy the Spanish throne and used it for personal political ends (Fuentes & Sebastián, 1997). The newspaper was officially incorporated into the Spanish Crown in 1761 during the reign of Charles III, reaching an average circulation of 12,000 in 1780 – similar numbers of *La Gazette* (Bellanger et al., 1969a; Fuentes & Sebastián, 1997).

For more than one century and a half, newspapers heavily depended on the goodwill of local authorities. To avoid giving offence, printers limited themselves to collecting and disseminating reports of official procedures, international correspondence about warfare and other information sent to their care. Political matters were only allowed to flatter the instituted power: members of the monarchies or the aristocracies that subsidized the high publication costs or even granted their protégés publishing monopolies in their territories (Pettegree, 2014; Stephens, 2007). Charron, De Bonville and Brin (2005) called this stage as *transmission journalism*. Nevertheless, most authors resist to consider ‘journalism’ the work of the printers of that time: newspapers in practice only registered governmental policies and subjects that were completely distant from the reality of the readers, the modern concept of news had yet to be created (Chalaby, 1996, 1998; Pettegree, 2014; Stephens, 2007).

In 1644, John Milton coined the concept of “free press” in his pamphlet *Aeropogetica*, starting the discussion on the issue. Newspapers effectively began to challenge the instituted power several years later, around the middle of the 18th century in Great Britain, where parliamentarian John Wilkes made himself a political celebrity by founding *The North Briton* to confront Lord Bute, owner of *The Briton* and a personal adviser of king George III (Pettegree, 2014). Wilkes and his staff at the paper were targeted with a warrant of arrest after denouncing one of his majesty's speeches. After a legal battle, he was released and received a compensation from the government. In the sequence,

Henry Sampson Woodfall, from *The Public Advertiser*, was also arrested for a similar reason, being released after a jury refused to comply with the charge, creating a jurisprudence for future cases. Later, in 1771, already as a London magistrate, Wilkes allowed newspapers to print parliamentary debates, what was previously forbidden (Pettegree, 2014).

London papers were the main influence and source of content for their counterparts in the American colonies by that time. In 1765, though, in an attempt to recover part of the financial losses of the Seven Years War, the British government started obligating colonial newspapers to use only paper certified by the Crown, which was obviously overtaxed (Pettegree, 2014). Pressured by their lack of resources, printers opposed the taxation and addressed the issue on their bulletins, influencing public opinion against the metropolis. The tax was lifted a year later, but the so-called Stamp Act crisis became a milestone in an attitude change from the American newspapers, which continuously assimilated a partisan political tone to please their fiery readership since then (Pettegree, 2014).

The American and British situations remained exceptions when compared to the scenario of the continental Europe, where the press had to handle with political constraints that affected their liberty to publish until most of the 20th century. In France, for example, State control of the press remained relatively strong until the 1860s, when, finally, the Second Empire stopped demanding the prior deposit of political newspapers. The first press freedom law was enacted only in the 1870s (Chalaby, 1996; Kuhn, 2011). A brief exception occurred during the first years of the French Revolution, when the Paris Book Guild, established by elite printers and favored by the monarchy, was dismantled giving place to a new generation of publishers that had already noticed a high demand for politically engaged content:

“The explosion of journal publication in Paris during these years was on a scale not witnessed anywhere in Europe. From four journals published in the capital in 1788, the number skyrocketed to 184 in 1789 and 335 in 1790. During the height of the revolutionary agitation, as many as 300,000 copies a day of these various publications would have been available on the streets. Paris was suddenly awash with a flood of exuberant, passionate, committed

newssheets. Soon they had come to dominate the political agenda” (Pettegree, 2014, p. 340).

Even journals favorable to the newly deposed monarchy came to circulate freely during the first years of the revolution (Wilke, 2016). Notable characters of this historic period such as Marat, Danton and Robespierre wrote for these publications at least for some time and benefited from a profitable cartel scheme that set their sale prices. However, at the head of the Committee of Public Safety from 1793, Robespierre went on to pursue his detractors in the press – Danton and many other writers who propagated their ideas in the journals ended up being guillotined during those violent years of revolt. Subsequently, Napoleon's regime further increased the control of the media – only 19 of the 80 printing houses allowed in the period were dedicated to newspapers and periodicals (Pettegree, 2014). The French Emperor himself is known to have assumed a journalist/publisher side by personally writing war reports published in the official bulletin of the Grand Armée, which glorified the battles of his army and helped to spread through French society a feeling of exaltation to the military campaign of territory expansion through Europe (Bertaud, 2005).

While the first amendment of the constitution already guaranteed press freedom to the American newspapers since 1791 (Chalaby, 1998), the influence of Napoleon's empire to the East and West prevented journalism from developing in continental European countries such as Spain, Germany and Italy (Wilke, 2016). The fall of Napoleon, in 1814, did not necessarily mean the revival of the news field in the region: in France, as the Bourbon monarchy was reappointed, it also restored the regime of strict censorship over newspapers (Wilke, 2016). The Spanish press made advancements during the War of Independence from 1808, a conflict that opened a new space for discussion in society: press freedom was established for the first time in the Constitution of 1812, but repression was reignited with the absolutist restoration of 1814 (Fuentes & Sebastián, 1997).

Even if indirectly, the Napoleonic regime also influenced the development of the press in Latin America. The first unofficial newspapers on the continent appeared during a period of unrest regarding the Spanish Crown in the 1770s: influenced by the Enlightenment, the Creole elite still did not nurture desires of separatism, but sought to

overcome economic, administrative, legal and social problems of colonies (Barrera, 2004). This booming press was responsible for stimulating regional identities that, after Napoleon's intervention in Spain in 1808, led to the creation of colonial government boards – some still loyal to King Ferdinand, some defenders of independence – which sought to prepare the colonies for the political developments that would follow. The freedom of the Spanish press was accompanied by that of its colonies, which, although still quite limited, served for the implantation of more presses (the only ones existing until then on the continent were in Mexico and Peru) and the emergence of new newspapers in the territories of Argentina, Colombia, Venezuela and Chile (Barrera, 2004). The first press in Brazil arrived on the ship that transported the Portuguese royal family fleeing Napoleon's empire to Rio de Janeiro in 1808. The crown created the *Gazeta do Rio de Janeiro*, an adapted version of the official Lisbon press, and independent newspapers did not circulate in the country until 1821, when the Brazilian elite was shaken by a republican sentiment under the influence of the independence movement in the Spanish colonies and unrest when Portugal ordered the return of prince regent Pedro to Europe (Martins & Luca, 2008; Molina, 2015; Sodre, 1999).

The wars of independence of the Spanish colonies, until 1833, had a very large political, economic and social cost that certainly impacted the development of the press in the region. The colonial regime gave way to *caudillismo*: paternalistic, authoritarian and repressive governments sponsored by the agrarian economic elites (Barrera, 2004). The newspapers of these newly declared independent Latin American countries needed to align themselves with the regime of the caudillo, under penalty of being persecuted and closed. This system remained more or less active in the region until the end of the 19th century and gave rise to the so-called clientelism: the exchange of political support for favors, usually financial (Guerrero & Márquez-Ramírez, 2014). On the other hand, the Brazilian press started developing after the country's strange independence in 1822 – it is the only Latin American country to institute a monarchy and its head was still an emperor linked to the Portuguese royal family, former regent prince Pedro – and reflected the slowly growing republicanism that culminated in the deposition of the regime in 1889 (Martins & Luca, 2008; Molina, 2015; Sodre, 1999). In both the Hispanic Latin American and Brazilian cases, the most successful newspapers were the products of aristocratic elites that sought to influence public opinion: circulation of these

periodicals was not very expressive at the time due to the limitations in the educational development in the region (Barrera, 2004).

The same cannot be said of the American, English, French and Spanish press of the time. Keeping due proportions, the circulation of newspapers in all these countries began to increase from the 1830s onwards. For different reasons and in different levels, in all of them, a political press gradually gave more space to an informative one. While, in the United States and Great Britain, this trend was mainly a way of increasing the commercialization of newspapers and guaranteeing their sustainability in times of increasing printing costs (Hamilton, 2004), in France and Spain it was also an alternative to circumvent intermittent state repression as political papers were the more scrutinized ones (Barrera, 2004) – in the Iberian country, press freedom increased during the first part of Elizabeth's reign only to diminish again between 1857 and 1881 (Fuentes & Sebastián, 1997).

Although making large profits was not publishers' main objective when founding a newspaper in the first stages of the print press, money was already an important factor in the circulation of publications since the very beginning. It is not a coincidence that both the news pamphlets and the most important newspapers were mostly sold in renowned European commercial hubs, such as the cities of Hamburg, Hanover, Amsterdam, Antwerp, Paris and London – where the capital obviously circulated more, and the largest potential audiences were. Commercial disputes over the rights to publish in certain territories and to use words such as *Zeitung* and *Post*, expressions that still today are synonymous of traditional and credible media, also attest to this (Pettegree, 2014).

In the 1620s, the first Dutch newspapers already dedicated space for advertisements. By the 1650s, they “frequently occupied half of the last column, that is one eighth of the total space” of those publications (Pettegree, 2014, p. 301). Ads also appeared for the first time in England by the mid-1600s, and it did not take long for them to be widespread. High production costs would make it impossible for a British newspaper to be sustainable in the 18th century without advertisements. In the rest of Europe, though, perhaps influenced by a strong religious philosophy that condemned profit, publishers remained reluctant to accept advertising for longer (Pettegree, 2014).

American press remained politically engaged after the independence from Great Britain and during most of the 1800s, shamelessly making clear their connections to and

the influence received from political parties. Charron et al. (2005) labeled this phase as *opinion journalism*, even though their concept of news was still different from the one we are used to nowadays: newspapers worked as a tribune of political debate and conversion by publishing opinion articles from members of their party. Furthermore, they offered only brief notes about commerce and international affairs.

“The free press clause in the First Amendment to the constitution was seen as a means to protect dissident political viewpoints, as most newspapers were closely linked to political parties. It was understood that if the government could outlaw or circumscribe newspapers, it could effectively eliminate the ability of opposition parties or movements to mobilize popular support. It would kill democracy. (...) Each newspaper tended to represent the politics of the owner and if someone was dissatisfied with the existing choices, it was not impossible to launch a new newspaper. By contemporary standards, it was a fairly competitive market” (McChesney, 2008, p. 26-27).

The partisan press system as a whole was actively subsidized by the government no matter the inclinations of the owners (McChesney, 2008). By 1870, the Republican press still dominated the scene with 54% of the daily newspapers and 43% of the circulation in the 50 largest American cities, followed by the Democrat, which made 33% of the dailies and 31% of the circulation, while only 13% of the papers declared themselves ‘independent’ and reached 26% of the readers (Hamilton, 2004). However, these few independent US newspapers were already leading a real shift: creating the roots of modern journalism and establishing the commercial economic model that would become the basis of the news industry for at least the next 150 years even in countries that did not enjoy the same press freedom (Chalaby, 1996, 1998; McChesney, 2008, 2013; Schudson, 1981).

2.2. The shift to a commercially driven press

Technological advances in cylindrical presses and papermaking made it possible to print a much larger number of newspapers per hour: the new equipment was up to 20 times more expensive than the old one, but paper had become cheaper, increasing

the importance of reaching economies of scale (Hamilton, 2004). In the 1830s, most of the established American newspapers were politically engaged, expensive (costed US\$ 0.06 when the daily average wage was US\$ 0.85), sold mainly by subscriptions and had relatively low circulation (their readership was formed by mercantile and political elites), even though urbanization was already spreading at a rapid pace (Schudson, 1981). The business opportunity for emerging publishers was clear: on the one hand, they could sell news for a cheaper price (US\$ 0.01 or a penny) on the streets and reach a larger potential base of readers; on the other, they could sell the attention of their readership to more advertisers eager to market their products (Hamilton, 2004; Schudson, 1981).

Perhaps even more important than newspapers' affordable price, was editorial independence, which became the easiest means for publishers to reach a larger readership (Hamilton, 2004). By 1900, 47% of the American dailies had already declared themselves independent of political parties. They were responsible for 53% of the total circulation, which grew faster than the size of the population of the United States: while there were 0.25 newspapers per person being distributed every day in 1870, that number increased to 0.55 at the turn of the century (Hamilton, 2004). In this movement, publishers found it necessary to change the paradigm of the content presented on newspapers. Instead of editorialized articles from political figures, the penny press separated news and editorial, a discourse based in facts, and another based in opinions: a distinction that would prove extremely successful in terms of profitability.

“For the first time, the American newspaper made it a regular practice to print political news, not just foreign but domestic, and not just national but local; for the first time it printed reports from the police, from the courts, from the streets, and from private households. One might say that, for the first time, the newspaper reflected not just commerce or politics but social life. To be more precise, in the 1830s the newspapers began to reflect, not the affairs of an elite in a small trading society, but the activities of an increasingly varied, urban, and middle-class society of trade, transportation, and manufacturing” (Schudson, 1981, p. 22-23).

After a first stage, in which journalism consisted of a monopoly controlled by instituted power, and a second one, in which it was controlled by political parties, the US press had reached a third and theoretically more autonomous phase: *news journalism* (Charron et al., 2005) – or the libertarian model described in the highly contested *Four Theories of the Press* (Siebert et al., 1984). McChesney (2008) argued, though, that the separation between news and editorial did not eliminate politization of newspapers: it just made it more subtle. While the opinion section continued to clearly reflect the owner's political position, the news carried a less visible but still noticeable bias.

Interestingly, the French press was the first to follow in the footsteps of the American *penny press* – in France it was called *presse à bon marché* (Wilke, 2016). The two main examples of this tendency emerged in the late 1830s: *La Presse* and *Le Siècle*. Both were funded mostly by advertising and were focused on larger circulations by reducing the retail price and betting on illustrations, gossip and fashion-related subjects (Wilke, 2016). For the first time in the history of the French press, newspapers required journalists who knew how to cater to the taste of the audiences rather than writers who craved for a literary career or political projection (O'Boyle, 1968). Meanwhile, on the other side of the Pyrenees, the reign of Ferdinand VII faced an erosion after the successive defeats of the Spanish Crown in the American colonies, irrevocable from 1824 onwards. The death of the monarch in 1833 was followed by several political developments that put liberalism into practice and allowed the return of Spanish intellectuals and journalists who were exiled in London. Along with them, several new news initiatives were born and two newspapers, inspired both by the English and the French presses, deserve mention for their modernity: *El Español* (founded in 1835) and *El Eco del Comercio* (1834) (Fuentes & Sebastián, 1997).

Against common knowledge, the movement to rationalize advertising took place earlier in the press of continental Europe than in the America. Émile de Girardin, founder of *La Presse*, was the main responsible for it, formulating the reasoning for the emerging model:

“It is necessary to reduce the sale price as much as possible in order to maximize the number of subscribers; advertising will pay for the reader. It will fill the difference between the cost price of a copy and its sale at a loss. The

lower the selling price and the higher the number of copies, the more expensive the ads will be. The ads should pay for the newspaper” (Barrera, 2004, p. 91, the translation is mine).

Girardin also created parameters for the acceptance of ads by publishers: “Advertising must be concise, simple and frank, never wear a mask, always go directly to your target with your head held high. Advertising should be reduced to say: in this address, this thing is sold at this price. Any additional comments, if not harmful, are at least superfluous. All praise, instead of confidence, provokes disbelief (Barrera, 2004, p. 91, translation is mine).

Under those standards, the three main Parisian newspapers created the *Compagnie Générale des Annonces* (CGA) to manage advertising on their pages in 1845 (Bellanger et al., 1969b). Seven years later, the first Spanish advertising agency appeared in Madrid: the *Comisión Central de Anuncios*, which was responsible for managing publicity for the capital’s newspapers – 40% of the 300.000 copies distributed across the country by that time (Fuentes & Sebastián, 1997). In 1855, CGA merged into two other French advertising agencies, including one that detained the leadership in the provincial market, giving birth to the *Société Générale des Annonces* (SGA), which would merge with Havas in 1857, creating a monopoly that would soon also take over the Spanish market (Palmer, 2021).

The first advertising agency in the United States was opened only several years later, in 1869: the N. W. Ayer & Son. But at least until the 1880s, American newspapers executives still believed advertising was a wasted space, subjecting them to editorial judgment in order to make their placement on the pages (Hamilton, 2004). Prices varied significantly and circulation numbers, the main metrics that could be made available to advertisers, were hardly reliable. With the development of a market economy, the demand for advertising space increased, creating the need for better intermediation between the press and commercial businesses (Schudson, 1981). In 1887, the American Newspaper Publisher Association was funded to regulate advertising, ensuring that newspapers would provide reliable circulation numbers and make it less a moral exchange and more an economic one:

“The ratio of editorial matter to advertising in the newspaper changed from about 70-30 to 50-50 or lower. Advertising revenue represented 44% of total newspaper income in 1880, 55% by 1900. This did not diminish the reliance of newspapers on circulation but, on the contrary, made circulation firmly the measure of a newspaper’s competitive standing. Newspapers became brokers of their own columns, selling their space and the readership it represented to advertisers. Circulation became less a private matter of pride and income, more a public and audited indicator of the newspaper’s worth as an advertising medium” (Schudson, 1981, p. 93).

Idealized types of journalism are commonly used when discussing the history of the press (Charron et al., 2005), but the truth is that several forms coexisted. Political pamphlets did not immediately leave the scene when printed newspapers appeared; political newspapers and more elitist forms of journalism remained alive during the consolidation phase of the penny press (Pettegree, 2014). Two main models stood out, though, during the shift from a politically to a commercially driven press: one mostly based on entertainment and storytelling; and another that emphasized its informative character, radical report of the facts and verifiability above all. According to Schudson (1981), *The New York World*, from Joseph Pulitzer, was the most striking example of the former stream, while *The New York Times*, under the command of Adolph Ochs, set a trend in the latter.

The Hungarian immigrant Joseph Pulitzer started his career in Saint Louis before acquiring *The New York World* in 1883. He did not invent ‘sensationalism’, the journalistic stream that gives greater focus to crime, scandals and high society and that had already scandalized the established press since the 1830s, but he noticed it could be used to increase circulation, especially amongst the growing middle class (Schudson, 1981). *The World* was aimed at immigrants like Pulitzer that accounted for roughly 40% of the population in New York and in general did not speak perfect English; people that were commuting to work on public transport, a relatively new habit; and women, who were regarded as more responsible consumers and a target audience that interested some types of advertisers. *The World’s* headlines were usually larger and darker, making them easier to read, and a special issue on Sunday was totally devoted to entertainment.

Pulitzer's greatest innovation was the newspaper crusade: a combination of political exposés of prominent figures and startling headlines. The resounding success of the newspaper, whose circulation rose from 15,000 copies in the year of Pulitzer's arrival to more than 1 million just three years later, was attributed to its controversial style, which also led its publisher to be considered the pioneer of mass media (Schudson, 1981).

The World and its counterparts were considered a lower form of journalism by *The New York Times*, which started a 'moral war' against them: it resulted in the pejorative label of 'yellow press' that is still used nowadays for more popular-focused news initiatives (Schudson, 1981). Based on the ideals of conservatism, accuracy and decency, *The NYT* was aimed at a wealthy or aspiring to wealth readership that grew at a slower speed than *The World's* but at a constant pace: from 25,000 in 1898 to 343,000 in 1920. It did not have as many readers as its main rival in the yellow press, but they were worth more dollars as they were particularly more attractive to the advertising market (Schudson, 1981). *The Times* was considered a more reliable source of information and set the tone for a fact-based journalism that even nowadays tends to be treated as more serious.

Meanwhile, in France, no publisher in the country had managed to reach an average circulation of more than 50,000 copies/day until the early 1860s, when emerged the commercial phenomenon *Le Petit Journal*, the most successful French newspaper of the 19th century,. Just two years after its foundation, *Le Petit Journal* (which costed half the price of *La Presse*) printed an average of 260,000 copies. In 1887, almost at the same time as Pulitzer's *The New York World* and almost a decade and a half before the *Daily Mail* in the United Kingdom, *Le Petit* reached the circulation of one million copies (Palmer, 2014). Newspapers were definitely no longer products aimed only at the elites and had become popular among the simpler layers of the population: hence the reason for considering that the emergence of *Le Petit Journal* marks the emergence of modern journalism in France.

Although, perhaps inspired by *the New York Times*, it sought to be faithful to the facts, the model proposed by *Le Petit Journal* was not as rigidly serious as the iconic American newspaper: "Traditionally, newspapers are as much about commenting and entertaining as they are about informing. In mass-circulation dailies, the news alone is likely to fulfill all of these functions" (Palmer, 2014, p. 14-15, the translation is mine).

According to Delporte (1999), the French journalism that was born from the emergence of la presse à bon marché created its own identity that, despite privileging the facts, did not completely break with the national literary tradition nor with critical spirit.

Despite a period of greater repression against the press between 1957 and 1881, it is also possible to speak of mass media at the end of the 19th century in Spain: in 1892, 580,000 copies of 380 different newspapers circulated daily across the country. Among the most economically successful newspapers, *La Correspondencia de España* should be highlighted: in 1906, 40% of its monthly budget already came from advertising, double what was normal for other major periodicals of the time (Fuentes & Sebastián, 1997). On the other hand, despite the rise of a model of informative journalism, Spanish newspapers kept an apparent identification with political causes: 60% of the circulation was from the so-called monarchist press and the rest from republican newspapers, a connection that was also encouraged by secret subsidies (Fuentes & Sebastián, 1997). Timóteo Alvarez (1992) mentioned a sophisticated network of clandestine funding of newspapers that served the purpose of influencing public opinion in favor of the Restoration regime (1875-1902).

A similar situation occurred in the former Spanish colonies in America. Perhaps the most pronounced case of intertwining between politics and the press occurred in Mexico, where caudillo Porfirio Díaz simply eliminated opposition newspapers. The result, on the one hand, was the press' total loss of credibility around the 1870s, and on the other, the emergence of a clearly officialist and government-subsidized press that managed to make investments in technology and imitate, even if in a limited way, successful foreign models: in 1988, Rafael Reyes Spínola founded *El Universal*, practically an official government daily, and eight years later, the same publisher launched *El Imparcial*, a one-cent daily (Barrera, 2004).

The economic development caused by the export of raw materials led to the growth of Latin American capitals at the end of the 19th century and, consequently, to the emergence and development of several important newspapers, such as *El Mercurio* (founded in 1827), in Chile, which survived political repression, economic difficulties and several changes of owners to become one of the most successful dailies in the country in 1900. The 1870s mark the development of exceptional Argentine newspapers such as *La Prensa* (1869) and *La Nación* (1870) – always in line with the economic elites and

national aristocracies (Timóteo Alvarez, 1992). Meanwhile, the Brazilian press struggled for greater freedom in their growing revolt against the monarchy and in favor of the implementation of a democratic regime (Sodre, 1999). Newspapers worthy of mention at the time are *Jornal do Comércio* (1827), *O Estado de S. Paulo* (1875) and *Jornal do Brasil* (1891).

Despite the wide circulation and commercialization, American, English, French and Spanish newspapers would not be able to provide their readers with a wide range of news primarily based on facts, including international ones, without the existence of news agencies – whose work, in turn, was only made possible by the adoption of a technology like the telegraph (Palmer, 2021). The three main news agencies were created at roughly the same time, albeit under different conditions. In France in 1832, Charles-Louis Havas began to organize a network of correspondents in Europe who would send newsletters to the main Parisian newspapers from 1835 – an extension of its lithographic newsletter and correspondence services aimed at the provincial press, which promised to reduce, with a fee, the costs of larger newspapers to collect information and produce reports from abroad (Palmer, 2021).

Similarly, London-based Reuters was the result of the personal initiative of its founder, Paul Reuter, a German collaborator of Havas who emigrated to the English capital after following the growth of the telegraph network in Germany and France in the late 1840s. Reuter's telegraphic expertise was the secret of his early success, starting in 1851, when his company began to provide short information on the opening and closing of the Paris and London markets to banks, businesses and merchants (Palmer, 2021). This business and economic expertise as well as the focus on international correspondence would be essential for the expansion of the service to news providers. The Associated Press, on the other hand, arose in 1846 from the need of the five largest newspapers in New York to break the most recent news of the Mexican-American War. The consortium had on-site reporters who sent news dispatches via convoy to the nearest telegraph stations, from where they were finally sent to the newsrooms: a reasonably cheap scheme of coverage for newspapers, which was used to cover other important events (Palmer, 2021).

Between 1859 and 1870, struggling to bear the high financial costs of maintaining a body of correspondents around the world, paying for telegraph lines and still

dealing with competition, the three largest European news agencies (Havas, Reuters and the German Wolff) made a series of agreements that divided the world into regions of influence for each (Barrera, 2004; Palmer, 2021). Thus, in a cartel scheme, Havas provided news from Southern Europe and North Africa, while Reuters was responsible for covering events in the UK and Canada, and Wolff was mainly active in Germany and the Eastern Europe (Barrera, 2004; Palmer, 2021).

The commercialization of the press (more intense in countries such as the United States and France, developing in Spain, and still emerging in Latin America) with a business model based mostly on advertising meant that publishers also increasingly sought to follow dominant market practices. Thus, as newspapers with larger circulation managed to grab larger shares of the advertising market, the mass media, at the turn of the 20th century, moved steadily towards greater concentration and economic monopolies and oligopolies.

2.3. Concentration dynamics and the emergence of radio and television

The beginning of the 20th century is considered by many scholars as the Golden Age of the French press. While Paris had around 3 million inhabitants, the average circulation of the capital's main newspapers reached 4.5 million copies – 75% of which were from four dailies: *Le Petit Journal*, *Le Petit Parisien*, *Le Matin* and *Le Journal*, periodicals that used a model similar to the American but with a few particularities (modern technology, low price, non-public affairs content such as entertainment, crime, tragedy and feuilleton-style literature). “Thanks to the continuous growth in the number of readers, *Le Matin* went from 78,000 copies in 1899 to 285,000 in 1902 to 483,000 in 1905 and to one million in 1913” (Barrera, 2004, p. 183, the translation is mine). Such dominance over circulation guaranteed these periodicals the formation of an oligopoly over the advertising market, boosted by agreements signed with the Havas agency, then already hold a monopoly over the commercialization of advertisements in the country after the merger with Société Générale des Annonces (SGA) (Palmer, 2014).

Although political newspapers were eclipsed by the French *petite presse* in terms of circulation and advertising revenue, this did not prevent the emergence of what Charon (1991) called “entrepreneurs-hommes d’Etat” (p. 43): men who maintained

newspapers or at least took advantage of their position to influence public opinion and rise to important positions in the government. The most representative of them was Jean Dupuy, owner, director and editor-in-chief of *Le Petit Parisien* from 1889 to 1919, who held the position of senator and was minister of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce, Public and State Works in different occasions during the period (Charon, 1991). Similar moves took place in Spain, where the director of *El Imparcial*, Rafael Gasset, for example, was incorporated into the government in 1900 as Minister of Development. The problem was that, in this case, contrary to what had happened with *Le Petit Parisien*, the Spanish newspaper lost its market leadership, dropping its circulation from 130,000 daily copies to around 80,000 in a few years – also partly because of the competition from *ABC* after 1905 (Fuentes & Sebastián, 1997).

Used as a scapegoat by the government in the wake of the defeat in the war against the United States over the territories of Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Philippines in 1898, the Spanish press managed to recover in the face of public opinion by reducing the nationalist pride on its pages and using new technologies to produce more graphically appealing editions (Fuentes & Sebastián, 1997). Thus, from 1906 onwards, there was an intense movement of concentration and organization of newspapers and magazines in chains. The publishers of *El Liberal* formed Sociedad Editorial de España – which became known as ‘el trust’, while the group that created *ABC* followed suit with the foundation of conservative Sociedad Prensa Española in 1909. These societies were promptly accused of having a monopolistic nature, which forced their founders to adopt a defensive position that did not convince anyone, but kept external pressures under control and the business evolving (Fuentes & Sebastián, 1997).

World War I marked the end of the Golden Age of the French press and the beginning of the peak for the Spanish one – although the latter’s circulation numbers and duration were just a fraction of the former’s. In France, the legal provisions of 1881, which guaranteed press freedom, were revoked right at the beginning of the conflict, when fierce censorship was established (Bellanger et al., 1972). Advertising revenues drastically reduced and the increase in the price of paper caused newspaper editions to shrink in size right when the public interest in the news was higher. The economic difficulties intensified the oligopolistic character of the main newspapers, while the political interests of press barons increasingly mingled with those of the government, which used

newspapers for propaganda campaigns aimed at French citizens. These schemes would come to light soon after the end of the conflict, in 1918, almost mortally wounding the credibility of the French press in a period of scarcity of economic resources, as France needed to rebuild (Bellanger et al., 1972).

French provincial newspapers also increasingly sought concentration and began to control an important part of the market: 175 newspapers published in 81 cities became responsible for a daily circulation of 5.5 million copies in 1939 (Paz Rebollo, 1994), while the circulation of the main newspapers decreased significantly, and their owners had to deal with a movement of revolt among the workers who considered that their business interests were not compatible with the public service they were supposed to provide:

“The decline of *Le Petit Journal* was unstoppable. After passing through various hands, it became in 1937 the official spokesman for the PSF, an extreme right-wing organization that succeeded ‘Les Croix-de-Feu’. Its print run was reduced to 139,000 copies in 1939. Finally, after World War II, it would be banned. *Le Matin*, increasingly oriented towards an anti-communist as well as anti-parliamentary attitude, printed only 300,000 copies on the eve of the Second World War, 100,000 less than its colleague *Le Journal*, a newspaper that defended conservative ideas” (Barrera, 2004, p. 198, the translation is mine).

On the other hand, Spain had, for the first time, five newspapers with more than 100,000 copies distributed per edition in 1913: *La Correspondencia de España*, *El Heraldo de Madrid*, *El Liberal*, *ABC* and the weekly *Nuevo Mundo*. The national press was relatively free to cover the conflict involving neighboring countries, taking advantage of the Spanish neutrality in the war (Fuentes & Sebastián, 1997). In 1918, the national circulation of periodicals reached 1.6 million copies, a 33% increase over five years earlier. From that year on, however, the government started increasingly intervening again in press freedom: first, with a law that regulated the concession and charged newspapers with taxes according to their circulation. Spanish newspapers also faced the same economic difficulties that affected their neighboring counterparts: the price of the paper tripled, and advertising revenues dropped significantly as foreign companies stopped

investing in publicity (Fuentes & Sebastián, 1997). The dictatorship of Primo Rivera (1923-1930), aligned with Italian fascism, further complicated the life of the Spanish press with new restrictions as political radicalism grew on the European continent. Despite growing difficulties, at the end of 1924, the Urgoiti family, owner of the newspapers *El Sol* and *La Voz* received a concession to form *Unión Radio* as the radio started to end the print press' hegemony as the only medium of mass communication. A few years later, *Unión Radio* had already established itself as the main one in the country by purchasing several stations and broadcasters, such as *Radio Barcelona* and *Libertad* (Fuentes & Sebastián, 1997).

Spain was going through a true communication revolution in the 1930s: the radio became the broadcasting medium of the three main national sports (football, boxing and cycling) and news coverage took up much of the programming (Fuentes & Sebastián, 1997). But then, in 1936, the Civil War broke out, a harbinger of World War II (Bowen, 2006): the newspapers and magazines that opposed the interests of the nationalists commanded by General Francisco Franco, who had a leading role in the war since early, were closed and their facilities and machinery were taken over by his movement. A year after the end of the conflict, in 1940, a law declared the new government as the owner of these properties (Fuentes & Sebastián, 1997). Francoism controlled public opinion until 1975, the year of the general's death, establishing the state monopoly over radio and television – one of the last measures of the dictatorial regime for communication, in the early 1970s, was a campaign to popularize the state TV channel through teleclubs spread across rural regions of the country (Fuentes & Sebastián, 1997).

Despite the increasing urbanization of its main capitals in the first decades of the 20th century and an accelerated economic growth, resources have not been distributed equally among the population since the beginning of the republican periods in Latin America and the educational development never followed the speed of the economic development. This means that the reading market never expanded enough to sustain the growth of the print press to the extent of what happened in Southern European countries or even the United States (Barrera, 2004). Thus, in several Latin American countries, the press was established with the essential support of state-sponsored advertising and clandestine agreements with the political elites in power while, first, the radio and then the television had become the main media of reference for most of the

population (Barrera, 2004). And several dictatorial regimes followed one another for relatively long periods, limiting press freedom and directing resources to collaborationist media (Barrera, 2004; Godoy, 2016; Sodre, 1999).

Very few newspapers were opened in Mexico until 2000 during the 70-year political monopoly of the Revolutionary Industrial Party (PRI). *El Excelsior* was the leading daily between the 1960s and 1970s, “running highly influential editorials in 250,000-copy daily print runs” (Huerta Wong & García, 2016, p. 675) until the state decided to withdraw official ads in the late 1970s due to growing criticism over the government and the paper went into an inescapable decline. *Grupo Televisa* had a completely opposing fate: its early advantage of being the only commercial TV broadcaster in the country between 1972 and 1993 was essential for building a monopoly on broadcast TV, which received between 58% and 65% of the total national advertising revenue in the early 2010s and up to 70% in the 1990s and 2000s.

“*Grupo Televisa’s* executives had a tacit understanding with PRI leaders that as long as its channels were not overly critical of the PRI, political roadblocks would not be thrown up to prevent *Grupo Televisa* from expanding its operations. This allowed *Grupo Televisa* to implement a successful vertical integration strategy in distribution and content production and to accumulate capital to invest in cable and satellite TV” (Huerta Wong & García, 2016, p. 679).

The newspaper *O Globo* played a role of little relevance in the Brazilian press in the first years after its foundation in 1925. Roberto Marinho, its director from 1931, however, knew like few others how to move in the political field to develop it as the largest media conglomerate in Brazil (Ramos, 2005) – and one of the largest in the world (Winseck, 2008). Marinho maintained an ambiguous relationship with the government of Getúlio Vargas, sometimes supporting it, sometimes approaching the oligarchies that opposed the government, such as bankers and new industrialists: enough to keep his media company running during a period of fierce censorship between 1937 and 1945. *O Globo* supported the deposition of the dictator and accommodated itself to subsequent governments, winning its first TV concession in 1957: a joint venture with American *Time*

Life, something illegal in the country as foreign participation in media concessions was forbidden. Marinho managed to avoid punishments by stating that *Time Life* only provided professional expertise but not capital or equipment (Ramos, 2005). During the military dictatorship, between 1964 and 1985, *Grupo Globo* collaborated with the government, winning TV and radio concessions to expand their business across the country in reward and using their near monopoly in the sector to spread haughty narratives and a feeling of support for the regime while the rest of the press suffered with strict censorship and threats of closure (Arbex Jr., 2015).

In Chile, the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet banned opposition press in 1973, leaving two anti-communist and collaborationist holdings dominate the newspaper market: *El Mercurio*, controlled by the Edwards family since the 1830s, and *La Tercera*, owned by the Picó-Cañas family (Godoy, 2016). Radio has become a monopoly of the state after the government confiscated left-wing stations and created *Radio Nacional AM*, while TV remained as an unusual non-profit duopoly between state and university broadcasting until 1990, when the regime ended: “Lack of public funding and absolute reliance on advertising after general Pinochet liberalized the economy in 1975 generated a ‘trout and parrot mixture’ of a system in which elitist, public-service principles of European origin coexisted with often conflicting mass appeal and market rules” (Godoy, 2016, p. 649).

While European and Latin American newspapers faced constraints related to political instability, economic difficulties and armed conflicts in their own territories, American newspapers benefited from a relatively stable democratic regime that guaranteed considerably larger press freedom for newspapers to strengthen their institutional power and brands (Hamilton, 2004). Reaching an even larger readership, though, demanded more technological and logistical resources and a larger staff of professional journalists: entering and staying in the newspaper market required greater capital (Hamilton, 2004). Owning a newspaper had become the privilege of wealthy Americans. Consequently, competition dwindled: by the end of the World War II, 40% of the newspaper circulation was already controlled by chains. According to a special committee of the US Senate responsible for analyzing the competitive situation of the press, “200 papers consumed 85% of the nation’s total newsprint, leaving the rest to be divided among 17,000 smaller dailies” (Pickard, 2015, p. 143). The number of communities with two or

more daily papers dropped from 502 in 1923 to only 137 twenty years later (Baughman, 2009).

American newspapers' owners were quick to acquire the first radio licenses. According to Stamm (2011), newspapers already owned almost one third of all the AM radio stations in the United States in the early 1940s and were eager to improve their reach on the FM. They were not the only companies collaborating to media concentration, though. Four major broadcasters dominated the radio spectrum by the mid-1940s: the *National Broadcasting Company* (NBC, with 162 affiliates), the *Columbia Broadcasting System* (CBS, 162), the *Mutual Broadcasting System* (MBS, 384) and the *American Broadcasting Company* (ABC, 238), which formerly was part of NBC's Blue Network, broken up in 1943 under pressure from the Federal Commission of Communication (FCC) and the Supreme Court after an antitrust suit from MBS (L. White, 1947). "The major networks commanded about 95% of the entire country's nighttime programming, with independent commercial broadcasters and about 28 noncommercial stations producing the remaining 5%" (Pickard, 2015, p. 10).

The effects of the lack of competition and the hyper-commercialization of the American media could be perceived in the low-quality and homogenized content provided to radio listeners. Advertisers were able to acquire entire time segments – which explains the soap operas, for example – and oversee the production of programs, hiring staff and directing scripts. Commercials typically took up to a quarter of the broadcasted time during peak hours. "Many critics discerned an underlying pattern: programming was cheaply produced, crafted barely to pass the lowest quality threshold and still be acceptable to large audiences" (Pickard, 2015, p. 22). Because of this, American media faced a strong reform movement during the 1930s and early 1940s, the result of which was a model of loose regulation over TV and radio concessions and future broadcasting technologies (McChesney, 2008). At the same time, the media committed to providing content that satisfied the public interest – an abstract concept that still depended on media's own journalistic standards (Pickard, 2015).

Consequently, by the end of the 1940s, newspapers already controlled more than half of the radio stations and 40 of the 97 operational TV stations in the country (Baughman, 2009). Advertising became increasingly concentrated as well as only four corporations dominated the whole American market after the World War II (Pickard,

2015). In a deregulated market, media privatization, concentration and commercialism only intensified since the 1940s in the United States, allowing companies to increase economies of scale, reach larger profitability, limit the risks inherent to competition – including from the emergence of a possible new medium – and exert political power under an aura of impartiality provided by the ideology of journalism based on the unreachable but always desirable objectivity (Flew, 2007; Kunz, 2007).

In the beginning of the 2000s, when most media companies had already created their websites and were on the process of attempting to make their traditional business models work on digital, 98% of the American cities only had one daily newspaper and the top four owners controlled almost 50% of the market (Albarran, 2003). Concentration was even stronger in television, music and film markets: 50 corporations used to dominate the American media in 1983 but that number dropped to between four and six in 2004 depending on the author (Bagdikian, 2004; McChesney, 2008; Mosco, 2009; Winseck, 2008). “While the size of the global media market in 2005 was a staggering US\$ 258 billion and consist[ed] of hundreds of firms, the ‘big 10’ global media firms account[ed] for just over 80% of all revenues” (Winseck, 2008, p. 37). Six of the top 10 media companies of the world by then, according to the author, were from the US and three of the non-American ones had a strong participation in the largest market in the West (Winseck, 2008). Most of these companies already had a diversified ownership, with shareholders from companies from several other different sectors: media conglomeration reached a stage of consolidation under the power of financialization (Winseck, 2008). Hence, because of dispersed ownership, it had become difficult to measure the influence of shareholders on the content provided by these companies to the audiences (Demers & Merskin, 2000).

Directly related to the media in times of increasing digitization and access to content through the Internet, the telecommunications sector was also quite concentrated in the late 2000s and early 2010s in America despite the historical split-up of AT&T in 1984 – the company “accounted for nearly 77% of local telephone revenues nationally” (Noam, 2016b, p. 533). Resulting companies ended up merging into others and the top four firms increased their share of the national wireline market from 48.1% in 1992 to 66.3% in 2012 after this reconsolidation. More importantly, four companies controlled 95,2% of the growing mobile telephone market in 2013: *Verizon* (33.6%), *AT&T* (32.9%),

Sprint Nextel (16.3%) and *T-Mobile* (12.4%) – the mobile industry already provided broadband access to the Internet to 17.6% of the total national subscribers and it was growing at a rapid pace as this medium-speed alternative gained popularity with the increase in the area covered with 4G (Noam, 2016b). Almost 46% of the broadband Internet access was provided by cable TV providers such as *Comcast* (market share of 18% of the total service subscribers) and *Time Warner* (9.8%), and 35.4% was provided by the telecom industry (*AT&T* detained 18.2% of the total national subscribers and *Verizon* had 9%) (Noam, 2016b).

Concentration dynamics occurred elsewhere in the world, however, hardly another media system outside the United States was able to replicate the same combination of high commercialization, concentration and lack of regulation enjoyed by the American media in the 20th century (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In France, for example, the print press had to rebuild from 1945 onwards. In that year, the newspapers that had collaborated with the German Nazi regime (which occupied the north of the country and the entire Atlantic coast from 1940) and the Vichy regime (Nazi-allies who dominated the south of the country and became involved in conflicts in Algeria) were banned (Barrera, 2004). In 1944, Agence France-Presse was created to replace Havas. Several daily newspapers appeared, many edited by government-subsidized editorial boards, such as *Le Monde* (1944). But the high printing costs resulted in exorbitant cover prices that ended up limiting the circulation and the influence of these periodicals only to an elite of readers (Bellanger et al., 1975). Provincial newspapers gained more space: “In 1955, there were 13 dailies in the French capital with a total circulation of 3.779.000 copies, while in the rest of the country 116 dailies reached a global circulation of 6.823.000 copies” (Barrera, 2004, p. 206). Thus, new publishing groups were formed to deal with a market that never reached again the same levels of the beginning of the 20th century: “*Amaury* around *Le Parisien Libéré* (500.000 copies), which intended to emulate *Le Petit Parisien*, *Hachette* around *France-Soir*, periodical that followed the steps of *Paris-Soir* and reached a circulation of 750.000 copies” (Albert et al., 1990, p. 140). These groups were required by law, from 1947, to form a company, *Presstalis*, that detained the monopoly on the periodicals distribution throughout the country (Badillo et al., 2016).

In 2011, *Amaury Groupe* still controlled 37.8% of the total daily newspapers circulation in the country with *Aujourd'hui-Le Parisien* and the sports paper *L'Equipe*, followed by the *Socpresse Group* (16.4%), which published *Le Figaro*. *Le Monde* followed with 15%. Publishing groups – and private companies in general – were not allowed to acquire radio and TV stations in France, which remained a monopoly of the State with *Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française (RTF)*, until the early 1980s, when privatization started. However, in practice, four commercial radio stations broadcasted from neighboring territories even before that: *Radio-Luxembourg*, owned by *RTL*, *Europe 1* from Germany, *Radio Monte-Carlo (RMC)* and *Radio-Andorre* (Badillo et al., 2016). In the early 2010s, basically the same players still shared the audience in the country: state-owned *Radio France* (21.9% of the audience), *RTL* (19.2%), *Lagardère Active* (which acquired *Europe 1* with 12.5%) and *Next Radio TV* (owned by *RMC* with 6.6%) – *NRJ* was the intruder in the band with 14.3% of the total audience of radio broadcasting in the country.

France Télévisions took advantage of its early monopoly to remain as the dominant player on TV (29.4% of the audience share in 2011), followed by *Bouygues Group* (*TF1* with 23.7%), *Bertelsmann* (Germany, 10.8%) and *Vivendi* (3.3%) (Badillo et al., 2016). The first cable networks developed in France in the 1970s and the market remained fragmented until 2003, when new rules allowed concentration: by 2014, *Altice*, controlled by Patrick Drahi and owner of cable operators in Belgium, Israel and Portugal managed to complete the acquisition of the total market with a deal that bought *SFR* from *Vivendi* (Badillo et al., 2016). *Altice/SFR*, *France Telecom/Orange*, *Bouygues Telecom* and *Iliad/Free* competed on the provision of wireline and mobile telephony and Internet access. *Orange* held the lead with around 40% of the market share by subscribers in all of them – *SFR* slightly led the rest of the group that split the rest (Badillo et al., 2016)

Similar US-inspired concentration movements took place over the media in Spain and Latin America especially during the initial years of the process of globalization, which caused the opening of international markets from the 1980s onwards and the increasing relaxation of regulation on markets that previously consisted of state monopolies. Spanish press had 30 years less time to recover from a regime that limited press freedom after its French counterpart, starting this path only in 1975, when TV (a monopoly of the State until then) had already become the main medium of mass communication

(Fuentes & Sebastián, 1997). In the early 2010s, this process had resulted in *Grupo Prisa*, owned by the Polanco family, becoming the dominant media company on news publishing (17.6% of the circulation share), radio broadcasting (39.6% of the revenue share) and also detaining a high stake in the provision of cable and satellite TV (42.2% of the revenue share). State-owned *TVE* still held the lead with one third of the total audience share, but most of the revenues were controlled by *Telecinco/Mediaset* (owned by the Berlusconi family with a share of 28.1%) and *Antena 3* (owned by the Lara family with 25.8% of the share) (Artero & Sánchez-Tabernero, 2016). *Grupo Prisa* owned *El País* (founded in 1975), the most popular national newspaper, and *Unión Radio*, which held 40% of the entire national market revenues with stations such as *Cadena Ser* and *Cadena 40* in 2013. “This figure – which reached a high of 51.7% in 2008 – represents the largest concentration of a radio broadcasting market belonging to a private enterprise in the EU” (Artero & Sánchez-Tabernero, 2016, p. 317).

Unidad Editorial published another national newspaper, *El Mundo*, and a popular sports daily, *Marca*, holding a 15.8% stake of the total circulation in Spain in 2012, while the daily *ABC* was still published by *Vocento*, a publishing group created in 2000 with the merge between *Prensa Española* and the regional chain *Grupo Correo* that amassed a 18.3% of the total circulation (Artero & Sánchez-Tabernero, 2016). *Cope* (10.5% of the total revenue share) and *Onda Cero* (13.7%) were other relevant private radio operators that had over 200 owned and affiliated radio stations by the early 2010s. And *Telefónica* dominated the telecommunication landscape: a former state monopoly, the company was completely privatized in 1997 when the government sold its remaining participation of 20.9% (Artero & Sánchez-Tabernero, 2016). It held 72% of the total revenue share of the wireline telecom, 39.8% of the wireless (UK-based Vodafone had 27.4% and French Orange had 21.1%) and 44.1% of the Internet access provision (its main rival was Ono with only 15.1%) in 2012 (Artero & Sánchez-Tabernero, 2016). Like *Grupo Prisa* on content, the company also had important shares of Latin American markets – which, in total, was 13 times greater than the Spanish one and had become highly attractive for foreign companies (Artero & Sánchez-Tabernero, 2016).

Mexico was a top 5 country with the most concentrated media in the world in the early 2010s thanks to *Grupo Televisa*’s monopoly in broadcast, cable and satellite TV and *Telmex*’s monopoly in the telecommunications sector (Noam, 2016). Mexican

broadcast TV received between 58% and 65% of the total national advertising revenue in the early 2010s and up to 70% in the 1990s and 2000s – and *Grupo Televisa*, as already mentioned, was the only commercial TV broadcaster until 1993, accumulating an advantage that would place it as the market leader for the following decades (Huerta Wong & García, 2016). The group held a participation in *Cablemás*, the country's leader in cable and satellite television: 50% of the total Mexican subscribers to those services in 2010, followed by *Megacable* (17%) and Dish Mexico (13%). It also had a considerable stake (11% of the total number of 1,594 stations in the country) on the radio broadcasting market, which were more fragmented – *Grupo ACIR* had 16% of the stations, *Grupo Radiorama* (owned by the Spanish *Grupo Prisa*) had 11% and *Grupo CMR* had 9%. Revenue figures were not available (Huerta Wong & García, 2016). Mexican government privatized the state monopolist *Telmex* in 1996 to *Grupo Carso* owned by the media tycoon Carlos Slim: in 2021, it owned 85% of the wireline telecom revenue as well as around 70% of the revenue from the provision of access to the Internet. Lack of competition made Mexican citizens pay some of the highest per capita rates on cable and satellite television and telephony and Internet in the world (E. M. Noam, 2016). By the time, the country's newspaper market was already almost irrelevant in comparison to TV: “even the largest Mexican print media group (*OEM*), which held 59.4% of the newspaper market share in 2012 (down from an even higher 63% in 2009), account(ed) for less than 3% of overall content media revenues” (Huerta Wong & García, 2016, p. 694).

Similarly to Mexico, in the beginning of the 2010s, Brazil had a clear dominant player in content media industries: *Grupo Globo*, owned by the Marinho family, which controlled 52.4% of the revenues on TV broadcasting, 53.6% of the income on multi-channel video platforms, 28.4% of the circulation on daily newspapers, 19.6% of the circulation on magazines and almost 10% of the revenues on the fragmented market of radio broadcasting (Moreira, 2016). Regional groups held a stake of 24% of the revenue share in the broadcast TV market, followed by *Grupo Record* (owned by the Universal church) with 14.7%, and three other national commercial groups that divided the rest: *Bandeirantes* (owned by the Saad family), *SBT* (owned by the Abravanel family) and *Rede TV!*. *Grupo Folha* (owned by the Frias family and the owner of the flagship newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo*) and *Grupo Estado* (owned by the Mesquita family and the owner of the centenary daily *O Estado de S. Paulo*) held 27.9% and 25.2% of the market share of

daily newspapers respectively – they were followed by *Grupo RBS* (owned by the Sirotsky family), the number 1 regional media in the country, with a participation of 7,5%. *Grupo Abril* (owned by the Civita family) was an important company in the magazines sector with 37.3% of the share in circulation (Moreira, 2016). Foreign participation in the media was controlled and limited to 30% of the total enterprise shares, but international companies dominated the landscape in telecommunications: an oligopoly formed by the Spanish *Telefónica/Vivo*, the Mexican *Telmex/Claro* and the Portuguese *Telemar/Oi* (Moreira, 2016).

Foreign media ownership was one of the world's highest in Chile, according to Noam (2016). They were usually organized in oligopolies after the privatization that occurred after re-democratization in 1990. In a smaller market in comparison to Mexico and Brazil, *Grupo El Mercurio* and the *COPESA* consortium (the new name of *La Tercera* after it was acquired in the early 2000s by businessman Alvaro Saieh) split the readership of the newspaper market in the early 2010s, but revenues were more concentrated in the outlets owned by the former (54.9% against 25.5%, while the rest was divided by other smaller publishers) as they were targeted to higher income groups (Godoy, 2016). *Iberoamericana* network, owned by the Spanish *Grupo Prisa*, controlled 60% of the audience share and 37% of the advertising revenues in the radio broadcasting market with its several stations. Public TV broadcaster *TVN* was able to keep its mass appeal even after the market was open to commercial companies and despite the prohibition to receiving public funding: "In 2009, it attracted 33% of advertising expenditures in television, a dominant position that gave it political independence from government" (Godoy, 2016, p. 649). American *Time Warner* acquired a former university TV network, *Chilevisión*, from the country's former president Sebastián Piñera in 2005, but it was able to grab only 4% of the total revenues of the market by 2008 – *UCTV*, previously owned by Universidad Católica, and later acquired by *Grupo Luksic* controlled other 30% of all the advertising spent in Chilean broadcast TV. An oligopoly formed by Italian/Chilean *Entel* (58% of total telecom revenues), Spanish *Telefónica/Movistar* (37.3%), Mexican *Telmex/Telcel* (4.4%) and American/Chilean *VTR* (0.3%) dominated telecommunications (including internet provision) in the country (Godoy, 2016).

This relatively brief historical description, which certainly did not touch on all points of media development in the countries that are the focus of this research, was

intended to show that these systems were far from perfect when digital platforms emerged and disrupted them. Even though the main objective for owning a media organization has gradually shifted towards profitability during the last 150 years, the production and distribution of news, whether through the print press or electronic means such as radio and television, has not ceased to influence and to be influenced by – and eventually even serve – political interests (McChesney, 2008). As we will see in the following section, several political economy scholars analyzed the dynamics of concentration and consolidation of the cultural industries and pointed out the conflicts inherent to commodifying the news under monopolist (or oligopolist) capitalism and acting in the public interest (the objective of the so-called accountability journalism that emerged in the 1940s).

2.4. The critique of the concentrated media industry and its implications for the production and distribution of news

Even before the 20th century developments in which the mass media was used as a form of control and manipulation by political powers, Marx had already pointed out to the importance of the media for the legitimation of capitalism. According to him, capitalism was an intrinsically conflictive system, where dominant forces sought to expand it against the will of subordinate forces: accumulation of wealth empowered elites to control technological, economic, political and cultural changes in order to avoid reform movements and to maintain the status quo (Marx, 2010). His personal experience as a journalist seems to have based his perception that the interests of publishers, big businesses and governments ended up influencing the work of journalists and, consequently, public opinion:

“The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it” (Marx & Engels, 1998, p. 67).

The idea that the media has been historically instrumentalized by the dominant political powers is widely accepted within the PEC. For Bagdikian (2004), for example, the media are the only oligopolies capable of manufacturing social and political reality. According to Winseck (2017), though, few scholars still consider the concept of *dominant ideology* proposed by Marx. “The notion that the media are little more than the playthings of those who own them is too crude. (...) Media are sites of contested meaning (between dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings, to use Stuart Hall’s terms), rather than just tools of power” (Winseck, 2017, p. 77-78). In this sense, the institutionalist approach seems particularly important as an early interpretation of the phenomenon of media concentration: in their view, the commercial press has become a capitalist enterprise and “the role of journalism as a cornerstone of liberty and democracy was becoming a mere convenience of commerce” (Ross, 1910, p. 304-305) as newspapers have become subordinated to other businesses with more extensive capital such as banking and technology industries.

In a broader analysis of the entire cultural industry that took a similar direction, Horkheimer and Adorno (2007) stated that the culture had merged with commerce and all forms of cultural expression – including the news, but also films, music and literature – had consequently become means of financial accumulation as culture has increasingly lost its characteristic of being an autonomous space for critical thought. Habermas (1991) expressed concern that the increasing commercialization of the media could corrode the public sphere. According to the author, the public sphere represented a dimension of the social that mediated communication between the State and society, in which the public organized itself as a bearer of public opinion. Essential assumptions for the formation of the public opinion were freedom of expression, assembly and association – therefore, access to such rights must be guaranteed to all citizens. According to Habermas (1991), citizens behave as a public body when they communicate in an unrestricted manner on matters of general interest leaving aside class interests, for example. Moving a little further away from Marx’s concept of ideology, “Habermas critiques how the ‘systems world’ – technology, markets and the state – and the penetrative powers of ‘instrumental rationality’ have colonized the lifeworld and eroded the powers of communicative rationality” (Winseck, 2017, p. 85) – threatening the culture of democracy.

Although his concepts of ideology came to be considered outdated by most PEC scholars, Marx's ideas about the development of capitalism provoked a great number of important related reflections. The concept of *commodity*, for example, developed in *Capital: A Critique of the Political Economy, Vol. 1* has been later expanded to analyze cultural production and has become one of the essential processes taken into account by the political economy of communication (Mosco, 2009). In one of the founding texts of the PEC, Smythe (1977) argued that commercial media commodified the audience by selling the time of their base of consumers to advertisers:

"Under monopoly capitalism TV-radio programs are provided 'free' and the newspapers and magazines are provided at prices which cover delivery (but not production) costs to the media enterprise. In the case of newspapers and some magazines, some readers characteristically buy the media product *because* they want the advertisements. This is especially the practice with classified advertisements and display advertising of products and prices by local merchants in newspapers and with product information in advertisements in certain magazines (e.g., hobby magazines). Regardless of these variations, the central purpose of the information, entertainment and 'educational' material (including that in the advertisements themselves) transmitted to the audience is to ensure attention to the products and services being advertised" (Smythe, 1977, p. 6).

Smythe (1977) already noted that audiences had distinct values, according to useful specifications for advertisers (or demographics) such as age, sex, income level, family composition, urban or rural location, etc. Further scholars sought to give more weight to the meaning of news content produced and distributed by the media by updating the concept of *audience commodity* proposed by Smythe and proposing that news works as a *double commodity* that should attract readers/listeners/viewers and advertising revenue at the same time (McManus, 1992; Picard, 1989). Economists have also defined news as a *public good*, when one person's consumption of a news article, for example, does not harm the possibility of another person to consume it; and as an experience good, as one needs to consume it in order to be able to judge its quality (Hamilton, 2004; McManus, 1992). The problem, though, is that rarely a consumer has

the capacity to determine fairness or accuracy of news content. “Whether broadcast or printed, news is often a credence good; it must be consumed on faith” (McManus, 1992, p. 796).

By journalistic standards, the most important news is the one that demands more investigation, as powerful individuals and entities want to keep matters undiscovered. But media owners and investors are interested in maximizing profits – frequently by cutting costs: for them, the ideal piece of content is the cheapest that can be produced in order to keep the reader/listener/viewer engaged with the content (McManus, 1992). Such a ‘dilemma’ potentializes the space for news management by forces outside professional journalism, especially governmental agencies and businesses, with the constant penetration of themes proposed by public relations, and the manipulation of the public agenda and content that privileges sensationalism and entertainment (McChesney, 2008).

Journalism studies scholars attempted to articulate theories and models that could explain how the commercial and political dimensions of the media reflected into the work of professional journalists and the production and distribution of news. One of the oldest and most popular ones – and particularly useful for this research – is gatekeeping theory, which assumes that the news media are not able to cover the myriad of events that happen at the same time around the world. Several decisions need to be made between the occurrence of an event and its distribution as news: each decision point is understood as a gate through which information may or may not pass and each decision maker works as a gatekeeper (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). The seminal work on gatekeeping is assumed to be David Manning White's (1950) *The ‘Gate Keeper’: A Case Study in the Selection of News*, which was focused on an individual level – a news writer that gathered information from wire services for publication – and helped to popularize a misperception of the theory (Vos & Heinderyckx, 2015). According to gatekeeping scholars, besides the individual level, which usually takes into consideration the work of the journalists and their role conceptions, there are other four levels of influence that can explain how the news turn out the way it does: the routine level, in which research has analyzed factors such as time constraints, verification procedures and relationship to sources; the organizational level, in which factors such as ownership structure, organizational cultures and processes play an important role; the social institutional level,

which is related to institutional influences from governments, advertisers, markets, public relations and interest groups on news production; and the social system level, in which scholars have attempted to examine how social structures and cultural values shape the news (Shoemaker, 1991; Shoemaker et al., 2001; Shoemaker & Reese, 2013; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Vos & Heinderyckx, 2015).

Organizational and social institutional levels are of particular importance for this research in which we examine institutional relationships between news organizations and platforms. Vos and Russell (2019) developed a model to assess the position of journalism within these kinds of institutional relationships, an elaboration of gatekeeping theory. Also based on institutional theory, the model pursue to understand the dominant forms of pressure received by journalism from external institutions – if regulative, normative or cognitive – and “the dominant incentives – coercive, moral, and remunerative – that draw journalism into institutional relationships” (p. 6). Other considerations taken into account in the model are if pressures are more likely experienced by management or reporters and if pressures are felt only at an institutional level (in the shaping of journalism’s norms and practices) and/or in the level of influencing specific news stories and decisions (Vos & Russell, 2019). A final consideration of the model is regarding the resources that journalism has at its disposal to resist to pressures: for example, resorting to legal protection or the publicization of issues performed by governments, in the case of political pressures, and to the traditional idea of a wall that separates the commercial department of news organizations and the newsroom usually used by the media to guarantee that pressures from advertisers remain distant from the news content produced (Carlson, 2015).

The authors identified three possible kinds of relationships journalism can assume with external institutions based on the model: first, an autonomous one, “and while that autonomy might be less than ideal and external pressures might be consequential in some ways, journalistic actors can nevertheless largely set their own course” (p. 5). Second, journalism could have a balanced relationship with other institutions, meaning that they mutually benefit and constitute one another – here, the authors give the example of politics, to which news would be intertwined. And, third, journalism could have a weak autonomous position in relation to other powerful institutions. While acknowledging that the position of journalism vis-à-vis external institutions may vary

from one media system to another, the authors cite PEC scholars to claim that news organizations are usually seen as weak institutions compared to most of the others, the third possibility remaining as the more frequent (see table 1) (Vos & Russell, 2019). The authors gave special emphasis to the relationships between news institutions and advertisers. They pointed out that the drop in this type of revenue in recent years can put news organizations in a very precarious position and, by making use of remunerative pressures, advertisers can create new demands. "Advertisers can specify to news advertising managers what audience demographic is most valuable, thus incentivizing news organizations to select or avoid particular categories of news" (Vos & Russell, 2019. p. 7).

Related to gatekeeping and worth mentioning is agenda setting theory. Starting from the assumption that the mass media was often the only point of contact between citizens and politicians, McCombs and Shaw (1972) noticed that "voters tend to share the media's composite definition of what is important" (p. 184): consequently, there was a strong suggestion that the media has an agenda-setting function, shaping the audience's understanding about political subjects. This was the starting point of the agenda-setting theory, which is strongly related to psychological factors, such as need for orientation: "each individual feels some need to be familiar with his surroundings, both his physical and cognitive environment. In terms of Tolman's (1932) concept of cognitive mapping, each individual will strive to 'map' his world, to fill in enough detail to orient himself, to intellectually find his way around" (McCombs & Weaver, 1973, p. 3). In the first level of agenda setting, researchers usually analyze the impact of the media agenda on the public agenda in terms of saliences of specific public issues or political players. A second level of agenda setting examines the salience of these objects of study's attributes (e.g., descriptions of personalities of political candidates, their political ideologies, etc.) (Lopez-Escobar et al., 1998). This last line of inquiry emerged in response to criticism that the agenda setting theory only touched the surface of political problems being covered by the media, not taking into account their nuances (Kosicki, 1993) and, above all, possible controversies: "controversy is the underlying basis of any issue that becomes a topic of media coverage" (Jasperson et al., 1998).

	Journalism's power position <i>Strong- Equilibrium-Weak</i>	Dominant form of pressure <i>Regulative- Normative- Cognitive</i>	Dominant Incentive <i>Coercive- Moral- Remunerative</i>	Who is most directly pressured <i>Management- Reporters</i>	What is most affected <i>Journalism- News</i>	Main means of resistance <i>Publicity- Norms, procedures</i>
Governments	Weak, but some clear rights	Regulative	Coercive and moral	Management and Reporters	Journalism and news	Legal protection; Publicity
Markets	Weak	Regulative	Remunerative	Management	Journalism	Wall of separation norm, procedures
Financial Markets	Weak	Regulative	Remunerative	Management	Journalism	Wall of separation norm, procedures
Advertisers	Weak	Regulative	Remunerative	Management	Journalism	Wall of separation norm, procedures
Audiences	Weak	Normative	Moral	Reporters	Journalism	Autonomy norm, procedures
Sources	Weak, approaching equilibrium	Cognitive	Moral	Reporters	News	Autonomy norm, procedures; Publicity
Public Relations	Weak, approaching equilibrium	Cognitive	Remunerative	Reporters	News	Autonomy norm, procedures; Publicity
Other Media	Weak, approaching equilibrium	Cognitive	Moral	Reporters	News	Autonomy norm, procedures
Interest Groups	Weak in face of coordinated campaigns	Regulative	Coercive	Reporters	News	Autonomy norm, procedures
News Consultants	Strong for management, weak for reporters	Regulative	Remunerative management, coercive for reporters	Management and Reporters	Journalism and news	Little recourse for reporters

Table 1. Institutional pressures on news and journalism (Vos & Russell, 2019).

Frequently considered part of the second level of agenda setting theory, framing theory is another. It involves “selecting and highlighting some facets of events and issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution” (Entman, 2003, p. 5). Framing is based on the psychological and sociological assumption that people struggle to make sense of their personal experiences and the world around them, resorting to ‘primary frameworks’ of interpretation (Goffman, 1986). More than 400 studies did not exhaust the findings related to the agenda setting or framing theory, nor did they present unquestionable evidence that the media influence the public agenda or the public framing of specific political issues,

since several methodological obstacles to the researchers' conclusions are often pointed out (Rossetto & Silva, 2012).

In the early 2000s, therefore, the media in the countries where this research focuses on was already an industry with high levels of concentration, largely dependent on advertising revenues and very susceptible to pressure from external institutions such as governments, markets and the entire public relations sector that was organized around it. In other words, the news industry's role as an intermediary between political power and the audience has been already contested for years, while journalism resisted with the tools it had: theories about the separation of commercial and news, production of content that eventually contradicted the interests of the government and demonstrated its watchdog role, among others. The platformization of the Internet emerged to further complicate the contradictions of commercial media and change the fragile control that it had over its advertising-based business model consolidated in the 20th century, affecting the production, distribution and monetization of news content. In the process, it also affected the fragile foundations on which democracy was based. In the next chapter, I attempt to describe how this process has worked.

3. The platformization of the Internet

3.1. The early promise of the Internet: Democratization and non-market practices

Castells (2009) was one of the first scholars to propose a broad social theory about the early developments of the Internet by the end of the 1990s. The author devoted most of the first book of his famous trilogy *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* to explain how networks were increasingly occupying a transforming role once attributed to individuals (e.g., entrepreneurs) and collectives (e.g., political groups, social classes) in shaping the society: a social reorganization that has been moving from the self to the net. “A network is a set of interconnected nodes. A node is the point at which a curve intersects itself. What a node is, concretely speaking, depends on the kind of concrete networks of which we speak” (Castells, 2009, p. 501). Financial markets, companies, media, political, cultural and other institutions would have to adapt to this *networking logic*, the basic structure of a *global informational society* integrated by computer-mediated communication technologies and characterized by never-before-seen flows of information.

The author warned that this transformation had already started causing a growing opposition between abstract and instrumental networks and individuals and collectivities confused by insecurities related to changes in identity, the subject of the second book of the trilogy. Castells (2010) stated that identity serves as the main source of meaning for individuals in the prevailing order. While social movements formed around national, religious or sexual identities had been already in place in an attempt to restore the previous social order, cultural elites identified with libertarian politics were pushing forward the expansion of these new technologies. This conflict could cause social divide or have an emancipatory potential, depending on developments – at least in this regard, Castells (2010) seemed to remain on the fence about prophetic predictions of the future.

Perhaps the author’s first clear sign of optimism and belief on the emancipatory potential of the Internet came in his addressing of power: of course, the economic and social importance of the networks defended by the scholar would have to be translated into the transformation of this structures into large sources of political power (Castells,

2009). According to Castells, though, the main instruments of power would not be individuals, even if they were important parts of the networks:

“Switches connecting the networks (for example, financial flows taking control of media empires that influence political processes) are the privileged instruments of power. Thus, the switchers are the power holders. Since networks are multiple, the inter-operating codes and switches between networks become the fundamental sources in shaping, guiding networks, and misguiding societies” (Castells, 2009, p. 502).

In a later book, the author recognized that the ability to constitute, program and reprogram networks had actually become a more privileged means to exert power. Even so, these *programmers* and switchers would still not be single individuals or groups but a network of decentralized, interconnected social actors:

“I suggest that in many instances the power holders are networks themselves. Not abstract, unconscious networks, not automata: they are humans organized around their projects and interests. But they are not single actors (individuals, groups, classes, religious leaders, political leaders), since the exercise of power in the network society requires a complex set of joint action that goes beyond alliances to become a new form of subject” (Castells, 2013, p. 45).

Castells’ (2009) ideal of a network society was made possible by the unprecedented development of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) that increasingly took place since the 1970s. These technologies were fundamental for restructuring capitalism towards a globalized economy, the solution found by markets to enable a resumption of economic growth after a period of crisis. Therefore, far from meaning the death of capitalism, the transformation towards a network society actually meant an evolution of the system towards financialization in global scale: “Capital works globally as a unit in real time; and it is realized, invested, and accumulated mainly in the sphere of circulation, that is as finance capital” (Castells, 2009, p. 503). Information technology have influenced the direction of financial capitalism: information and knowledge

circulated through ICTs and served as base for investment in profitable companies that, in turn, would develop and strengthen other networks fundamental to the accumulation process.

Of course, the reorganization of social, politic and economic structures would have an impact on work. Castells (2009) did not believe, however, in mass unemployment despite eventual displacement and elimination of some jobs as employment rates had been higher than ever before: “The work process is increasingly individualized, labor is disaggregated in its performance, and reintegrated in its outcome through a multiplicity of interconnected tasks in different sites, ushering in a new division of labor based on the attributes/capacities of each worker rather than on the organization of the task” (Castells, 2009, p. 502).

Castells was skilled to make broadly descriptive analyses, occasionally exuding a bit of positivity, but generally avoiding prophetic predictions about the future of the Internet and the emerging networked information economy. The same cannot be said of most of his successors. Despite eventual warnings (Bauerlein, 2011; Carr, 2008, 2020; Jackson, 2009; Turner, 2008; Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009) and the dot-com bubble burst in the beginning of the 2000s (Cassidy, 2003; Lowenstein, 2004), enthusiasm around the emancipatory potential of the Internet dreamed of by Berners-Lee et al. (2001) dominated public thought and opinion during the 2000s and most of the 2010s. Several authors from different sectors were quick to write works lauding the emergence of a connected economy where people, in theory, would have more freedom, autonomy and flexibility to build their own networks and perform more stimulating work. All of them contributed to the development of what Foucault (1995) called a *discursive regime*: a set of discourses that sustain, validate and normalize the adoption of new practices. Discursive regimes produce certain atmospheres: “spaces of resonance in which the oxygen of certain kinds of thought and practice seems natural and desirable” (Amin & Thrift, 2013, p. 5). As we will see below, the discursive regime of the then emerging connected global society contained several catchy expressions and buzz words that eventually favored and legitimized the platformization of the Internet under the guise of infrastructures that would democratize access to the means of cultural production.

Benkler was perhaps one of the most influential advocates of the “increasing role of nonmarket and nonproprietary production” (2006, p. 2) in the networked information

economy. According to the author, in the previous industrial regime, the capital needed to gain access to the means of production was expensive and required financing that constrained entrepreneurs and made innovation difficult. Technological developments have lowered the cost of the means of production and restructured communication around the Internet, a broad network of cheap information processors such as computers: in an economy centered on information and cultural production, they are owned by an immense number of individuals – all web users. Thus, the capital necessary for production has been widely distributed throughout society, enabling a never-before-seen level of cooperation: human creativity and economics of information have supposedly become the core structuring pillars of the digital economy (Benkler, 2006).

A long list of marketing and business authors followed suit with the publication of manifestos that have influenced readers to believe the world was quickly moving towards a digital economy based on participation, collectivity and creativity (Leadbeater, 2009; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Reynolds, 2007; Sawhney et al., 2005; Surowiecki, 2005; Tapscott & Williams, 2006). According to these authors, conventional business models anchored in the producer-consumer scheme would invariably end up being replaced by the flexible co-creation model intermediated by emerging digital platforms such as YouTube, Wikipedia, Flickr, among many others. Therefore, companies established during the industrial period of the economy would have to embody these ideals and follow the global societal transformation or risk being displaced.

3.2. The emergence of a new meaning for the term 'platform'

The broader utilization of 'platform' as a term to refer to products and services provided on the Internet emerged during this initial period of optimism around the developments of the world wide web. O'Reilly (2005) employed it to describe the 'Web 2.0' as a potentially disruptive model for developing products and services in which the Internet became an infrastructure for building applications on by taking advantage of the 'wisdom of the crowds' (Surowiecki, 2005). Not coincidentally, the author mentioned Google as the main example of a successful enterprise that had adopted the set of principles and practices of that movement. In O'Reilly's (2005) point of view, as an easy-to-use search engine tool, Google broke paradigms by giving up on selling a

computational product that needed to be updated every year and, instead, providing a free access software available directly on users' favorite web browser. This service was – and still is – updated on the go with improvements depending on the company's ability to continually process and respond to an increasing amount of data recorded from Internet users all around the world (O'Reilly, 2005).

In terms of culture, Benkler (2006) showed enthusiasm that the Web 2.0 would be more transparent and more malleable: in this sense, more people would participate and shape cultural practices. On the media front, though, the author recognized two main issues of the emergence of the networked information economy as an alternative to mass media: at first, it was argued that the multiplication of voices available on the Internet would make it difficult for them to be heard (the so-called Babel objection or information overload); and a second generation of studies showed that very few information sources captured most of the attention, while the vast majority of websites remained unnoticed: a blow to expectations that the world wide web would lead to greater democratization of communication. But Benkler (2006) remembered three serious problems with the mass media: 1) a relatively small class of commercial journalists were in charge of addressing all societal questions, obviously leaving many of them unnoticed; 2) market concentration allowed a few media owners political power of shaping public opinion; and 3) oversimplification of complex public discussions. According to the author, platforms were already solving these limitations and assisting in building collective-based solutions to their own issues. Peer-produced mechanisms of filtration and accreditation of information were considered examples of this movement: "relevance and accreditation are themselves information goods, just like software or an encyclopedia" (Benkler, 2006, p. 12).

Several of the most acclaimed cultural and media studies in the period were influenced by the enthusiasm of their business and marketing counterparts, adopting 'platform' as a routine term and considering 'Web 2.0' as a valid recurring concept, legitimizing them in academic circles often without providing much scientific evidence on the benefits of consumer participation in cultural production and in the development of the so-called post-industrial media (Porlezza, 2019). And, as if enough mantras and buzzwords had not already been created, Bruns (2008) coined another one: 'produsage'. The author's idea was that the emerging 'user-led' process of content creation could not

be labeled as ‘production’ anymore as well as its results could not be simply called ‘products’ as participants took uncomplicated turns as producers and users almost simultaneously – hence, contributors had to be considered ‘produsers’. Produsage was based in open participation and ‘fluid heterarchy, *ad hoc* meritocracy’ (meaning that the hierarchy of a community would be dynamic depending on the quality of the contribution of produsers no matter if they were junior or senior). Content was never supposed to be considered a finished artifact, but an unfinished and always evolving process: that was the reason why it should remain available for free for the largest possible community of contributors to be constantly improved and updated. As it would be difficult to monetize non-proprietary content, individual rewards for participation would not be financial but added value to one’s personal status (Bruns & Schmidt, 2011). Although this idea looked like it was designed for open participatory content platforms such as Wikipedia, it influenced the thinking of media gurus which started to preach that content by traditional media companies, for example, should be also increasingly shaped by public participation (Jarvis, 2011, 2014). The audience, by the way, should perhaps no longer be called as such as they would become active participants in the process of cultural production (Rosen, 2006).

Digital utopianism received criticism since its very beginning, but it has not been effectively challenged as the dominant ideology of the first two decades of the networked information economy despite reasonable claims. The numerous manifestos praising the democratization of the Internet and the rise of the participatory culture were far more persuasive in influencing public opinion because of their own rhetorical features: they are considered a specific genre of texts that seek to convince the greatest number of readers about a specific line of thought or political action as the best available alternative for organizing society (Lyon, 1999). Critics recognized Benkler, O’Reilly and their apostles’ sophisticated rhetoric to inspire industry leaders to adopt a set of controversial principles under the guise of personal emancipation alternatives: “an intriguing complexity of thought which has combined roots in hardcore business economics and the sociopolitical idealism of the 1960s counterculture” (Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009, p. 857).

Those marketing and business gurus’ ability was being able to concatenate ideas of personal liberation and alternative communalism around the development of new

technologies put forward by a group of entrepreneurs at the Silicon Valley that eventually included some of the richest and most powerful business executives in the world (Turner, 2008). “Mass creativity, peer-production and co-creation apparently warrant the erasure of the distinction between collective (non-market, public) and commercial (market, private) modes of production, as well as between producers and consumers; the terms also cleverly combine capital-intensive, profit-oriented industrial production with labor-intensive, non-profit oriented peer-production” (Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009, p. 856).

Furthermore, most of those texts that praised co-creation as unavoidable pillars of revolutionizing business models of the post-industrial society were written by authors that have been making a living as business consultants selling their expensive advice to (online) companies. Hence, their work could be “easily dismissed as industry-supporting pamphlets leveled at marketing experts and business managers who are operating mainly within the boundaries of economic discourse” (Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009, p. 867).

Despite Castells and Benkler’s claims, inspired business leaders still held the power to influence the course of society, even a globalized informational one connected in apparently decentralized networks. Gillespie (2010, 2018a, 2018b) argued that the GAFAM (the group of big tech companies formed by Google/Alphabet, Apple, Facebook/Meta, Amazon and Microsoft) wittingly took advantage of the discursive characteristics of the term ‘platform’ developed in those manifestos to position themselves to users in a way that is contrasting to conventional mass media. According to the author, they employed it in official communication and the discourse of their executives in order to emphasize their emancipatory, open, neutral, egalitarian and progressive character:

“This offer of access to everyone comes fitted with an often implicit, occasionally explicit, counterpoint: that such services are therefore unlike the mainstream broadcasters, film studios and publishers. Unlike Hollywood and the television networks, who could be painted as the big bad industries, online content seems an open world, where anyone can post, anything can be said. YouTube was distinctly not going to play the role of gatekeeper, nor

even curator: it would be mere facilitator, supporter, host” (Gillespie, 2010, p. 353).

Positioning as benevolent platforms had become strategically important for digital intermediaries as they have attempted to accommodate the often contradictory interests of their diverse constituencies (end-users, advertisers, professional content producers, etc.), establish what is acceptable for each and manage their expectations within the tools – a function that also seemed contradictory for private enterprises that, above all, sought to generate commercial revenue (Gillespie, 2010). ‘Platform’ is a word that has helped them to solve those potential conflicts:

“A term like ‘platform’ does not drop from the sky, or emerge in some organic, unfettered way from the public discussion. It is drawn from the available cultural vocabulary by stakeholders with specific aims, and carefully massaged so as to have particular resonance for particular audiences inside particular discourses. These are efforts not only to sell, convince, persuade, protect, triumph or condemn, but to make claims about what these technologies are and are not, and what should and should not be expected of them. In other words, they represent an attempt to establish the very criteria by which these technologies will be judged, built directly into the terms by which we know them” (Gillespie, 2010, p. 359).

Platforms have specific dynamics that can be analyzed from several different perspectives and considering distinct definitions. In the recent years, aforementioned platforms – the most important ones for Western countries are based in the United States but there are also the ones based in China and Japan that have built an important presence in Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia – evolved to become the dominating players of the global digital economy, permeating all spheres of social life as it has become increasingly digital through a process of platformization of society (Van Dijck et al., 2018a). As already mentioned, Poell, Nieborg and Van Dijck (2019) recommended the examination of this process in three dimensions: 1) the microeconomic, which addresses the reorganization of economic relations around multi-sided markets; 2) the infrastructural, which considers platforms as huge infrastructures for collecting, processing and using

data from potentially all internet users; and 3) platform governance, as platforms control how users interact with each other and with so-called ‘complementors’: data-brokers, advertisers, developers and other actors that take part in a platform’s ecosystem. In the following sections, we are going to address platforms in each of these dimensions and explain how each one of them fostered dynamics that contributed to an unequal distribution of power among its various actors.

3.3. Platforms as multi-sided markets with network externalities

Researchers from the field of network economics are considered to be the pioneers in seriously analyzing platforms and using this term to refer to companies that serve as intermediaries between groups of individuals and/or organizations even before the rise of Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon and others as the dominant structures of the digital economy (Steinberg, 2019). In their seminal analyses of enterprises from the financial (credit and debit cards), media (TV channels and newspapers), Internet (providers and portals), video games and software (operational systems and text processors) sectors, Rochet and Tirole (2003, 2006) described platforms as *two-sided* – or, more frequently, *multi-sided* – *markets with network externalities*.

Evans (2011) questioned calling platforms as ‘markets’ because the author considered them to be, in the first place, private businesses. As these companies developed, though, their hybrid nature of acting both as firms and as markets clearly emerged as one of their most intrinsic characteristics (Napoli, 2019; Smyrnaio, 2018) – which is going to be further described and analyzed in the following sections of this study. Unlike traditional business models based on an arrangement of successive steps that create value to the consumer of a product or user of a service (Porter, 2008), platforms’ value lies on their ability to build bridges between the needs of general users, developers, advertisers and other stakeholders (D. S. Evans & Schmalensee, 2016). “The platform’s overarching purpose: to consummate matches among users and facilitate the exchange of goods, services, or social currency, thereby enabling value creation for all participants” (Parker et al., 2016, p. 11).

Multi-sided markets heavily rely on network effects (Evans & Schmalensee, 2016; Hagiu & Wright, 2015; Rysman, 2009), which can be direct: the greater the

number of people connected to a network, the greater the value that each person will perceive in remaining on it; or indirect: when the value of a market for a group depends on the size of another group participating in it (Evans & Schmalensee, 2016). An externality is the impact caused by a person to another in the network. Obviously, platforms usually look for beneficial impacts, or positive externalities, but they can be also faced with negative ones, when the presence of a group of users is detrimental to another, for example.

Platforms take into consideration those definitions when addressing the so-called *chicken and egg problem*: how they can stimulate several sides of the market to realize the value of getting on board (Caillaud & Jullien, 2003; Evans, 2009b; Evans & Schmalensee, 2016; Rochet & Tirole, 2003, 2006). To understand firms' strategies to make market sides to engage on their grounds, scholars have dedicated considerable consideration to the examination of price structures. Soon they realized that "platforms often treat one side as a profit center and the other as a loss leader, or, at best, as financially neutral" (Rochet & Tirole, 2003, p. 991). In other words, one side (the money-side) is usually charged a price that more than covers the costs of providing the whole service and subsidizes the other side (the subsidy-side), which can be even completely freed from any charge as a stimulus to get on board. In this sense, multi-sided platforms defy traditional economic rules such as the one that established the impossibility of making a profit when selling a product or service at a price lower than its cost (D. S. Evans & Schmalensee, 2016).

Some authors noticed that a free price can be not only a temporary mechanism to attract more users to platforms but a permanent strategy to maximize profitability (Evans & Schmalensee, 2016). For several years, that has been already the logic behind big tech companies such as Google and Facebook. Thanks to the growing financialization of the economy, these platforms have been able to put in practice what Davis (2018) called the 'growth before profits model', leveraging debt against future revenue prospects with venture capital investments. Thus, these firms were able to develop their technological capabilities while attracting large user bases before opening the platforms to other sides such as advertisers, which now account for most of Google and Facebook's revenues.

3.3.1. Anti-competitive practices towards economic monopolies

As noticed with advertising, more than a single platform can perceive the value in attracting onboard one specific market side. Hence, competition was another subject that called attention of economists. According to scholars, competition is intimately connected to price structures as users often connect with more than one platform: a practice labelled as *multihoming* (Rochet & Tirole, 2003). Simple examples of this are the merchants that accept several credit cards such as American Express, Mastercard, Visa, etc. and the consumers that also hold more than a single credit card in their wallets according to their own convenience. “More generally, multihoming on one side intensifies price competition on the other side as platforms use low prices in an attempt to ‘steer’ end users on the latter side toward an exclusive relationship” (Rochet & Tirole, 2003, p. 993).

Multihoming, which is also a common practice on the social media and instant messaging sectors, is usually dealt by digital platforms by mergers and acquisitions (horizontal integration) of new entrants and potential competitors and/or by the imitation of innovative features from these kinds of start-ups. Motta and Peitz (2020) showed that mergers have already become an integral strategy and part of the routine of the GAFAM. According to their research, only from 2015 to 2020, Microsoft acquired 53 other enterprises, Google (Alphabet) 48, Amazon 42, Apple 33, and Facebook (Meta) 21. “The vast majority of these and earlier mergers were under the radar of Antitrust Authorities and the very few that have come under their scrutiny have been approved” (Motta & Peitz, 2020, p. 1). The acquisitions of Instagram and WhatsApp by Facebook were cited by the authors as ones from the latter group together with Google/YouTube, Google/Waze, Microsoft/LinkedIn, among others. In all those cases, the acquired companies seemed to have put in practice a two-stage entry strategy (attempting to enlarge their base of users in an adjacent market before pivoting to the main one) coupled with the offer of an innovative product or service with more perceived quality (Katz, 2020; Motta & Peitz, 2020).

Those deals were highly controversial at the moment they were closed, and there has been a growing perception that they were also harmful to users. “Whenever the start-up has the ability to pursue its project, the merger will be anti-competitive. The

acquisition then becomes either a ‘killer acquisition’ or an upgrade with suppressed competition” (Motta & Peitz, 2020, p. 2). Competitive effects of mergers, though, are difficult to evaluate and highly related to the particularities of each deal due to an enormous number of variables to be considered in predicting the path of the companies (Katz, 2020). That situation may explain why so many economists have recently proposed models that attempt to solve recent controversies around big tech acquisitions (Cabral, 2020; Hollenbeck, 2020; Letina et al., 2020; Motta & Peitz, 2020).

According to Motta and Peitz (2020), there are several conditions in which mergers are anti-competitive and harmful to consumers: horizontal mergers of free services with consumer single-homing (Google/Waze would fit in that category); horizontal mergers with consumer multihoming and indirect price effects (the offer of coupled advertisements on Facebook and Instagram may configure that situation); conglomerate mergers that affect the volume of data available to firms (more data may mean better services, but they can also be used to decrease the utility for consumers: nowadays Alphabet and Meta detain a huge amount of data from users and their several other stakeholders, using it at their own discretion and privileging some businesses over others); conglomerate mergers and synergies through one-stop shopping (when one merger is enough to give a huge majority of the market for a platform); and conglomerate mergers and the bundling of free services.

Katz (2020) suggested that a disproportional price can provide important indications about the anti-competitiveness of a merger as incumbents are more capable to identify threatening competitors than antitrust authorities: an unprofitable transaction, for instance, would make it clear an incumbent’s intention of preventing competition and it should therefore be prevented by authorities. A co-founder of Facebook, Chris Hughes wrote that Instagram and WhatsApp were in the path of emerging as important rivals⁸ when they were acquired by the tech giant in 2012 and 2014: the former costed US\$ 1 billion, while the latter merger involved an even more impressive sum of US\$ 19 billion⁹. Those negotiations are of particular interest for this research because they

⁸ Hughes, C. (2019, May 9). Opinion: It’s time to break up Facebook. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/09/opinion/sunday/chris-hughes-facebook-zuckerberg.html> on January 14, 2021.

⁹ Sheard, S. (2019, December 18). Facebook owns the four most downloaded apps of the decade. *BBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-50838013> on January 14, 2021.

consolidated Facebook's position as the dominant platform of the social media and instant messaging sectors with more than 7 billion monthly active users in their four main applications combined¹⁰. Besides those criteria, Katz (2020) recommended taking into consideration start-ups' share growth rates and consumer views instead of evaluating only their market shares and current revenues, especially when network externalities play such a decisive role.

Economists also addressed a possible negative effect of blocking mergers: limiting innovation – or the so-called 'entry for buyout', when an entrant has a differentiating feature but not the resources needed to develop the product, hence it needs to be acquired (Cabral, 2020; Hollenbeck, 2020; Letina et al., 2020; Motta & Peitz, 2020). On the other hand, Katz (2020) argues that mergers can actually also prevent innovation by 'incumbency for buyout': whereby an incumbent invests in slightly strengthening its competitive position solely to induce the entrant to merge on more favorable terms.

After reportedly failing to acquire Snapchat multiple times, Facebook has dealt with the competitor differently: by imitating their main features one after the other¹¹. The strategy was so successful that the company did not even risk to attract excessive attention from regulatory authorities and the media when faced with another threat such as TikTok. Through the launch of Instagram *stories* on August 2, 2016¹² and *reels* on August 5, 2020¹³, the Menlo Park company has deliberately cloned to its platform the two most popular functions present on its main competitors.

Imitation is not a new strategy and has been studied by researchers already for several decades. According to them, there are clear advantages in focusing on imitation instead of innovating, even though nothing prevents a company from using both approaches (Teece, 1986). First, it is definitely cheaper (Mansfield, 1961). Imitation costs

¹⁰ Most popular social networks worldwide as of October 2020, ranked by number of active users (2020, October). *Statista*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/> on January 20, 2021.

¹¹ Wagner, K. (2016, December 28). Here are all the times Facebook tried to stomp out Snapchat in 2016. *Recode*. Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/2016/12/28/14100870/facebook-snapchat-copy-product> on January 25, 2021.

¹² Wagner, K. (2016, August 2). Instagram just cloned Snapchat's Stories feature to get more people sharing. *Recode*. Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/2016/8/2/12343218/instagram-copy-snapchat-stories-feature-sharing> on January 27, 2021.

¹³ Alexander, J. (2020, August 5). Instagram launches Reels, its attempt to keep you off TikTok. *The Verge*. Retrieved from <https://www.theverge.com/2020/8/5/21354117/instagram-reels-tiktok-vine-short-videos-stories-explore-music-effects-filters> on January 27, 2021.

in the area of development could be half of innovation costs (Schewe, 1996). The amount that Meta saved by imitating Snapchat and TikTok functions is unknown and difficult to calculate, but certainly the acquisition of both companies would have cost tens of billions of dollars. Second, imitation saved Zuckerberg's empire from the hassle of approving deals before regulatory authorities, facing media scrutiny and deal with public opinion, which would certainly see clear signs of monopolistic practices in the businesses. Third, academic literature also found that imitation, particularly in the field of technological development, is a path for operational and strategic advantages (Lieberman & Asaba, 2006; Mansfield et al., 1981; Shankar et al., 1998; Teece, 1986).

Despite advantages, imitation can be also challenging. Business scholars noticed that technological know-how was an indicator of success in imitation strategies: eventually there may be patents that become barriers to overcome with technological development (Fischer, 1978; Zoergiebel, 1983). In the analysis of initiatives from the industrial period, researchers also realized that the size of the company and its ability to implement large-scale production are factors that tend to guarantee the success of imitative procedures (Dunne et al., 1988; Schnaars, 1986; D. Shapiro & Khemani, 1987). Although Meta's social media do not employ industrial business models, it is difficult today to find companies with more technological development resources, larger user bases and greater advertising revenues than it. These characteristics make the company absolutely capable of putting into practice imitations of its competitors' features in a short time and at a proportionally low cost. In traditional markets, however, imitation strategies tend to have a limit: as imitation activity increases, it becomes difficult for a company to maintain positive results and, eventually, it would be necessary to return to the innovation path (Doha et al., 2018).

Thanks to the dominance of their digital platforms, Google (Alphabet) and Facebook (Meta) have maintained, for example, the duopoly of the global digital advertising market: the two companies together hold a share greater than 50% of the total revenues from this market since 2019 and are expected to remain dominant in the coming years despite the growth of Amazon and Alibaba in the sector¹⁴. The global digital ad market

¹⁴ Cramer-Flood, E. (2021, May 10). Duopoly still rules the global digital ad market, but Alibaba and Amazon are on the prowl. *eMarketer*. Retrieved from <https://www.insiderintelligence.com/content/duopoly-still-rules-global-digital-ad-market-alibaba-amazon-on-prowl> on March 27, 2022.

has already accounted for more than 65% of all advertising revenue in the world in 2021 and is expected to exceed 70% by 2025¹⁵.

Haucap and Heimeshoff (2014) argued, though, that high market concentration of multi-sided platforms cannot be automatically compared to the same situation of a market without network externalities. The authors pointed to two conditions that should be taken into consideration before establishing if Google and Facebook, for example, have become monopolies: if multihoming has been still possible for consumers – here we should also consider advertisers – and if switching costs have played an important role. In general, their conclusion regarding those platforms was that the adoption of competitors was not costless, but yet viable for users (Haucap & Heimeshoff, 2014). However, multi-sided markets usually tend to *natural monopolies* – when strong returns acquired by dominant companies considerably limit the number of viable competitors and the need for scale imposes virtually insurmountable barriers for new entrants (D. S. Evans & Schmalensee, 2016; Haucap & Heimeshoff, 2014; M. L. Katz, 2020; Rochet & Tirole, 2006). Recent developments from Antitrust Authorities have been pointing to that direction, considering that platforms impose increasingly harder lock-in strategies¹⁶: their brands have become almost synonyms for some specific services on the Internet – Google for search, Facebook and their platform instances such as Instagram for social media, Messenger/WhatsApp for messaging, and Amazon for online retail, for example (Smyrnaio, 2018; Van Dijck, 2013).

Some authors have referred to the platform concentration of the Internet as a proof of the concept of ‘winner-take-all markets’ based on Rosen’s (1981) ‘economics of superstars’ (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014). It occurs when there is a very wide gap

¹⁵ Share of digital ad revenue worldwide 2019-2027 (2022, June 29). *Statista*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/375008/share-digital-ad-spend-worldwide/> on July 20, 2022.

¹⁶ Koetsier, J. (2022, February 4). Google antitrust: The 14 most explosive allegations. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnkoetsier/2022/02/04/google-antitrust-the-14-most-explosive-allegations/?sh=536ae2023252> on March 27, 2022. Ferrie, D.; Tsoni, M. (2021, June 22). Antitrust: Commission opens investigation into possible anticompetitive conduct by Google in the online advertising technology sector. *European Commission*. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/ip_21_3143 on March 27, 2022. Edelman, G. (2022, January 12). The Antitrust case against Facebook draws blood. *Wired*. Retrieved from <https://www.wired.com/story/facebook-ftc-antitrust-non-price-theory/> on March 27, 2022. Lordan, B. (2021, August 19). FTC Alleges Facebook Resorted to Illegal Buy-or-Bury Scheme to Crush Competition After String of Failed Attempts to Innovate. *Federal Trade Commission*. Retrieved from <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2021/08/ftc-alleges-facebook-resorted-illegal-buy-or-bury-scheme-crush-competition-after-string-failed> on March 27, 2022.

between the most popular provider of a product or service and its best competitor. Technology development and network effects tend to largely contribute for winner-take-all markets by increasing the level of information about products and facilitating access to the best option available. “Suddenly the top-quality provider can capture the whole market. The next-best provider might be almost as good, but it will not matter. Each time a market becomes more digital, these winner-take-all economics become a little more compelling” (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014, p. 153).

Economic concepts alone, though, fail to capture all the complexity of platforms and all the dimensions of the power they exert over the digital economy (Van Dijck et al., 2019), an understanding that has been increasingly shared by economists and legislators themselves, as well as society in general. One of the aspects that adds to the understanding of platform control is the processing of personal and user behavior data on the Internet. We intend to explain how this is done in the next sections of this chapter.

3.4. Platforms as reprogrammable data infrastructures

Two fields often considered as one and the same but that have actually developed in parallel have definitions of ‘platform’ that take into account their systems. *Platform Studies* has mainly focused on breaking down the relationships between the material (hardware) and the programming (software) dimensions of specific computational platforms such as the Atari Video Computer System and the Nintendo Wii. In the foundation works of this research stream, Bogost & Monfort (2009) made it clear that (re)programmability was the essential characteristic of a platform when they employed the definition proposed by now venture capitalist Marc Andreessen:

“A ‘platform’ is a system that can be reprogrammed and therefore customized by outside developers – users – and in that way, adapted to countless needs and niches that the platform’s original developers could not have possibly contemplated, much less had time to accommodate” (Andreessen, 2007, par. 6).

The broader field of *Infrastructural Studies* has aimed at understanding platforms’ unmatched capabilities of de-centralizing data production and collection to

external webpages and applications and re-centralizing these data to be processed inside the platform's servers in order to make transactions with commercial partners (Helmond, 2015; Langlois & Elmer, 2013; Plantin et al., 2018). Kitchin (2014) defined data as "the raw material produced by abstracting the world into categories, measures and other representational forms – numbers, characters, symbols, images, sounds, electromagnetic waves, bits – that constitute the building blocks from which information and knowledge are created" (p. 1). And Helmond (2015) expanded the concept of *data pours* proposed by Liu (2004) to provide a socio-technical definition of platforms as "pouring data systems that set up data channels to enable data flows with third parties" (p. 1).

Platforms, therefore, transform users' interactions on the Internet into quantified information that can be analyzed: a process that has been widely called *datafication*. "Facebook datafied relationships; they always existed and constituted information, but they were never formally defined as data until Facebook's 'social graph'" (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013, p. 91). This trend was enabled by their capacity of implementing social buttons and plug-ins on other sites (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013) and making their APIs (application programming interfaces) and SDKs (software development kits) available to third parties for integration of their applications to platform infrastructures (Helmond et al., 2017). Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) explained that Facebook's like button, for example, has allowed the platform to improve its 'social graph', "a representation of people and their connections to other people as well as objects within the platform" (p. 1352), as it unlocked part of this structure to webmasters for integration of virtually any other page available on the Internet:

"The plugins allow for a controlled way of exchanging preformatted data between Facebook and the external web as they enable data flows from and to the platform through actions such as liking or by showing which users have engaged with the website or its content within Facebook. These features play an important role in Facebook's strategy of 'building a web where the default is social' as the Open Graph and Social Plugins mediate the connections between the platform, external websites and users through platform-specific activities" (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013, p. 1352).

APIs and SDKs are “a set of interfaces that allow them (*applications*) to communicate, interact and interoperate with the platform” (Tiwana, 2014, p. 5). Similarly, these interfaces provide the exchange of specific user data between app developers and platforms. Ghazawneh and Henfridsson (2013) called these interfaces *boundary resources* as they expand platform capabilities, generating complementary assets. In addition to these channels, large technology companies have also created, developed and even acquired other instances for their platforms – in the case of Facebook, for example, messaging applications such as Messenger and WhatsApp, among others, as already mentioned, that can themselves develop into standalone platforms (Nieborg & Helmond, 2019).

Add-on software allow platforms to extend their functionalities and develop a platform-based ecosystem (Tiwana, 2014) or an infrastructure: a sociotechnical system that “integrate(s) many heterogeneous components by means of sociotechnical gateways” (Plantin et al., 2018, p. 299) and one “that is widely shared and increasingly perceived as essential” (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4280). Key features of infrastructures are ubiquity, reliability and invisibility (Plantin et al., 2018). Here the complementarity between infrastructural studies and business studies becomes more apparent: each new platform functionality provided by a complementor adds value to the whole ecosystem. A fundamental characteristic of this ecosystem is interoperability, which lies in the modularization of computational technologies that can be mixed and matched together. Modular product architectures tend to facilitate innovation by simplifying complexity management and reducing costs (Bodle, 2011; Gawer, 2014). Modularization also relocates the locus of innovation from the platform to the developers (Tiwana, 2014) and allows these infrastructures to be more flexible to trajectory changes as they trace new interests and behaviors from end-users (Adner & Levinthal, 2001).

According to Tiwana (2014), modularization involves a certain level of mystery and exposure: “The logic behind modular architectures is to share information about the interfaces but keep the proprietary innards of individual apps and the platform secret” (p. 106). The visible part of the platform for plug-in and add-on developers is subject to interface standardization: a set of rules and protocols established by the platform to establish the level of interaction and communication that is allowed for complementors through the provided interfaces (Tiwana, 2014). “Interface standards are like traffic

lights; they simplify coordination only as long as everyone follows the same rules. Each driver must both know and follow the rules. (...) Compliance with a platform's interface standards requires a carrot—demonstrable value and benefit to app developers—rather than a stick (Tiwana, 2014, p. 114).

The expansion of platforms' capacity of data collection and production to potentially the whole internet means that every user interaction is traced, whether an individual is a platform user or not (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013). This movement generates an enormous amount of data – the so-called *big data*, another buzzword created during the 1990s that has gained popularity since the 2000s under the discursive regime of the network economy or, more recently, the platform economy (Kitchin, 2014). Anyone who thinks that big data refers only to the size of datasets, though, is wrong: although there is no agreed definition of the term, it is common to consider that they have not only volume but also great diversity and are produced at an intense velocity (real-time) (Zikopoulos et al., 2011). Kitchin (2014) added at least other four characteristics of these kinds of data found on literature: big data round up entire populations, are very detailed, flexible and relational, being able to be compared and linked with other datasets.

The only possibility to analyzing and employing big data is through the deployment of computer algorithms: automated processes used to learn from data, recognize complex patterns on them, build models that can make predictions based on past actions and facilitate decision-making (Kitchin, 2014). A differentiating aspect of algorithmic data treatment is its instant applicability: "it integrates and automates the sequence of collecting data, making decisions, and applying results, thereby relegating human discretion to the design and control stages" (Rieder, 2016, p. 42).

3.4.1. The emergence of targeted advertising

Technological developments allowed platforms to integrate the processing of big data into their logics, but the primary driver of datafication was financial: the possibility of increasing efficiencies and reducing costs (Gantz & Reinsel, 2011; Manyika et al., 2011; Zikopoulos et al., 2011). The advertising market was already on a push to improve their ability to target consumers since the 1980s, when media channels and consumption started becoming increasingly fragmented because of the dissemination of cable

television (Turow, 1998). Platforms such as Google and Facebook were able to integrate the logics of datafication and consumer targeting into business models that potentially benefit advertisers more than the old system based on ad placement on mass media print and broadcast properties (Couldry & Turow, 2014). Since they have billions of users worldwide and the capacity as data infrastructures to become worldwide leaders in the tracking market, platforms are able to provide advertisers with valuable information about consumer decision journeys (the consumer path between product awareness and final decision) for basically everyone that is online (Turow, 2013). This way, via digital intermediaries, marketers can present their products to those consumers who are supposedly more prone to buying them (Evans, 2009a). “Generally speaking, digital advertising shifted from probabilistic, cookie-based approaches towards a performance-based, dynamic modality that allows advertisers to ‘bid’ on thousands of impressions, clicks, or taps in real-time” (Helmond et al., 2017, p. 2). This practice has been interchangeably called by varying names in the literature and in the industry: *behavioral marketing*, *targeted advertising*, *segmentation*, *(content) personalization*, *people-based marketing*, *performance marketing*, etc. Supposedly, it would also benefit users of the Internet and platforms, who would not waste time on advertisements and content of products and services that do not interest them (Kitchin, 2014).

The provision of data analytics tools such as Google Analytics and Facebook Insights was fundamental to convincing advertisers about platforms’ pitch on the larger effectiveness of targeted advertising and the consequential normalization of their systems (Smyrnaio, 2018; Turow, 2013). At the same time that these interfaces make it possible for platforms to make available only an essential part of the data they collect from users’ behavior on the Internet, keeping in secrecy details about the parameters of the algorithms that generate the information, they also make it easier for marketers to understand how their messages are performing in real time through advanced and uncomplicated visualizations, a demand that advertisers have had since media fragmentation has made campaign planning and resource allocation considerably more difficult – in the 1990s with the popularization of cable and satellite television and the creation of several different channels (Turow, 2013).

3.4.2. The emergence of dataism

Despite occasional crises, related to leaks of users' personal data or the publication of controversial practices for the collection of this information¹⁷, both Google and Facebook have been successful in maintaining the reputation of their systems to advertisers in recent years not only because they are supposedly more effective and costless than traditional media but also because they simplify marketers' decision-making as they can put all the responsibility about their choices on data: "Judgement, understood as the evaluation of evidence to make a decision, becomes a product of statistical analysis and thus acquires an aura of objectivity, rationality, and – most importantly – a legitimacy that derives from its empirical findings (Rieder, 2016, p. 45).

Scholars from the field of platform studies refer to this almost thoughtless adoption of insights provided by the 'social quantification sector' (Couldry & Mejias, 2019) as *dataism*. According to Van Dijck (2014), dataism has become an ideology and its followers have a "widespread belief in the objective quantification and potential tracking of all kinds of human behavior and sociality through online media technologies" (p. 198). Consequently, datafication sponsored by digital platforms "has grown to become an accepted new paradigm for understanding sociality and social behavior" (Van Dijck, 2014, p. 198). The proliferation of metaphors such as "data is the new oil" in opinion articles on business media¹⁸ as well as manifestos praising the advantages of the platform business model based on data over the linear business model (D. S. Evans & Schmalensee, 2016; Parker et al., 2016; Van Alstyne et al., 2016) seems to confirm Van Dijck's argument and the role of data in the discursive regime of platforms.

For the authors of those manifestos, it is platforms' ability to collect, process and employ data from their gigantic user bases on real-time decision-making that gives them

¹⁷ Albright, J. (2018, March 20). The Graph API: Key Points in the Facebook and Cambridge Analytica Debacle. *Medium*. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/tow-center/the-graph-api-key-points-in-the-facebook-and-cambridge-analytica-debacle-b69fe692d747> on September 13, 2021. Newman, L. H. (2018, November 1). The privacy battle to save Google from itself. *Wired*. Retrieved from <https://www.wired.com/story/google-privacy-data/> on September 13, 2021.

¹⁸ The world's most valuable resource is no longer oil, but data (2017, March 6). *The Economist*. Retrieved from <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2017/05/06/the-worlds-most-valuable-resource-is-no-longer-oil-but-data> on August 16, 2021. Toonders, J. (2018). Data is the new oil of the digital economy. *Wired*. Retrieved from <https://www.wired.com/insights/2014/07/data-new-oil-digital-economy/> on May 5, 2021. Bhageshpur, K. (2019, November 15). Data is the new oil – and that's a good thing. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2019/11/15/data-is-the-new-oil-and-thats-a-good-thing/?sh=232ddf8e7304> on May 5, 2021.

a competitive advantage over traditional companies and even two-sided markets without this capacity (e.g., media). However, there have been several clear indicators that the increasingly closer relationships between platforms and their complementors can hardly be attributed only to the former's 'organic' attractiveness, to use an industry jargon. As platforms develop reprogrammable infrastructures that facilitate the business needs of multiple sides of the market, they stimulate cross-side externalities and grow exponentially by performing boundary work on programmability towards very specific groups of stakeholders, strategically targeting market leaders with partnership programs built to give platforms leverage over some sectors of the digital economy, such as advertising, marketing and publishing (Helmond et al., 2019). In the next section, this issue will be addressed in more depth.

3.4.3. The role of essential institutional partnerships

The relationship between platforms and complementors is far from friendly and straightforward, as business scholars who preach the superiority of the platform's business model in their manifestos seem to imply. "There is a delicate tension in boundary resource design between maintaining platform control and, at the same time, stimulating third-party developers to join forces with the platform owner by developing applications" (Ghazawneh & Henfridsson, 2013, p. 2). In this sense, the platforms discovered early on the need to develop partnerships and design exclusive APIs for specific groups of developers – usually market leaders – considered essential for the rapid growth of the platform as an infrastructure (Helmond et al., 2017). These partners have allowed platforms to penetrate into strategic sectors while in return platforms have provided those complementors with larger ability to influence platform governance (Eaton et al., 2015). This strategy is embedded on what Caplan and Gillespie (2020) defined as *tiered governance*: "offering different users different sets of rules, different material resources and opportunities, and different procedural protections when content is demonetized" (p. 2).

If we take the example of Facebook, we will see that the social network site was not programmable since its launching in 2004: it only reached that level with the release of its first set of boundary resources two years later (Helmond et al., 2019). They were

initially aimed at developers who could integrate their ‘social apps’ to the platform and provide mostly entertainment options to attract more users and increase their time spent on the platform. These partnerships (e.g., fbFund and Great Apps Program) were valuable for Facebook penetration into the developer community. “The Preferred Developer Consultant program helped brands and business to grow a Facebook presence, build apps, and accommodate the enrolment of high-profile partner organizations” (Helmond et al., 2019, p. 137).

A second wave of Facebook’s infrastructural partnerships was pushed between 2010, two years before its IPO, and 2014 and was consequently focused on the development of capabilities for the platform to build its revenue model. Available only to selected marketing agencies, the Facebook Ads API, launched in mid 2010, “offered partners deeper levels of technology integration by enabling them to connect their own tools with Facebook’s advertising products, allowing partners to automate and manage ads on Facebook (Helmond et al., 2019, p. 136). This integration, however, demanded from the partners an effort towards improving their programming capabilities, an outcome that favored Facebook’s intention to make marketing on the platform increasingly API-driven. Simultaneously, the platform developed improvements of its own mobile application and made available boundary resources related to its technologies, paving the way to become a dominant infrastructure in the mobile environment. “During this period, the Ads API morphed into the MAPI, which signaled an ambition to grow the business side of the platform beyond advertising to include other marketing products and services such as programmatic advertising, analytics, and insights” (Helmond et al., 2019, p. 138-139).

At first, perhaps strictly following its internal motto ‘move fast and break things,’ Facebook did not really seem concerned about documenting changes and letting developers know in advance about upcoming updates (van der Vlist et al., 2022). A third push, between 2014 and 2018, though, solidified the company’s trajectory as a marketing development platform and marked its expansion to global markets. Answering to criticism from the marketing developer community, “Facebook’s two main development platforms adopted a ‘core and extended versioning model’ with regular API releases and scheduled deprecation dates (FD-2018e)” (Helmond et al., 2019, p. 139). A fourth stage of partnerships started in 2018 was aimed at addressing increasing criticism about

Facebook's market dominance and concerns about data abuse and the dissemination of misinformation on the platform. According to the authors, the company has carried out a complete re-examination of its platform, including the entire family of apps such as Instagram, Messenger and WhatsApp, followed by a major redesign and restructuring of developer and partner pages and the release of new updates for its APIs. "Finally, the new Facebook Marketing Consultants program introduces individual consultants who can establish Facebook marketing technologies for smaller advertisers and businesses not addressed by the partner ecosystem" (Helmond et al., 2019, p. 139).

Helmond et al. (2019) have mapped and categorized Facebook's partnerships via APIs, and numbers confirm the primary focus on enhancing the platform's marketing capabilities: until 2018, most associations were classified into 'advertising & promotion' (598), followed by 'social and relationships' (375), 'data' (294), 'content and experience' (267), 'commerce and sales' (95) and 'management' (36). "'Content & experience' has been steadily growing since 2009, pointing to Facebook's key role in the platformization of cultural production" (Helmond et al., 2019, p. 137), a finding that is particularly important for this research and will be addressed later.

Extending the focus to most major social media platforms, Van der Vlist and Helmond (2021) performed a network analysis of partnerships that revolved around the connection between advertising and data – because the first has become the main source of revenue for the sector and the second has granted a competitive advantage to players such as Google and Facebook. The authors noticed that, while most partners (79.4%) were mentioned only once, a significant minority (20.6%) had their footprints spanned through several different platforms: large advertising agencies, advertising and marketing clouds, audience data aggregators, data analytics and measurement firms, multichannel advertising and marketing solutions and customer relation management solutions (Van der Vlist & Helmond, 2021). Spiekermann (2019) remarked that these kinds of companies have become central players in the audience economy because of the strategic importance of data. Those partnerships granted exclusive access to proprietary data and services which most competitors did not have, raising serious political economic questions about the power asymmetries they generate (van der Vlist & Helmond, 2021).

According to Helmond (2019), those partnerships assisted platforms in accumulating external dependencies in essential areas. Platforms exchange access to their APIs' data and services for infrastructural control over the relationships with partners and the directions of the markets: "Developers agree upon an asymmetrical power relationship where they connect to Facebook and Google, thereby enhancing the importance of their standards, making them more powerful as data hubs and passage points" (Bechmann, 2013, p. 75). Thus, boundary resources have become primary sources of power over entire sectors, such as advertising, marketing and even cultural industries, at the same these interfaces allow platforms to accommodate demands from partners to a certain extent: "The strategy seems to be one of exercising power through the design of boundary resources and seeking to be perceived as equitable and rational by regulators, the blogosphere, and partner organizations" (Eaton et al., 2015, p. 239).

Partnerships with data management platforms (DMPs) and customer data platforms (CDPs) in the field of data aggregation such as eXelate, LiveRamp (by Acxiom), Oracle DMP (formerly BlueKai) and Salesforce DMP (formerly Krux), for example, allowed Facebook and Google to reach a once inaccessible universe of audiences, devices and media distribution channels (Van der Vlist & Helmond, 2021). In exchange, DMPs and CDPs received access to first-party data from major platforms that most competitors did not have. On top of it, these data intermediaries could promote this exclusivity to their own clients interested in advertising seamlessly across an almost infinite number of possibilities in today's platformized Internet: "long-lasting API arrangements may be used to signal access, expertise, and experience (Van der Vlist & Helmond, 2021, p. 8).

On their research, Helmond et al. (2019) and Van der Vlist & Helmond (2021) showed that platforms provide distinct incentives and prioritize different sides along their evolution based on their business goals and strategies. Gawer (2021) summed up that, during an initial stage in which they are seeking growth and consolidation, platforms tend to invest in network effects, bringing as many strategic partners as possible onboard and stimulating their participation with increasing visibility. This situation usually changes when platforms reach a stage of greater maturity: digital intermediaries tend to become more selective in their partnerships and, consequently, complementors' growth tends to stall.

Such a hold over the data flows on the Internet led Blanke and Pybus (2020) to argue that platforms reached monopolization through data infrastructures, a view that seems to be corroborated by other scholars. Plantin et al. (2018) compared major platforms such as Google and Facebook to past monopolist organizations that dominated infrastructure businesses such as railroads, telephone and electricity provision: a major difference, though, is that platform conglomerates were born as private enterprises and not state companies that were eventually privatized becoming subject of state regulation that could even lead to split ups such as the one that happened with AT&T in the United States in 1982 (E. Noam, 2016b). There is a suspicion that similar measures would be actually impossible in the platformed ecosystem as these infrastructures are also deeply integrated. “Their services commonly co-occur in apps. Beyond their competition, they also depend on each other technically” (Blanke & Pybus, 2020, p. 11). API-mediated control is just a first dimension of the power exerted by platforms in the digital economy, in the next section, we provide further descriptions on how major big tech companies govern the Internet.

3.5. Platforms as the governing entities of the Internet

Van Dijck (2020) offered an interesting metaphor for visualizing how platforms have been concentrating more power through the process of platformization of the Internet (see figure 3). The author compared the whole ecosystem of information to a tree – a giant American sequoia. Its ‘roots’ were formed by infrastructural artifacts such as smartphones, cables, satellites, and data centers that enable the transference of data. Although governments have recently increased their push to control this layer of the platformization of the web, as exposed by political disputes around 5G technology that opposed the United States and China¹⁹, big tech companies also have already been successful in privatizing essential areas of this infrastructure. Google, for example, produces smartphones, owns data center facilities worldwide and is on the process of building

¹⁹ Woo, S.; Lin, L. (2021, October 12). The China-US 5G battle upends a telecom industry consortium. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-us-5g-battle-11634000482> on June 27, 2021.

several fiber-optic undersea cables to improve its cloud capabilities²⁰. Facebook is taking a similar path²¹.

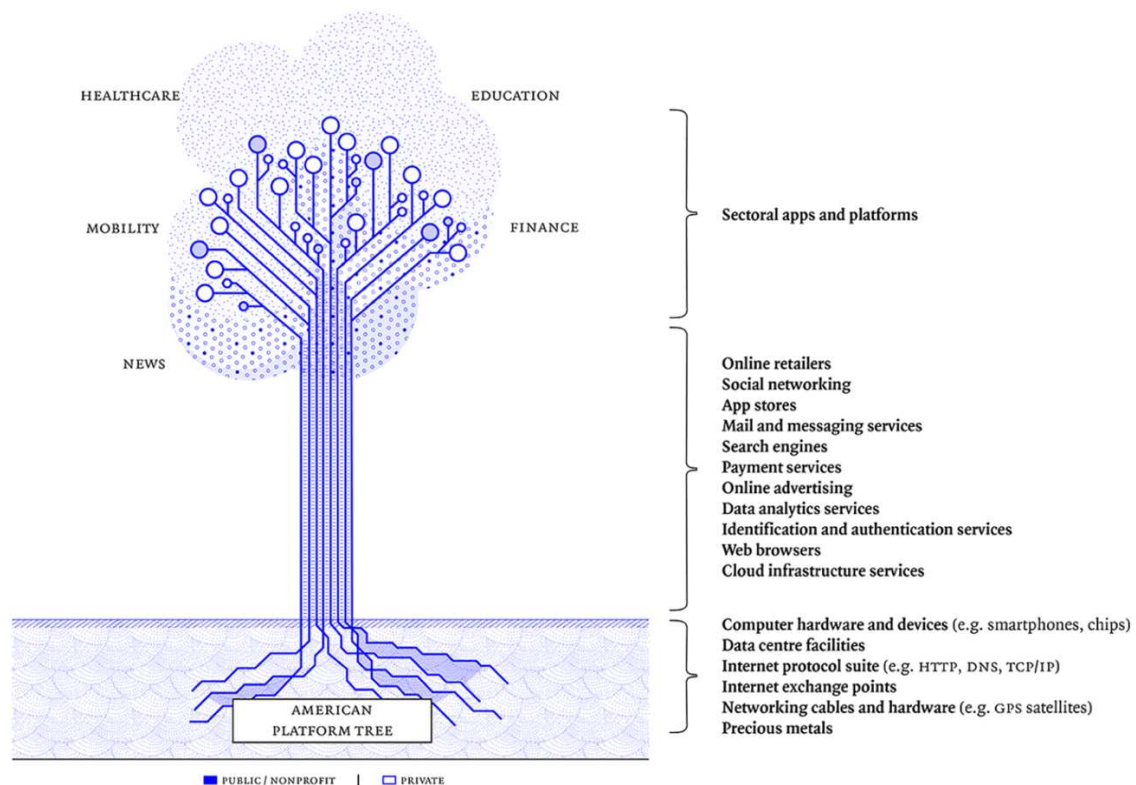


Figure 3. The giant sequoia that represents the American platform tree (Van Dijck, 2020).

The giant sequoia’s ‘trunk’ would comprise a limited number of private platforms such as the GAFAM and their known instances (Nieborg & Helmond, 2019) that work as mediators between physical infrastructures and end-users, businesses and societal sectors. The several ‘branches’ would represent the different societal sectors, whether private or public, that serve markets and individual consumers – this fragmented area includes, for example, the news sector. The more levels a company can operate in, the more power it acquires, and if a platform can establish itself in the trunk, it becomes a ‘obligatory passage point’ that can moderate data and content flows between the roots and the branches. “Owners of critical intermediary platforms are afforded extraordinary

²⁰ Shead, S. (2020, July 28). Google is building a huge undersea fiber-optic cable to connect the U.S. to Britain and Spain. CNBC. Retrieved from <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/07/28/google-undersea-cable-grace-hopper.html> on May 15, 2021.

²¹ Kene-Okafor, T. (2021, September 29). Facebook-backed 2Africa set to be the longest subsea cable upon completion. *TechCrunch*. Retrieved from <https://techcrunch.com/2021/09/29/facebook-backed-2africa-set-to-be-the-longest-subsea-cable-upon-completion/> on May 17, 2021.

power to set the rules for data trafficking in the global network as such” (Van Dijck, 2020, p. 8).

Vertical integration – the presence of platforms in all layers of the tree proposed by Van Dijck (2020) – also means that private companies are the ones mostly working as arbiters of consumption and expression in a network that was supposed to be free (Srnicsek, 2017). This arbitration is often called *platform governance* (Gillespie, 2010, 2018a; Gorwa, 2019; Tiwana, 2014). Before delving into the different aspects of platform governance, I must address the differentiation between governance *of* and governance *by* platforms, which are deeply entangled. Governance of platforms refers to “how public institutions set the legal boundaries of what can be exchanged on platforms” (Poell et al., 2021, p. 81). Section 230 of the United States Communications Decency Act produced in the 1990s make a distinction between hosts and editors: while the former (e.g., telecom companies such as AT&T and T-Mobile) have limited responsibility over the content shared through their infrastructures, the latter (e.g., media companies such as Disney) take legal liability over the content they produce and distribute. Due to the lack of a more specific framework to address their hybrid character, digital platforms have benefited from the same safeguards as telecommunications companies (Gillespie, 2018a, 2018b). This is why platforms often claim that they are not media companies, even though they commission productions for YouTube and Spotify, for example (Napoli & Caplan, 2017). The main law for platform regulation in the EU has been the E-Commerce Directive, which also exempts digital intermediaries from any obligation on monitoring user-generated content being shared on their interfaces “as long as they have no knowledge of illegal activities and act promptly upon notification” (Heldt, 2022, p. 70). The author considers that both legislation had synergy effects and “created a de facto transatlantic market for platforms with user-generated content” (Heldt, 2022, p. 70).

In recent years, authorities around the world have taken an increasingly active stance in discussing revisions to the lenient antitrust laws that have helped platforms grow into gigantic businesses with considerable power over political, economic, social and cultural developments of societies (Flew & Martin, 2022). Self-regulation has been increasingly considered inadequate, with Facebook/Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg himself admitting to US congressmen that it was necessary to create specific legislation to regulate platforms. “I think the real question, as the Internet becomes more important in

people's lives, is what is the right regulation, not whether there should be or not" (Zuckerberg & Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, 2018).

After moves from member states such as France, Germany and Austria since 2017, the European Union started discussions around the Digital Services Act in December 2020: so far, a law that keeps the liability privilege of platforms and still does not obligate them to moderate user content but expands the scope of previous legislation in the direction of acting against users who regularly publish illegal content and reporting crimes that represent a threat to life or safety of persons (Heldt, 2022). When approved, the DSA should create two new oversight institutions with supervisory rights: at the national level, the Digital Service Coordinators, and, at the EU level, the Board for Digital Services. Heldt (2022) argued that, when implemented, the DSA "will challenge the platforms in an unprecedented way" (p. 79). However, the author also admitted that it is possible that the new legislation will end up consolidating the dominant position of platforms over the public sphere. Only time will tell. In any case, it seems that any broader legislation that is passed is already long overdue.

This situation maintain platforms largely responsible for regulating their own ecosystems, therefore, governance by platforms "structures how content can be created, distributed, marketed, and monetized online, affecting the regulation of public space more generally" (Poell et al., 2021, p. 81). Thus, contrary to the rhetoric of openness and neutrality that they propagate, the platforms are stricter than they are required by law, differentiating, filtering and prioritizing content, dynamics by which they influence the direction of entire cultural industries (Van Dijck, 2013). In this sense, Poell et al. (2019) broadly defined platformization as "the penetration of the infrastructures, economic processes and governmental frameworks of platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life. And (...) the reorganization of cultural practices and imaginations around platforms" (p. 5-6)

These changes caused by the platformization in the cultural industries and, specifically, in the news, are the main focus of this research. Before addressing how platform governance has influenced culture, it is therefore necessary to address the concept of cultural industries. Williams (1981) defined *culture* as "the signifying system through which necessarily (though among other means) a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored (p. 13). Based on this definition, Hesmondhalgh

(2019) defined *cultural industries* as “those institutions that are most directly involved in the production of social meaning” (p. 15). Examples of institutions included in his definition are media organizations in the business of television, radio, cinema, newspapers, magazines, book publishing, music recording, advertising and performing arts. “These are all activities the primary aim of which is to communicate to an audience, to create and disseminate texts. All cultural artifacts can be viewed as texts in the very broad sense that they are open to interpretation” (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, p. 15). The author recognized that the term ‘content’ has gained much more popularity lately than ‘text’ and linked this trend to an influence of the ‘technological world’ in which culture is customarily reduced to content or even ‘information’. Hesmondhalgh’s definition limits the cultural industries to their institutional character, not considering what Burgess (2007) called ‘vernacular creativity’: “the everyday practices of material and symbolic creativity” (p. iii). Poell et al. (2021) remarked that “the boundary between industrial and vernacular forms of cultural production is often fluid and difficult to draw on platforms” (p. 9).

Defining the boundaries of the term *cultural producer* in the platformed Internet is also a complex task. Poell et al. (2021) used it to refer to “the broad range of actors and organizations engaged in the creation, distribution, marketing, and monetization of symbolic artefacts. An individual can be a cultural producer, but so, too, can traditional, or what we will hereafter refer to as ‘legacy’ institutions, such as newspapers, film and television producers, record labels, and game publishers” (p. 9). Platforms such as YouTube, TikTok and Twitch enabled a different kind of cultural producers that are often called ‘creators’, which produce content almost exclusively for their own channels on platforms and whose sources of income have been increasingly provided by direct deals with advertisers or advertising-based revenues reverted for them by platforms (Poell et al., 2021), as I am going to explain in the next sections.

Returning to the issue of platform governance now and starting to explain how it affects cultural production and distribution, it is important to highlight that it generally occurs via 1) regulation (the imposition of standards, guidelines and policies), 2) moderation (the enforcement of governance by platforms); and 3) curation (the classification and ranking of content and services). “Regulation sets the formal, technical framework

in which cultural production takes shape, whereas curation and moderation structure the availability and visibility of cultural content” (Poell et al., 2021, p. 84)

3.5.1. Regulation by platforms

Traditional means of regulation by platforms are standards, guidelines and policies, which are made available both in written form or through the architecture of the platforms by boundary resources (Eaton et al., 2015; Ghazawneh & Henfridsson, 2013), as mentioned in a previous section. In brief, boundary resources are composed by APIs, SDKs, partner programs, badges and certifications accompanied by their respective documentation intended to guide complementors on how to build their applications and services on top of platforms’ infrastructures (Helmond et al., 2019). Boundary resources are dynamic and always evolving, and the directions of changes depend on the platforms’ strategies to sustain their growth with the integration of new market sides to their infrastructures. “Yet, simultaneously, the standards, guidelines, and policies embedded in these resources give platform corporations far-reaching control over how processes of cultural creation, distribution, marketing and monetization are organized” (Poell et al., 2021, p. 85).

Poell et al. (2021) argued that regulation by platforms is aimed at maintaining a balance between openness and control for complementors and end-users at the same time these infrastructures need to comply with national legal frameworks in the regions they operate. Terms of service, the basic contract that exchanges access to the platform by stakeholders’ agreement to some conditions of use (Jankowich, 2006), are often considered binary, allowing or not certain practices and also subject to frequent changes (Duguay, 2019). Classic platform guidelines forbid the publication of obscenity, pornography, explicit violence, hateful speech, harassment and other illegalities (e.g., upload of content protected by copyrights) (Gillespie, 2018b). The ‘balance’ intended with these regulations, though, is largely asymmetrical, as they are aimed mostly at protecting platforms themselves and the market sides that provide them more revenues (e.g., advertisers and related data intermediaries) at the expense of the quick adaptation and compliance required from cultural producers, usually the last to know about changes (Gillespie, 2018b; Poell et al., 2021).

Unsurprisingly, terms of service are often considered unclear, ambiguous and inconsistent (Hestres, 2013; Mosemghvdlishvili & Jansz, 2013). Examples of the platforms' inconsistencies in dealing with theoretically controversial content based on their own guidelines abound: Apple reportedly rejected the first version of the Newspapers app Store because of *The Sun*, which since 1970 has published pictures of naked women on its page 3. The app has only been accepted on the iOS App Store after the English newspaper was removed. A kama sutra app was also reportedly rejected, while others like *Playboy* magazine remained available on the platform despite the fact that its content did not really comply with Apple's 'family-friendly' policies (Poell et al., 2021). Gillespie (2018b) also recalled a controversy around Facebook's almost automatic exclusion of user content that showed mothers breastfeeding their babies by the end of the 2000s. Recently, the 'Free the Nipple' movement, which seeks equal rights for men and women to go and post topless photos online, has been challenging Facebook and Instagram to change their policies with the support of several celebrities (e.g., Kylie Jenner, Jennifer Lawrence, Rihanna, among others) without much success²².

According to Suzor (2018), most platforms' terms of service are written in a style that cannot be easily understood by users. Additionally, platforms tend to provide other documents, such as community guidelines, in an attempt to presumably simplify rules for content publication: the problem, though, is that these documents usually refer to one another, are written in ambiguous forms, and create barriers for users to follow changes. "That is, platforms reserve the discretion to enforce different, as yet-unwritten rules, should the need arise" (Suzor, 2018, p. 7).

From the analysis of the terms of service of 14 American platforms that dominate the Internet in Western societies, Suzor (2018) noticed that practically all documents guarantee platforms the discretion to unilaterally exclude content or even users for not following their complex set of rules – a measure that has been lately labeled as *deplatforming* (Rogers, 2020). This is particularly worrying for cultural producers, who need to be up to date with the rules of the various platforms they use to publish and promote their content, but can simply end up agreeing to updates to the terms of service and

²² Will Instagram Ever 'Free the Nipple'? (2019, November 22). *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/22/arts/design/instagram-free-the-nipple.html> on August 4, 2022.

community guidelines without understanding them or even automatically without reading them in their entirety:

“Consumer contracts are poor ways to articulate the rights of users and the responsibilities of platforms. In purely formal terms, the Terms of Service of major platforms are almost universally designed to maximize their discretionary power and minimize their accountability. Through the lens of the rule of law, we can see how this is immediately problematic. At a general level, Terms of Service documents of platforms fall well short of accepted standards of good governance because they do almost nothing to restrain the platform’s exercise of power. The documents, Terms of Service fail to provide meaningful safeguards against arbitrary or capricious decisions. In procedural terms, they generally provide the clarity that is required to guide behavior, they provide no protection from unilateral changes in rules, do nothing to ensure that decisions are made according to the rules, and present no meaningful avenues for appeal” (Suzor, 2018, p. 8).

3.5.2. Moderation by platforms

Imperfect or not, the documentation provided by platforms instruct the content moderation these infrastructures perform. The complexity caused by main platforms’ guidelines as well as the scale they have reached, make moderation by platforms more than a necessary task, but one that has become mandatory for these infrastructures to maintain a minimally acceptable environment for end-users, advertisers and other complementors (Gillespie, 2018b). Poell et al. (2021) defined moderation as “the pre-screening, rejecting, removing, sequestering, banning, downgrading, or demonetizing of content and accounts by platforms” (p. 96). Content moderation can be performed by platforms before (e.g., pre-screening, certification) or after (e.g., removing, suppressing, demonetizing) the publication of content (Boudreau & Hagiu, 2009).

Moderation by platforms has seized increasing attention from governments, the media and the Academia after the 2016 presidential election in the United States and the Brexit referendum in 2016 because of widespread (advertising-powered) disinformation campaigns on Facebook and Twitter (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Saurwein & Spencer-Smith, 2020). Calls for platforms to take action to contain disinformation may

have peaked during the Covid-19 pandemic that erupted in early 2020 (Baker et al., 2020; Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020). The increasing platforming of social and work life during lockdown periods, however, created major challenges for effective content moderation across platforms. The moderation of live streaming services such as Facebook Live, Instagram Live, YouTube Live, TikTok, and Twitch, which have become popular in recent years, has been a particularly difficult problem to solve (Rein & Venturini, 2018; Taylor, 2018).

Moderation on platforms is complex and labor intensive due to the large scale of content being published online at every minute and the immediacy required for it to be effective particularly during live streams (Gillespie, 2018b; Gorwa et al., 2020). Added to this are the high costs to outsource moderation to workers in several different languages and contexts and the negative publicity that the precarious working conditions encountered by human moderators have generated for platforms²³ (Roberts, 2019). Thus, digital intermediaries have increasingly sought to automate content moderation. Algorithmic moderation was defined by Gorwa et al. (2020) as “systems that classify user-generated content based on either matching or prediction, leading to a decision and governance outcome (e.g., removal, geo-blocking, account takedown)” (p. 3).

Algorithmic moderation is also far from a perfect solution. These mechanisms have often been considered forms of surveillance and censorship that discriminate against already marginalized populations²⁴ (Sap et al., 2019; Siapera, 2022). And platforms’ excessive confidence in their effectiveness may aggravate already existent issues in content policy: “in particular, some implementations of algorithmic moderation threaten to (a) decrease decisional transparency (making a famously nontransparent set of practices even more difficult to understand or audit), (b) complicate outstanding issues of justice (how certain viewpoints, groups, or types of speech are privileged), and (c) obscure or depoliticize the complex politics that underlie the practices of contemporary platform moderation” (Gorwa et al., 2020, p. 3).

²³ Newton, C. (2020, May 3). Half of all Facebook moderators may develop mental health issues. *The Verge*. Retrieved from <https://www.theverge.com/interface/2020/5/13/21255994/facebook-content-moderator-lawsuit-settlement-mental-health-issues> on August 4, 2022.

²⁴ Angwin, J., Grasseger, H. (2017, June 28). Facebook’s secret censorship rules protect white men from hate speech but not black children. *ProPublica*. Retrieved from <https://www.propublica.org/article/facebook-hate-speech-censorship-internal-documents-algorithms> on August 4, 2022.

At the same time that they have been urged to make more drastic decisions regarding disinformation, hate speech and incitement to violence, the platforms have also faced questions about possible excesses in content moderation (Rogers, 2020), especially after the banishment of the former president of the United States, Donald Trump, from Twitter and Facebook in the wake of the Capitol invasion on January 6, 2021²⁵. Celebrities from the far right of the political spectrum have been the most targeted by deplatforming, but platforms have reached different results with these strict measures: “Facebook and Instagram are benefitting from the deplatforming activities in the sense that celebrity interest in them has declined, while the other platforms, Twitter and YouTube, have not seen a concomitant slump. (...) (T)hey both continue to be viewed as resources either for spreading the word, and for broadcasting content” (Rogers, 2020, p. 224). The author also noted that, as these political celebrities migrate to less policed and less popular platforms such as Telegram to continue propagating their extreme content, they lose monetization sources such as YouTube advertisements and are no longer able to mobilize a significant base of followers as they once were.

3.5.3. Curation by platforms

Curation has been one of the most debated issues involving platforms both in academia and in the media because digital intermediaries have caused a change in the process, which over the last two decades has become increasingly automated. Traditional gatekeeping – or editorial content curation – has been historically the work of humans, who have made judgement calls guided by cultural norms and based on their professional practices (Shoemaker, 1991; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). In the global platformed ecosystems of the Internet, editorial curation has been replaced by algorithmic curation, which “deploys automated systems to rank content and complementors. Typically, content or complementors with the highest ranking appear on top of a user’s feed, a homepage, or start screen” (Poell et al., 2021, p. 91). Algorithmic content selection is a defining aspect of *infomediation*, “the set of socio-technical mechanisms such as

²⁵ Delkic, M. (2022, May 10). Trump’s banishment from Facebook and Twitter: A timeline. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/10/technology/trump-social-media-ban-timeline.html> on August 4, 2022. Capitol riots timeline: What happened on 6 January 2021? (2022, June 10). *BBC.com*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56004916> on August 4, 2022.

software, services and infrastructures that provide internet users with all types of information online and connect them with other users” (Smyrnaio, 2018, p. 83). Algorithms are essential for organizing the incredible amount of content deposited on the Internet every day: the original problem is that their properties are largely opaque, as they are treated as trade secrets by the platforms that encode them (Pasquale, 2016), and they are not neutral and objective mechanisms of content hierarchization, as platforms typically advocate to maintain their status as non-media intermediaries (Bucher, 2012; Gillespie, 2010; Napoli & Caplan, 2017; Van Dijck, 2013).

Scholars argue that algorithms in general are biased and reproduce widespread prejudices of society and the developers that engineered them, even if unintentionally (Barocas & Selbst, 2016). Adapting this precept to the logic of platformization, it means that these mechanisms reflect the values of the organizations that have developed them (Caplan & boyd, 2018). Platforms are commercial companies aimed at maximizing profits (Couldry & Mejias, 2019): major ones such as Google and Facebook do that by commoditizing users’ online connectivity and selling it to advertisers (Van Dijck, 2013). “In this sense, a ‘good’ and well-functioning algorithm is one that creates value, one that makes better and more efficient predictions, and one that ultimately makes people engage and return to the platform or news site time and again” (Bucher, 2018, p. 6).

According to Bucher (2012), platform powered algorithmic curation produces ‘regimes of visibility’, in which cultural producers aspire to be shown on ‘top lists’ or have their content presented to the largest audiences possible. Platforms that heavily rely on algorithmic curation such as Facebook and YouTube have sought to develop personalized interfaces for their users, valuing more or less specific content formats (e.g., short or long videos, pictures), sources (e.g., individual producers, professional organizations), types (e.g., news, music, etc.) and metrics (e.g., click rates, time spent on content, shares and other interactions such as likes and comments) according to the input received from the data they ubiquitously collect from users. The problem is that platforms’ perceptions of what is more important vary over time according to their business goals, affecting algorithmic recommendation systems evolution, creating a situation of ‘structural uncertainty’ (Poell et al., 2021).

As infrastructures that have control over the design and operation of content selection systems, platforms end up centralizing ‘curatorial power’: “the capacity to

advance one's interests, and affect the interests of others, through the organizing and programming of content" (Prey, 2020, p. 3). This power asymmetry is particularly relevant to the cultural industries, and we address its main implications in the following section.

3.5.4. Implications of the governance by platforms for cultural production

In general, the power that platforms exercise over cultural industries forces content producers – individuals and organizations – to conform to the frameworks established by these infrastructures (Poell et al., 2021). Scholars have argued that commentators are in a position to negotiate these terms and conditions with digital intermediaries, but there is also a considerable consensus that their bargaining power is limited, and platforms always have the upper hand on the decision over disagreements (Kopf, 2020). First, content producers need to adapt to the platforms' economic framework, related to their business models and forms of monetization they allow.

As previously mentioned, search and social media platforms have disrupted the digital advertising market by providing cost effective alternatives to traditional placement of advertisements on a fragmented media ecosystem that did not allow the same kind of measurement available today on digital infrastructures. Mainly seem nowadays as content promotion platforms, mainstream social media such as Facebook and Twitter hardly revert a significant share of their global advertising revenue for content producers. Financial exchanges usually occur as a form of subsidy for essential players in the cultural industry to experiment with a new platform feature or provide a specific service – cooperation that usually have a predetermined fixed duration. Creator-dependent platforms such as YouTube, TikTok and Spotify developed monetization programs aimed at producers that feed them with creative material, commoditizing them and their content (Abidin, 2019; Aguiar & Waldfogel, 2018a, 2018b; Kopf, 2020). App stores such as Apple and Google hold a duopoly in the global market of mobile applications (excluding

China), where consumers spent \$133 billion in 2021²⁶. Platforms typically retain 30% of this revenue, earned with sales of premium apps, in-app purchases and subscriptions²⁷.

Second, by signing their terms of service and publishing several different types of content on these infrastructures, cultural producers accept the content distribution systems established by platforms. As explained in the previous section, these systems tend to reflect the values of the platforms themselves, which above all are private companies geared towards maximizing profit for their shareholders. Visibility (or reach) is the fundamental condition for cultural producers to achieve their goals on platforms. But for winning on that ‘popularity contest’, as Bucher (2018) called this dispute for visibility, they need to produce content that fits the criteria of the platforms’ recommendation systems. In the case of Facebook and YouTube, for example, which rely on algorithm-based content selection programs, basic criteria may be written in guidelines but most of them are strategically kept opaque (Pasquale, 2016). Thus, representations of the platforms’ algorithmic criteria are created by the content producers themselves and influenced by what Sandvig (2014) called ‘algorithms’ public relations’: a sector of marketing experts and specialized companies that propagate discourses about how to optimize content that will be more likely to circulate through these mechanisms. These representations are refined with A/B testing data provided by platforms’ analytics tools, such as Google Analytics and Facebook Insights, and shared by experts at events in their sectors, and tutorial videos, blog posts or documents made available on social media, making individuals and professionals that depend on algorithmic distribution to “act and react in certain ways” (Bucher, 2018).

Third, dependence to platform frameworks turn cultural production into *contingent commodities*: “Products and services offered and circulated via digital platforms are contingent in the sense that they are malleable, modular in design, and informed by datafied user feedback, open to constant revision and recirculation” (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276). There is obviously a clear relationship between distribution,

²⁶ Perez, S. (2021, December 7). App stores to see record consumer spend of \$133 billion in 2021, 143.6 billion new app installs. *TechCrunch*. Retrieved from <https://techcrunch.com/2021/12/07/app-stores-to-see-record-consumer-spend-of-133-billion-in-2021-143-6-billion-new-app-installs/> on August 5, 2022.

²⁷ Perez, S. (2021, August 26). Apple lowers commissions on in-app purchases for news publishers who participate in Apple News. *TechCrunch*. Retrieved from <https://techcrunch.com/2021/08/26/apple-lowers-commissions-on-in-app-purchases-for-news-publishers-who-participate-in-apple-news/> on August 5, 2022.

monetization and adaptation to contingencies created by platforms. Music, for example, has gone through an unbundling process since the launch of iTunes in 2001 that has only been intensified with the popularization of streaming services in the last decade: the traditional album format that served as the basic commodity for the recording industry has lost importance, and platform users now consume music by song tracks (Prey, 2020).

The most prominent music streaming platform, Spotify, employs algorithmic curated playlists with songs from different artists customized to each user, lists based on global and national charts, and editor-picked lists with recommendations based on data from the most streamed songs. Research indicates that these platforms already revert as much or even more revenue to artists than album sales used to do in the past (Aguiar & Waldfogel, 2018a). Additionally, a song added to one of Spotify's top recommendation lists has the potential to significantly increase the number of streams and, consequently, the financial gratification artists receive from the platform – a song added to 'Today's Top Hits', for example, is estimated to provide 20 million more streams and, consequently, increase the revenue earned by a musician on Spotify between US\$ 116,397 and US\$ 162,956. On the other hand, while this type of platform practically removes barriers to entry for independent musicians, "the major global lists tend to promote major-label and US-origin music" (Aguiar & Waldfogel, 2018b). The prominence of major record labels in Spotify playlists may be a sign of close collaboration between established players in the music industry and the platform (Eriksson, 2020).

At the same time platforms tend to promote a few major cultural players, such as major recording labels, media companies, and film studios, as well as some individual content producers, they tend to maintain several other players of the cultural sector in the shadows: "The problem as it appears is not the possibility of constantly being observed, but the possibility of constantly disappearing, of not being considered important enough. In order to appear, to become visible, one needs to follow a certain platform logic" (Bucher, 2012, p. 1171). Visibility is a scarcity: platforms render a few visible (or successful in their own popularity contests) to keep many aspiring (Bucher, 2012). Beyond the success stories of influencers who became millionaires because of the platforms, the result for most is precarity and dependency (Poell et al., 2021). While individual content producers cannot make a living from outsourced working for platforms, organizations are scrambling to produce and distribute more content than ever before in

formats that comply with intermediaries standards, with smaller teams and across multiple platforms as the cultural industries are no longer simply organized in silos – newspapers, radio, TV – as they were in the past (Albarran, 2017). To top it off, building a larger audience on established platforms these days without investing in content promotion is hardly feasible even for major institutional cultural producers. “As a result, publishers are forced to invest heavily in digital advertising campaigns if they want to reach audiences and get noticed among the never-ending glut of digital content” (Poell et al., 2021, p. 48).

In a sense, contradictorily, all these changes that led to the platformization of cultural industries entailed a continuity of route with – or, perhaps better, an intensification of – processes that were already in progress during the late 1990s and early 2000s: the concentration of economic and political power in the hands of a few institutional and profit-driven actors, shaping the production, circulation and hierarchization of content and, consequently, the meanings manufactured by cultural production (Winseck & Jin, 2011). Consequently, at least until the present moment, platformization also has not realized its promised potential of democratization: if entry barriers and costs of production and distribution have been, indeed, lowered, the widespread dissemination of ‘non-market production’ preached by Benkler (2006) has been clearly captured by market forces and big tech companies that managed in two decades to reach an unprecedented growth, amassing incredible revenues while not taking proportional responsibility for the content that circulate on their infrastructures (Winseck, 2017).

US platform companies now figure among the most profitable organizations in the world in terms of global revenue²⁸ (see figure 4), raising concerns about “platform imperialism”: “an asymmetrical relationship of interdependence in platform technologies and political culture between the West, primarily the US, and many developing countries, including two great powers – both nation-states and transnational corporations” (Jin, 2015, p. 12). And already existing inequalities such as access to capital, education and Internet persist all around the globe (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Mansell, 2017).

²⁸ Leading companies in the world in 2020, by net income (2022, August 5). *Statista*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/269857/most-profitable-companies-worldwide/> on August 10, 2022.

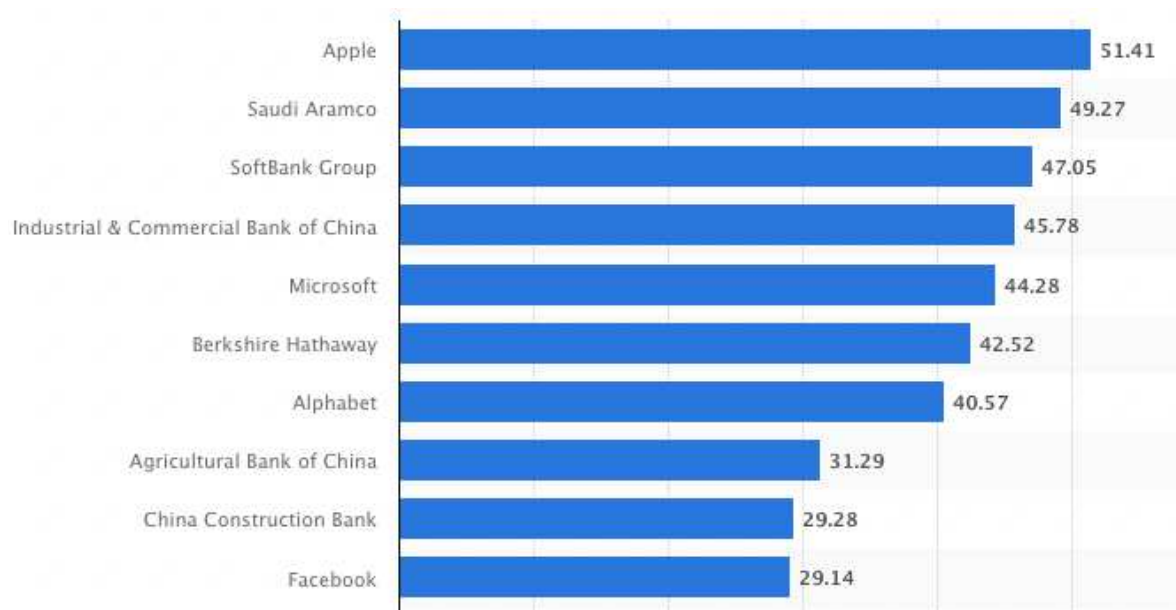


Figure 4. Top 10 companies in the world by revenues (in billion US dollars) in 2020 (Source: Statista).

The main break with the past is that even traditional media conglomerates have become dependent on platforms that stimulate and influence the production and distribution of certain types and forms of content and the visibility of certain cultural producers to the detriment of others without much transparency: new criteria of selection and hierarchization of content are hidden behind infrastructural architectures developed by the platforms themselves in order to privilege their own commercial interests without commitment to editorial criteria and practices established by cultural actors during the development of their industries in the past century and a half (Bucher, 2018). With a few rare exceptions, the most important media organizations have lost power over their sectors and the cultural industries have generally gone through a process of deinstitutionalization in which these companies hold fewer resources and offer worse working conditions for their employees (Poell et al., 2021). Among individual cultural producers, precariousness is the rule despite some few exceptions:

“What distinguishes multisided platform markets from past market configurations is that for platform holders, content developers can become dispensable. For Facebook, content developers were not a crucial part of the chicken-and-egg equation. That is, when it came to launching the platform and kick starting positive direct and indirect network effects, the most critical

sides for the platform were users and advertisers. Content developers are just another side, and *individual* games, magazines, and newspapers are increasingly interchangeable cultural commodities” (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4282-4283).

3.5.5. Platforms’ affordances for cultural industries

One can ask how could media as a sector, despite media organizations being individually dispensable, be lured to integrate and have a significant role in the emergence of a platformed ecosystem on the Internet? How can cultural producers in general still remain distributing their content through platforms after knowing about all the dependencies and power asymmetries generated by these infrastructures? I believe the answer to these questions is related to the affordances that these platforms provide to the cultural industries. The concept of affordances was first used by Gibson (1986) to refer to utilities of an object as perceived by a given actor. In other words, the concept has a relational character: different actors can perceive different affordances in the same object. Particularly important for this study are technological and social affordances: according to the former perspective, the utilities of devices may not only be perceptible but may also be hidden and subject to exploration (Gaver, 1991). The latter is related to “the possibilities that technological changes afford for social relations and social structure” (Wellman, 2001, p. 228).

In platform studies, the concept of affordances refers to the possible actions that a platform’s architecture allows its users to perform (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). Researchers tend to use the concept in two different dimensions: low-level (or design-oriented) affordances, which “are typically located in the materiality of the medium, in specific features, buttons, screens and platforms” (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 240), and high-level affordances, which refer to “the kinds of dynamics and conditions enabled by technical devices, platforms and media” (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 239).

For social media researchers, this last dimension seems to provide more analytical potential than technical affordances of specific features. Therefore, boyd (2010) claimed that four main affordances organize the engagement of users on social media: persistence, replicability, scalability and searchability. Burke et al. (2011) suggested three others: communication with friends, news consumption and broadcasting. And,

finally, Sundar (2008) identified other four affordances on social media: modality, agency, interactivity and navigability. Treem and Leonardi (2013) suggested that other four affordances structure communication processes in the level of organizations: visibility, editability, persistence, and association. Interestingly, Schrock (2015) formulated a typology of communicative affordances of mobile media that included portability, availability, locatability and multimediality.

Bucher and Helmond (2018), though, defended a multi-layered approach to analyzing affordances in the context of digital platforms, that is, “moving beyond the end-user-centered and designer-centered approaches that have figured prominently within affordance theory” (p. 243). The authors emphasized that different sides coexist in the platformed ecosystems with different uses and different purposes. “By approaching the question of affordances from a relational and multi-layered perspective, the question is not just *whose* action possibilities we are talking about, but also *how* those action possibilities come into existence by drawing together (sometimes incompatible) entities into new forms of meaningfulness” (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 243).

In the case of the utilization of platforms, if we do not keep our notion of *users* restrictedly attached to the notion of *audience*, broadening it to make reference to other possible ‘market sides’ (e.g., advertisers, cultural producers, etc.), there seems to exist a close link between affordance theory and uses and gratifications theory (UGT), which considers that end-users tend to have an active role in the adoption of media according to their needs and expected gratifications (Katz et al., 1973). Common gratifications sought by individuals when they choose a medium are knowledge enhancement, entertainment and relaxation, social interaction, and reward or remuneration (Ko et al., 2005).

Users’ agency, though, has been a subject of discussion and criticism about UGT over time. There were basically two groups of critics: those who believed that audiences were predominantly passive and subordinated to the media and those who attributed the power of choice to structural factors (Zillmann & Bryant, 1985). However, as “new technologies present people with more and more media choices, motivation and satisfaction become even more crucial components of audience analysis” (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 14). As we have already discussed in this study, the architecture of digital platforms really stimulates connectivity and continuous engagement (Bucher, 2018; Van Dijck,

2013). At the same time, users and complementors also seek to have some expectations met by the utilization of these infrastructures (Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

Through in-depth interviews, Whiting and Williams (2013) identified ten uses and gratifications for using social media: social interaction, information seeking, pass time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, convenience utility, expression of opinion, information sharing, and surveillance/knowledge about others. Dolan et al. (2016) argued that users mostly seek for informational, entertainment, remunerative and relational gratifications when they access social media, which tend to influence the engagement behavior of customers. A recent study on usage motivation of Facebook, Instagram and Twitter found that consumers tend to look for information on Twitter, gravitate around Instagram and Twitter for social purposes and pursue entertainment on Instagram – at the same time, motivation to use Facebook for those purposes was low despite this being the most used and the largest social media platform in the world (Pelletier et al., 2020).

Following those lines, we can find in the literature that individual and even institutional cultural producers mainly seek three kinds of gratifications when they resort to platforms to perform their work: remunerative, relational and informational – which can actually mix with surveillance/knowledge about others. On the *remunerative* front, digital intermediaries afford *cost-effectiveness* as they lower costs of production and distribution, as vertical integration of toolsets “constitute the beating heart of newly emerging platform practices. They allow users to forgo extensive training or acquire additional software” (Poell et al., 2021, p. 45). As they provide clear rules and systems for payments, platforms also lowered transactional costs in comparison to physical markets, where receiving payments from contractors can become a costly extra task and even result in legal disputes. Lately, though, cultural complementors have increasingly questioned platforms’ practices that treat content producers unequally and unfairly punishes some of their groups (Duffy et al., 2021).

In terms of *relational* gratifications, platforms provide cultural producers with *access to unprecedented audiences* not only in terms of size but also in terms of diversity. Facebook, for example, reportedly has 2.9 billion monthly users – arguably 62,3% of all

global social media users²⁹ – spread across over 130 countries and is available in more than 100 languages³⁰. Content producers on YouTube are considered to be “more racially plural, multicultural, and gender diverse by far than mainstream screen media” (Craig & Cunningham, 2019, p. 49). Book, music and game industries present a similar increase in diversity over other platforms (Poell et al., 2021). Platform design also affords cultural producers with increased interaction with the public and even open new funding opportunities for early-stage or niche artists (Galuszka & Brzozowska, 2016; Leenders et al., 2015). Patronage schemes allow for a closer relationship between artists and their fans and a mutual understanding of each other’s interests (Bonifacio et al., 2021).

Cultural producers of all hues have never had so much *information* about their audiences. Similar analytics tools that were developed to provide advertisers with market and customer insights were also made available for the media, artists, and content creators, which can develop products that cater to their audience tastes (Napoli, 2010). In this sense, platform markets can be considered more transparent than non-digital markets where publishing companies and record labels, for example, retained the control over the data on sales and revenues – although today the native tools of the platforms are the most used to measure success metrics of cultural products, it is possible to cross these data with the use of third-party analytical tools (Poell et al., 2021).

3.5.6. The shift from public to private communication

While enabling the cultural industries to reach markets far beyond their geographic borders without making as many economic investments as would be needed in the past, platforms’ scale brought significant challenges for their governance. Negative content and behaviors contrary to social media’s community policies often go unnoticed by their moderation mechanisms contradictorily generating more engagement and receiving better rewards by curation algorithms (Gillespie, 2018b). In addition, platforms’ policies and measures to regulate political advertising have proven to be particularly

²⁹ Worldwide digital population April 2022 (2022, July 26). *Statista*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/> on August 11, 2022.

³⁰ Fick, M.; Dave, P. (2019, April 23). Facebook's flood of languages leave it struggling to monitor content. *Reuters*. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-languages-insight-idUSKCN1RZ0DW> on August 11, 2022.

flawed and harmful to electoral processes (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018, 2019; Stier et al., 2018), attracting negative press coverage and increasing pressures on national governments to establish external regulatory mechanisms³¹. This situation appears to affect users' willingness to engage in political conversations and discussions on the Internet: "it seems that the public or open nature of social media such as Facebook or Twitter is precisely what citizens dislike, and users are therefore less willing to share and comment on public and political affairs online with people they do not know as they fear that opinion exchange may lack civility" (Masip et al., 2021, p. 2).

At the same time, as open or public social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, among others, have reached maturity and have become closer to hitting their ceiling in terms of growth, instant messaging applications are gradually reaching similar or even higher levels of utilization around the world. Unlike mainstream social media, though, "messaging apps such as WhatsApp are closed online spaces in which posts are not public, but sent to another contact or pre-established group" (Masip et al., 2021, p. 5). Consequently, this type of tool tends to facilitate interpersonal communication between users who already have some level of proximity (Matassi et al., 2019). Thus, editorial or algorithmic content curation, which has caused so much controversy on other platforms, have a limited role in chat apps. What supposedly guarantees the privacy of conversations between users in these platforms are end-to-end encryption systems, which are aimed to keep the content of exchanges secret and inaccessible even for platforms' owners: "In 'end-to-end' encrypted messaging, the server that hosts messages for a user or any third-party adversary that intercepts data as the message is *en route* cannot read the message content due to the use of encryption. The 'end' in 'end-to-end' encryption refers to the 'endpoint,' which in the case of messaging is the client device of the user rather than the server" (Ermoshina et al., 2016, p. 244).

WhatsApp is the most popular end-to-end encrypted messaging application with more than 2 billion users worldwide, who exchange roughly 100 billion messages a

³¹ Foroohar, R. (2022, January 19). Big Tech braces for a year of regulatory pressure. *Financial Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.ft.com/content/825eca35-8bf1-47dd-814a-8e22f40e6761> on August 15, 2022.

day³². It ranks only behind Facebook (2.9 billion users) and YouTube (2.5 billion users) in the environment of social platforms³³, and is the first social app in terms of user preference according to a DataReportal survey³⁴. There are only 25 countries in the world where WhatsApp is not the leading messaging application: its main user bases are in India (487.5 million users) and Brazil (118.5 million users)³⁵, but it dominates the market in all Latin America, Central and Western Europe, Africa and Southern Asia (see figure 5). As already mentioned, WhatsApp was acquired by Facebook/Meta by US\$ 19 billion in 2014 from founders Brian Acton and Jan Koum, who left the company in 2015 and 2018, respectively, due to disagreements over Facebook's plans to monetize the platform, which would supposedly affect the levels of privacy users experimented³⁶.

Behind WeChat, which monopolizes the Chinese market, the third most used messaging app in the world also belongs to Meta: Messenger, which left the role as another feature at Facebook to become a specific app that users had to download in 2014³⁷ and today has almost 1 billion users – it is the leader in the American market, in some countries in Eastern Europe and North Africa and in Australia. An emerging force in the messaging market is Telegram, which has announced 700 million users worldwide³⁸. The app was founded by the Russian entrepreneur Pavel Durov and his brother Nikolay in

³² Singh, M. (2020, October 9). WhatsApp is now delivering roughly 100 billion messages a day. *TechCrunch*. Retrieved from <https://techcrunch.com/2020/10/29/whatsapp-is-now-delivering-roughly-100-billion-messages-a-day/> on August 11, 2022.

³³ Dixon, S. (2022, July 26). Global social networks ranked by number of users 2022. *Statista*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/> on August 11, 2022.

³⁴ Kemp, S. (2022, January 26). Digital 2022: The world's favorite social media platforms. DataReportal. Retrieved from <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-favourite-social-platforms> on August 11, 2022.

³⁵ Ceci, L. (2022, May 25). Global WhatsApp users in selected countries. *Statista*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/289778/countries-with-the-most-facebook-users/> on August 11, 2022.

³⁶ Olson, P. (2018, September 26). Exclusive: WhatsApp co-founder Brian Acton gives the inside story on #DeleteFacebook and why he left \$850 million behind. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/parmyolson/2018/09/26/exclusive-whatsapp-cofounder-brian-acton-gives-the-inside-story-on-deletefacebook-and-why-he-left-850-million-behind/?sh=59a49fa43f20> on August 12, 2022. Solon, o. (2018, April 30). WhatsApp CEO Jan Koum quits over privacy disagreements with Facebook. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/apr/30/jan-koum-whatsapp-co-founder-quits-facebook> on August 12, 2022.

³⁷ Hamburger, E. (2014, November 6). Mark Zuckerberg finally explains why he forced you to download the standalone Messenger app. *The Verge*. Retrieved from <https://www.theverge.com/2014/11/6/7170791/mark-zuckerberg-finally-explains-why-he-forced-you-to-download-the> on August 11, 2022.

³⁸ What is Telegram? What do I do here? (n.d.). Telegram FAQ. Retrieved from <https://telegram.org/faq#q-what-is-telegram-what-do-i-do-here> on August 13, 2022.

2013, who had previously founded the social media platform V Kontakte in 2006³⁹. Durov, who was once called ‘the Mark Zuckerberg from Russia’ by *The New York Times*, decided to sell his stakes at the older platform and leave the country in 2014 after it refused to share data from Ukrainian protesters with the Kremlin⁴⁰. V Kontakte is now owned by state-run insurer Sogaz⁴¹, while Telegram has moved its headquarters to Dubai (United Arab Emirates)⁴² and remained blocked in Russia (where it has around 30 million users) for two years by the national censorship bureau until June 2020⁴³.

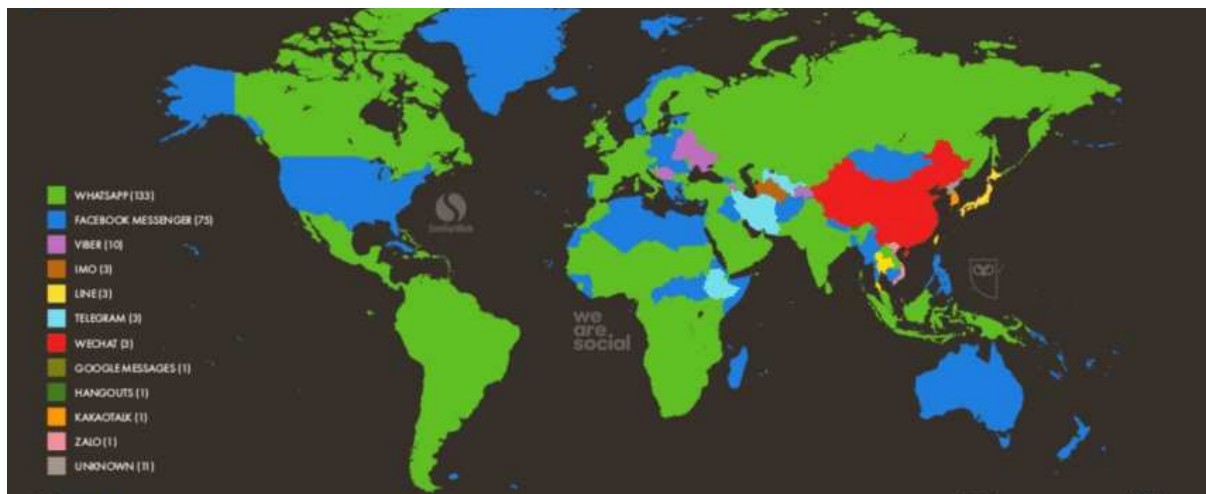


Figure 5. Top messaging application in each country or territory in December 2019⁴⁴ (Source: We Are Social/HootSuite).

In addition to issues with Russian authorities, the messaging app has been embroiled in a number of controversies in recent years. The application has adopted a strategy of confrontation with its main rival, WhatsApp, in several opportunities and has

³⁹ Descalsota, M. (2022, March 28). Meet Pavel Durov, the tech billionaire who founded Telegram, fled from Moscow 15 years ago after defying the Kremlin, and has a penchant for posting half-naked selfies on Instagram. *Business Insider*. Retrieved from <https://www.businessinsider.com/pavel-durov-telegram-billionaire-russia-instagram-wealth-founder-dubai-lifestyle-2022-3> on August 12, 2022.

⁴⁰ Hakim, D. (2014, December 12). Once celebrated in Russia, the programmer Pavel Durov chooses exile. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/03/technology/once-celebrated-in-russia-programmer-pavel-durov-chooses-exile.html> on August 11, 2022.

⁴¹ Russia's VK internet group sold to company linked to Putin ally (2021, December 2). *Reuters*. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-usm-holding-sells-stake-vk-sogaz-insurer-2021-12-02/> on August 12, 2022.

⁴² Where is Telegram based? (n.d.). *Telegram FAQ*. Retrieved from <https://telegram.org/faq#q-where-is-telegram-based> on August 12, 2022.

⁴³ Russia gives up and unblocks Telegram (2020, June 18). *Meduza*. Retrieved from <https://meduza.io/en/news/2020/06/18/russia-unblocks-telegram> on August 12, 2022.

⁴⁴ Kemp, S. (2020, Jan 30). Digital 2020: 3.8 billion people use social media. *We Are Social*. Retrieved from <https://wearesocial.com/uk/blog/2020/01/digital-2020-3-8-billion-people-use-social-media/> on August 12, 2022.

positioned itself as a safer alternative for exchanging private messages⁴⁵. In practice, though, there are many doubts about the effectiveness of Telegram's encryption⁴⁶. The hybrid character that the platform has sought to offer (combining the characteristics of a private messaging application and open social media in its channels feature) in order to maintain an aggressive growth rate does not contribute to this scenario as several extremist political celebrities and organizations that have been banned from mainstream platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have been flocking to Telegram for shelter, disseminating their ideas without being disturbed by the messaging application's loose governance mechanisms (Guhl & Davey, 2020; R. Rogers, 2020; Winter et al., 2020). In 2021, after a *The New York Times* revealed that Apple was involved in the surveillance and censorship in China, Durov attacked the big tech company, saying that its devices were overpriced and outdated and that its users were digital slaves of a platform that only allowed them to install apps through the App Store⁴⁷. It was the harbinger of a new crisis with Apple triggered in August 2022, when the platform held off on a 'revolutionary update' of Telegram for more than two weeks without giving any explanation⁴⁸.

Telegram seems to be a standalone application without links to a parenting platform despite the former connection between the Durov brothers and V Kontakte, while Messenger and WhatsApp, as already mentioned, function as platform instances of Facebook/Meta in different levels. According to Nieborg and Helmond (2019), a platform instance is "a technical and economic platform configuration that facilitates connectivity

⁴⁵ Rapoza, K. (2019, November 21). Telegram founder says users should 'delete WhatsApp'. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2019/11/21/telegram-founder-says-users-should-delete-whatsapp/?sh=68aa9a8ecb9c> on August 12, 2022. Bhushan, K. (2019, May 16). 'WhatsApp will never be secure', Telegram owner slams Facebook-owned app over security lapse. *The Hindustan Times*. Retrieved from <https://tech.hindustantimes.com/tech/news/whatsapp-will-never-be-secure-telegram-founder-slams-facebook-owned-app-over-security-lapse-story-BDsNXyLPcKVE-LuyO7XPQOP.html> on August 12, 2022.

⁴⁶ Greenberg, A. (2021, January 27). Fleeing WhatsApp for better privacy? Don't turn to Telegram. *Wired*. Retrieved from <https://www.wired.com/story/telegram-encryption-whatsapp-settings/> on August 12, 2022. Meineck, S. (2020, November 25). Five reasons you should delete Telegram from your phone. *Vice*. Retrieved from <https://www.vice.com/en/article/jgqqv8/five-reasons-you-should-delete-telegram-from-your-phone> on August 12, 2022.

⁴⁷ Balakumar, K. (2021, May 20). Telegram founder launches scathing attack on 'totalitarian' Apple. *TechRadar*. Retrieved from <https://www.techradar.com/news/telegram-founder-launches-scathing-attack-on-totalitarian-apple> on August 12, 2022.

⁴⁸ Peters, J. (2022, August 11). Telegram founder blames Apple for holding a major update. *The Verge*. Retrieved from <https://www.theverge.com/2022/8/11/23301864/telegram-founder-pavel-durov-blames-apple-holding-back-major-update> on August 12, 2022.

and interactions among end-users and multiple partners. Put differently, individual platform instances serve the stand-alone derivatives that each provide a distinct ‘view’ of the platform as a whole and offer different functionalities tailored to distinct user groups. Each platform instance contributes to Facebook’s overall data work while simultaneously engaging its own” (p. 199).

Perhaps because of its trajectory, which began as a feature of Facebook, the integration between Messenger and its parenting platform seems to be the most refined. An owner of a Facebook page, for example, can send messages to that page’s followers directly on Messenger without the need to look for telephone numbers – something that is not possible on WhatsApp – and follow the conversations’ metrics (e.g., responsiveness rates, deleted conversations rates, marked as spam rates, etc.) on Messenger Analytics via Messenger Insights API⁴⁹. Since 2017, marketers can include Messenger advertisements in their broad Facebook campaigns, just as it is possible to do on Instagram, as the business model of the three platforms is similar, based on targeted advertising⁵⁰ – once again, an alternative that is not available on WhatsApp and raises significant concerns as Messenger is the only messaging platform addressed in this study that has not fully implemented end-to-end encryption yet⁵¹. Companies with a Facebook page can also provide customer service through Messenger⁵².

WhatsApp’s business model is mainly based on services for businesses: small ones can hold a simple business account to respond to consumer demands and send eventual messages with promotions; an update in 2019 introduced the WhatsApp Business Platform, which allowed medium and large companies to integrate all their communication systems to the messaging app and to create large direct marketing

⁴⁹ Messenger Analytics (n.d.). Meta for Developers. Retrieved from <https://developers.facebook.com/docs/messenger-platform/analytics/> on August 13, 2022.

⁵⁰ Wagner, K. (2017, April 11). Facebook’s business model for Messenger won’t be payments and commerce after all. Vox. Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/2017/4/11/15252854/facebook-messenger-payments-advertising-revenue-business-model> on August 15, 2022.

⁵¹ Doffman, Z. (2020, July 25). Why you should stop using Facebook Messenger. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/zakdoffman/2020/07/25/why-you-should-stop-using-facebook-messenger-encryption-whatsapp-update-twitter-hack/?sh=a52c83d69ada> on August 15, 2022. Milmo, D. (2021, November 21). Meta delays encrypted messages on Facebook and Instagram to 2023. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/nov/21/meta-delays-encrypted-messages-on-facebook-and-instagram-to-2023> on August 15, 2022.

⁵² Build lasting relationships: Customer service on Messenger (n.d.). Meta for Developers. Retrieved from <https://developers.facebook.com/products/messenger/customer-care/> on August 15, 2022.

campaigns with customers information stored in the Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems of their preference⁵³. Every message received from customers can be responded free of charge during a 24-hour window, while every message sent to WhatsApp users without their previous request have a fixed cost depending on the region – for example, US\$ 0.1432 in France, US\$ 0.0615 in Spain, US\$ 0.05 in Brazil, and US\$ 0.0349 in Mexico 0,29⁵⁴. Every business-initiated conversation, as WhatsApp calls it, needs to strictly follow specific templates provided by the platform⁵⁵. In some countries, such as Brazil, the platform has become so ubiquitous that its users can make payments and bank transfers, order transportation and the delivery of meals without leaving the application's environment⁵⁶. Group chats, though, have a limit of 256 members on WhatsApp against 250 on Messenger – they are unlimited on Telegram.

Telegram only started attempting to generate revenues recently in an effort to make the messaging application sustainable as it has mostly relied on financial investments and the personal fortune of its owners. By the end of 2020, the platform launched its Ad Platform aimed at monetizing sponsored messages limited to 160 characters in large public one-to-many channels with at least 1000 subscribers – the interface remains largely experimental⁵⁷. On June 19, 2022, the platform announced 'Telegram Premium', a subscription that allows end-users to double their upload limits to 4 GB, to make faster

⁵³ A better way to connect with customers (n.d.). *Meta*. Retrieved from <https://developers.facebook.com/products/whatsapp/> on June 15, 2022.

⁵⁴ Conversation-based pricing (n.d.). *Meta for Developers*. Retrieved from <https://developers.facebook.com/docs/whatsapp/pricing#rates> on June 15, 2022.

⁵⁵ Message templates (n.d.). *Meta for Developers*. Retrieved from <https://developers.facebook.com/docs/whatsapp/api/messages/message-templates> on June 15, 2022.

⁵⁶ Send and receive Money right Where you chat (n.d.). *WhatsApp*. Retrieved from <https://www.whatsapp.com/payments/br?lang=en> on June 15, 2022. 99 passa a permitir que passageiros peçam suas corridas pelo WhatsApp (2020, October 5). *CNN Brasil*. Retrieved from <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/business/99-passa-a-permitir-que-passageiros-pecam-suas-corridas-pelo-whatsapp/> on June 15, 2022. Riveira, C.; Salomão, K. (2020, June 15). Com pagamento pelo WhatsApp, Cielo vai além da guerra de maquininhas. *Exame*. Retrieved from <https://exame.com/negocios/com-transferencia-pelo-whatsapp-como-fica-a-cielo-e-o-setor-de-pagamentos/> on June 15, 2022. iFood no WhatsApp não é golpe; empresa recomenda cautela (2021, February 25). *iG*. Retrieved from <https://economia.ig.com.br/2021-02-25/ifood-no-whatsapp-nao-e-golpe-empresa-recomenda-cautela.html> on June 15, 2022.

⁵⁷ Telegram Ad Platform (n.d.). *Telegram*. Retrieved from <https://promote.telegram.org/> on August 15, 2022. Singh, M. (2020, December 23). Telegram, nearing 500 million users, to begin monetizing the app. *TechCrunch*. Retrieved from <https://techcrunch.com/2020/12/23/telegram-to-launch-an-ad-platform-as-it-approaches-500-million-users/> on August 15, 2022.

downloads, and to have access to exclusive stickers and reactions⁵⁸. The actual results of Telegram's revenue models have yet to be proved, as the company has not yet had time to consolidate them and disclose any financial statements.

Among the three messaging apps, only Telegram allows common developers the creation of *chatbots* of any format⁵⁹:

“Chatbots are chat services that automatically respond to language text in a human-like manner and execute specific commands. These instant responses usually consist of structured messages, images, links, or even specific call-to-action buttons. The introduction of chatbots has marked the beginning of a new technological era that has been referred to as *conversational interfaces*. Importantly, these conversations will be similar to those users have with their friends and family” (Zarouali et al., 2018, p. 491).

On Messenger, chatbots were widely introduced in 2016⁶⁰, but later made only possible for businesses or pages from specific sectors, such as news, as long as they have been recognized as such by the Meta News Page Index⁶¹. On WhatsApp, chatbots are actually simple algorithms, which the company itself classifies as ‘interactive messages’: messages that give the user a limited number of alternatives to choose from; once the choice is made, the user receives a response with more content about the selected item⁶².

Early communication studies about messaging applications noticed these tools fostered connection, proximity and intimacy between relatives, friends and acquaintances through chats with apparent lack of purpose: “It is in the pointless chit-chat, the garbling of asides, the jokes and the non-sequitors in WhatsApp that friendship is at

⁵⁸ 700 million users and Telegram Premium (2022, June 19). *Telegram*. Retrieved from <https://telegram.org/blog/700-million-and-premium> on August 15, 2022.

⁵⁹ Bots: An introduction for developers (n.d.). *Telegram*. Retrieved from <https://core.telegram.org/bots> on August 15, 2022.

⁶⁰ Introducing bots on Messenger (2016, April 12). *Meta for Developers*. Retrieved from <https://developers.facebook.com/videos/f8-2016/introducing-bots-on-messenger/> on August 15, 2022.

⁶¹ Registration guidelines for the News Page Index (n.d.). *Meta Business Help Center*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/business/help/270254993785210?id=644465919618833> on August 15, 2022.

⁶² Sending interactive messages (n.d.). *Meta for Developers*. Retrieved from <https://developers.facebook.com/docs/whatsapp/guides/interactive-messages> on August 15, 2022.

once made and displayed” (O’Hara et al., 2014, p. 1142). Other studies, however, argue that chat apps such as WhatsApp have gained centrality in people’s lives because of, at least in part, their versatility, affording several kinds of usages in a single platform – family, personal, business, educational, professional, institutional, and political communication (Ahad & Md Ariff Lim, 2014; Fernández-Ardèvol & Rosales, 2019; Rosenberg & Asterhan, 2018). At the same time, “everyday use of messaging apps blurs the boundaries between family life, work contexts, community activities, and social contacts” (Mols & Pridmore, 2021, p. 423).

Interestingly, Matassi, Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2019) pointed out that, in Argentina, the older the people the more likely they were to have WhatsApp on their mobile phones, and their ‘domestication’ of the platform was different according to their life stages:

“For young adults, WhatsApp is taken for granted to the point of social exclusion, it is negotiated in its configuration to exert control over a continuous flow of content, and it is mostly localized within the space of the group, generally devoted to peers and friends. For middle adults, WhatsApp is not necessarily linked to social exclusion, but it is perceived as important, especially in connection to a constellation of responsibilities, which emerge from an also constant flow of messages concentrated on groups, usually revolving around family and work communication. For older adults, WhatsApp is experienced as less necessary and utilized less frequently, yet signifies a link to the world of younger generations, in addition to communication among peers” (Matassi et al., 2019, p. 3).

An increasingly frequent concern of researchers has been to study the effects of the permanent availability made possible by messaging applications. Mascheroni and Vincent (2016) considered ‘perpetual contact’ as a communicative affordance, which ambiguously enabled opportunities for communication and positive feelings associated such as proximity, intimacy and belonging, and constraints embodied in negative feelings such as anxiety and insecurity. “Negative emotions with ‘perpetual contact’ as a communicative affordance show how, beyond the encounter between subjective perceptions and communicative possibilities, affordances are relational, incorporated into

the social ecology, and assumes a normative, constraining character that cannot be simply dismissed by virtue of individual negotiations” (Mascheroni & Vincent, 2016, p. 322). However, negotiating with the tools’ features is exactly what people do to deal with the constraints of constant availability, demarcating presence and absence in particular relational contexts (e.g., signal jamming, putting the phone on silent mode or using more sophisticated features and settings of phones and messaging apps) (Mols & Pridmore, 2021). Authors considered WhatsApp’s features insufficient to protect users from the pressure to be constantly available and argued that “the ongoing contradictions of messaging practices – always available but always negotiating that availability – affect privacy, freedom, and autonomy in significant ways” (p. 436).

Mannell (2019), though, seemed to disagree: for her, mobile messaging actually provides five ‘disconnective affordances’ through their architectures: disentanglement, jamming, modulation, delay and suggestiveness. In terms of disentanglement, the author emphasized that messaging applications do allow users to reduce the frequency of notifications as well as smartphones permit users to put them away; “regarding suggestiveness, using a curt messaging style is similarly allowed – there is no requirement that messages contain an emoji or are more than one word long” (Mannell, 2019, p. 87); jamming is also possible; while modulating availability is discouraged by messaging apps as actions such as blocking contacts and leaving groups are visible to other users. “These outcomes were not, however, always easily achieved. As an investigation of the mechanisms of each affordance revealed, disconnection is enabled but certainly not encouraged. On the contrary, engaging with disconnective affordances often requires navigating a complex array of functionalities that pull both toward and against the possibility of disconnection” (Mannell, 2019, p. 89).

Research on more specific affordances of messaging applications for cultural production and distribution are still rare and usually related to news consumption, which will be addressed in the next chapter. More often, studies relate messaging apps to affordances in the fields of education (Baguma et al., 2019; Klein et al., 2018; Naghdipour & Manca, 2022), health (Yeshua-Katz, 2021; Yeshua-Katz et al., 2021) and political communication, a more connected subject to this study. Pang and Woo (2020) made a systematic review of studies about WhatsApp and found four key motivations for using the platform for civic and political engagement: news gathering and sharing for reciprocity;

connecting for solidarity and building collective identity; coordinating actions; and state surveillance and evasion. There is an overlap in basically all these motivations. That is, they are all somehow connected, and a user does not tend to use the messaging application with just one motivation. News gathering and sharing for reciprocity, for example, is less about the professional work of journalists and more about maintaining relationships and social cohesion (Goh et al., 2019; Swart et al., 2019), something that is not only limited to this motivation but also to connecting for solidarity and building collective identity, as political movements nowadays can emerge even if members have never previously met face-to-face provided they were able to build a network with solidarity and homophily among them (Centola, 2013).

Messaging apps have certainly enabled users and political groups to distribute disinformation and misinformation without the same scrutiny that public social networks would have. Evangelista and Bruno (2019) started to observe various WhatsApp groups months before the election of far-right politician Jair Bolsonaro to the presidency of Brazil in 2018 and collected evidence that they were centrally managed by his campaign with the aim of radicalizing the electoral dispute. Recuero et al. (2021) found that messages on WhatsApp during the campaign created an emotional framing of the situation and their discourse was focused on generating a sense of urgency and mobilization among voters against possible election fraud – authors argue that disinformation on the messaging application tended to be higher than on Twitter because of its private essence of communication. During the campaign, *Folha de S. Paulo* newspaper revealed that marketing companies sent massive political messages on the platform, buying phone numbers with documents from elderly people who did not know about the scheme and hiring foreign agencies – an illegal practice under the Brazilian electoral law which also violates WhatsApp policies⁶³. The following year, the platform admitted the occurrence of the scheme and that it had not taken effective measures to avoid it⁶⁴. The Brazilian election was recognized by the Organization of American States as the first in

⁶³ Campos Mello (2018, October 18). Empresários bancam campanha contra o PT pelo WhatsApp. *Folha de S. Paulo*. Retrieved from <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2018/10/empresarios-bancam-campanha-contr-o-pt-pelo-whatsapp.shtml> on August 16, 2022.

⁶⁴ Campos Mello (2019, October 8). WhatsApp admite envio maciço ilegal de mensagens nas eleições de 2018. *Folha de S. Paulo*. Retrieved from <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2019/10/whatsapp-admite-envio-massivo-ilegal-de-mensagens-nas-eleicoes-de-2018.shtml?origin=folha> on August 16, 2022.

which disinformation on the messaging platform has had an influence⁶⁵, but similar processes occurred in India, Malaysia and Nigeria (Cheeseman et al., 2020; Farooq, 2018; Santini et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2022). No one has been held criminally responsible for the spread of misinformation in these elections, but legislation has since become stricter and messaging apps have promised to take measures to curb abuses.

In March 2019, Mark Zuckerberg apparently found a new strategy, at least in discursive terms –, something that he has been successful to develop throughout the existence of Facebook, as shown in this study – to deal with the scale challenges of its main social media platforms: sweep problems under the rug by stimulating private communication through their optimized integrated channels. Facebook’s CEO wrote:

“As I think about the future of the internet, I believe a privacy-focused communications platform will become even more important than today’s open platforms. Privacy gives people the freedom to be themselves and connect more naturally, which is why we build social networks. Today we already see that private messaging, ephemeral stories, and small groups are by far the fastest growing areas of online communication. There are a number of reasons for this. Many people prefer the intimacy of communicating one-on-one or with just a few friends. People are more cautious of having a permanent record of what they’ve shared. And we all expect to be able to do things like payments privately and securely”⁶⁶ (par. 2-3).

The media called the process supposedly started by Zuckerberg’s post as ‘Facebook’s pivot to privacy’ and remained largely skeptical about its developments. *Forbes* said it was fake⁶⁷, *Slate* described it as awkward⁶⁸, and *The Washington Post* asked its

⁶⁵ Dias, M. (2018, October 25). Uso de WhatsApp para disseminar fake news ‘talvez não tenha precedentes’, diz chefe de missão da OEA. *Folha de S. Paulo*. Retrieved from <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2018/10/uso-de-whatsapp-para-divulgar-fake-news-talvez-nao-tenha-precedentes-diz-chefe-de-missao-da-oea.shtml> on August 16, 2022

⁶⁶ Zuckerberg, M. (2019, March 6). A privacy-focused vision for social networking. *Facebook*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/notes/2420600258234172/> on July 29, 2019.

⁶⁷ Chakravorti, B. (2019, March 11). Facebook’s fake pivot to privacy. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bhaskarchakravorti/2019/03/11/facebooks-fake-pivot-to-privacy/?sh=e296a10b37a5> on August 3, 2019.

⁶⁸ Oremus, W. (2019, March 6). Facebook’s awkward pivot to privacy. *Slate*. Retrieved from <https://slate.com/technology/2019/03/facebook-privacy-pivot-zuckerberg-motive.html> on August 3, 2019.

readers not to believe the move⁶⁹. All these analyzes mentioned the fact that Meta's main platform has been onboarding fewer users in recent years and has stimulated less interest from the public, especially the younger one, which has flocked to other platforms, such as messaging apps – Meta earned almost US\$ 118 billion in 2021 and Facebook remained as the holding's main source of revenues though⁷⁰. "Zuckerberg is merely preparing to shift resources to follow users from one platform to the other. However, Facebook's business model dictates that the company cannot make a true pivot away from the town square (*Facebook*) and toward the living room (*WhatsApp*)"⁷¹ (par. 7). In the last three years, the main changes related to the 'shift to privacy' announced by Zuckerberg seem to have been towards making the business models of the company's messaging applications viable. In any case, it is the type of movement that the cultural industries and especially the media need to be aware of and pay attention to.

⁶⁹ Sullivan, M. (2019, May 5). Mark Zuckerberg claims that, at Facebook, 'the future is private.' Don't Believe him. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/mark-zuckerberg-claims-that-at-facebook-the-future-is-private-dont-believe-him/2019/05/03/b42f7564-6cf4-11e9-a66d-a82d3f3d96d5_story.html on August 3, 2019.

⁷⁰ Dixon, S. (2022, July 27). Meta: Annual revenue and net income 2007-2021. *Statista*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/277229/facebooks-annual-revenue-and-net-income/> on August 12, 2022.

⁷¹ Chakravorti, B. (2019, March 14). Facebook's pivot is less about privacy and more about profits. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/facebooks-pivot-is-less-about-privacy-and-more-about-profits-113144> on August 3, 2019.

4. The platformization of the news

4.1. *The great unbundling of the news*

Whether financed primarily by advertisers, audiences, or even state subsidies, until the turn to the 21st century, professional journalism in Southern Europe and Latin America, just like almost everywhere else, has been largely organized around institutions: a relatively limited and coherent group of companies (publishers and broadcasters, usually part of media conglomerates) with similar methods have become responsible for providing all the news consumed by society (Anderson et al., 2012). Any venture outside this group would face considerable entry barriers to produce a competitive product in this market. In this model consolidated in the previous century, journalists worked for these organizations with relative autonomy within a standardized career path and with the employment of specific set of tools (Anderson et al., 2012).

The production of news mixed aspects from the *editorial* and the *flow* social logics of cultural production suggested by Miège (1987). The former rationale concerned physical products such as books, compact discs and videotapes created by publishers or producers in order to be sold to consumers, while the latter was related to the model of broadcasting, funded by advertising, in which the role of programming is central to keep the shows flowing continuously. Thus, for example, similarly to the publishing market, one of the products produced by journalists would be a newspaper; as on TV, the content of this newspaper, however, would vary significantly from one edition to another, from one day to the next.

In the pre-Internet era, news organizations developed a straightforward linear business model. Borrowing Porter's (2008) concept of value chain, which describes the set of activities that a company needs to carry out successively to deliver its product or service to consumers, and adapting it to the news industry, Van der Wurff (2012) outlined five basic activities news publishers had almost complete control before the emergence of digital intermediaries: *content creation* (mostly news, but also advertising placement), *packaging* (bundling it into a single product, whether magazines, newspapers, radio or tv shows), *reproduction* (in print, it is related to the copies of a newspaper or magazine that can be produced), *distribution* (how the product reached the final

consumer) and *marketing & sales* (sources of revenue such as advertising, subscriptions or sales on newsstands) – see figure 6.

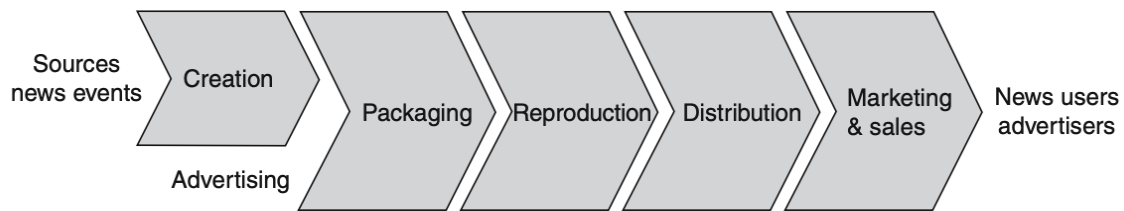


Figure 6. The news value chain (Van der Wurff, 2012).

Whether as producers of a dual commodity or two-sided intermediaries, news publishers' goal had been to provide the most attractive product possible (i.e., a daily edition of a newspaper or an issue of a magazine) so they could connect broad bases of readers (preferably, paying subscribers, but also buyers at newsstands) and advertisers seeking for their attention (Seamans & Zhu, 2014). From the economic need to make a profit and pay for the high costs of production and distribution, the media bundled a varied array of news stories about different subjects (from politics and economics to entertainment and sports) to display and classified advertisements in single products: "The newspaper as a whole is what matters, and as a product it's worth more than the sum of its parts" (Carr, 2008, p. 85).

Just as it happened during the emergence of electronic media, news organizations moved to the Internet, in the early to mid-1990s⁷², without taking their feet off popular media that preceded it (print, radio and television). Most of them simply attempted to migrate the core of their business models to the digital environment (Anderson et al., 2012; Siapera, 2013). Initially, the strategy looked promising. The first clickable banner advertisement was aired on October 27, 1994, on *HotWired.com*, which would later become the website of the famous *Wired* magazine. The website, accessible only via dial-up connection by then, provided 14 advertisements, but legend has it that

⁷² Meek, C. (2006, March 10). The online journalism timeline. *Journalism.co.uk*. Retrieved from <https://www.journalism.co.uk/news-features/the-online-journalism-timeline/s5/a51753/> on February 24, 2021.

the pioneering one was from the American telecommunications company AT&T⁷³. Despite the slow loading speed, 44% of the people who saw the ad actually clicked on it⁷⁴.

But the movement from news organizations to the Internet ignited a process that Carr (2008) called ‘the great unbundling’. Online news consumption has significantly differed from print since the very beginning: to start, readers have paid for access to the whole web, but content was offered mainly for free – at first, some media corporations themselves worked as Internet providers, but as soon as broadband arrived, access became mainly the service of telecommunication companies. Thus, users could read a single news article (e.g., an interesting sports story) from a publisher without having to pay for the rest of its content (e.g., the sometimes bitter political and economic stories). “The cross-subsidization system that economically sustained the production of original news by professional media (e.g., the popular sports section of a newspaper supporting more expensive investigative journalism) is shattered because monetization becomes attached to individual pieces of content” (Smyrnaio & Rebillard, 2019, p. 37). In other words, instead of speaking about commodification of the news in a broad sense, the Internet caused the commodification of each news article. “Each story becomes a separate product standing naked in the marketplace. It lives or dies on its own economic merits” (Carr, 2008, p. 85).

Along the years, first with the dissemination of the Internet and then with the popularization of digital platforms, the process of news unbundling was only intensified, making publishers lose control over the news value chain and, consequently, over the revenue it used to generate (Bell et al., 2017; Rashidian et al., 2018, 2019; Siaper, 2013; Van der Wurff, 2012). Classified ads were the first pieces of content that started migrating from newspapers to specialized websites such as Craigslist and eBay, undermining a once important revenue source for news media (Anderson, 2009; Hirst, 2011; Seamans & Zhu, 2014; Turow, 2013). Out of the news bundle, these ads could reach larger (or at least, more specific) consumer bases thanks to the network effects these platforms benefit from. Taking advantage of economies of scale, intermediaries could charge

⁷³ Singel, R. (2010, October 27). Oct. 27, 1994: Web gives birth to banner ads. *Wired*. Retrieved from <https://www.wired.com/2010/10/1027hotwired-banner-ads/> on April 6, 2021.

⁷⁴ Lafrance, A. (2017, April 21). The first-ever banner ad on the web. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/04/the-first-ever-banner-ad-on-the-web/523728/> on April 6, 2021

inexpensive or even free prices from buyers and advertisers, turning it a more attractive service for both sides of the market. Seamans and Zhu (2014) estimated that classified-ad buyers saved around US\$ 5 billion from 2000 to 2007 with Craigslist's entry into the American market – a sum that otherwise would be distributed among the main newspapers. A company with only about 50 employees and nominal costs, Craigslist has been amassing revenues of more than US\$ 1 billion a year since then, despite a 27% drop in 2019⁷⁵.

Since the beginning of the 2000's, Google's search engine put more pressure over the news unbundling as it allowed Internet users to easily bypass the news outlets' homepages to find only the specific news pieces they were looking for (Carr, 2008). Roughly, Google developed a recommendation system for ranking webpages – called PageRank – that automatically crawls the whole Internet counting links that direct for pages. The more links a page has, the more relevant it is considered, and the higher it will be shown on Google's search results (Grimmelmann, 2008). As Google gained importance as a news source, newspapers have become to look less attractive to traditional advertisers. The platform has also enabled advertising for medium and small businesses which never had enough revenue to promote their products and services on traditional media. It created an auction system called AdWords in which advertisers could associate their brands or products to specific words. Through their AdSense network, the ads were placed basically everywhere on the Internet, as website owners received a small fraction of the rate charged by Google depending on the amount of visualizations received (Levy, 2009).

The first news aggregators emerged a couple years later – again, Google jumped ahead with its service, available in beta since 2002, but Apple and Yahoo and later feed-readers such as Feedly and Flipboard, which allow people to make their own content curation, have also become important players in the sector. These platforms collect content from several different sources, including blogs, podcasts and YouTube, and 're-bundle' or 're-intermediate' it to users in a single place with the employment of algorithms (mainly) and human editors (Bustamante, 2004). "Rebundling makes the

⁷⁵ Leggate, J. (2020, January 31). Craigslist revenue fell estimated 27%. Here's why analysts say it's OK anyway. *FOX Business*. Retrieved from <https://www.foxbusiness.com/technology/craigslist-revenue-fell-analysts-ok> on February 23, 2021.

aggregator, rather than the original news outlet, the prime gateway to access news” (Van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 52). The difference was that originally Google News only pointed to external content to which it did not have publishing rights, while the others opted for establishing paid partnerships with media companies.

“By exploiting its search technology, it can continuously survey a large number of pre-selected sources and provide up-to-date information pages without coming to an agreement with the news producers, let alone paying them. This system is supposed to be beneficial to both parties: Google leverages content to maximize its overall audience, while publishers benefit from additional ‘traffic’” (Smyrnaio & Rebillard, 2009, p. 100, the translation is mine).

4.2. The conflictive relationships between news media and digital platforms

The emergence of Google News, which was officially launched only on January 2006, marks the beginning of a conflictive but above all nuanced relationship between news organizations and the main digital platforms (Rashidian et al., 2018). The process by which platforms took control over the news ecosystem was not the result of a simple and natural replacement of outdated technologies with more advanced ones that served better to users’ interests, as business scholars tend to theorize (Bower & Christensen, 1995; Christensen et al., 2015; Parker et al., 2016; Van Alstyne et al., 2016). Platforms themselves usually argue that they are not part of the media (Napoli & Caplan, 2017), but it is also clear that through various processes already described in this research, these infrastructures also do not function as mere uninterested and neutral intermediaries between users, advertisers, developers and other complementors. Platforms evaluate and shape content from cultural producers in order to keep their multiple sides connected as much as possible (Van Dijck, 2013; Van Dijck et al., 2018b). The media reacted to the intrusion into their business in distinct manners, reflecting a situation of fragmentation made possible by the internet with the emergence of new and smaller players in the news market. While some publishers have initially seen these tools as a way to generate more traffic to their websites and eventually even more revenues, others have been reluctant and even outraged by the exploitation of their original

content and copyright infringement: a division that ultimately favored the dominance of platforms on the media front (Smyrnaioi & Rebillard, 2009, 2019).

Disagreement over the operation of Google's news-focused initiative reached justice courts, especially in the United States, Belgium and France, but the technology company eventually found a way around it that served as a paradigm for future negotiations (Smyrnaioi & Rebillard, 2019). In August 2006, the first instance of the Belgian justice became the only one to render a decision in any of the early disputes involving Google News⁷⁶. It obligated the American company to pay a fine to *Copiepresse*, the association that managed the copyrights of several newspapers in the country if it continued to reproduce the headlines of the local press on its news aggregator. To avoid prolonging litigation, which could threaten the company's business model, Google started signing individual agreements with a few essential partners – initially, news agencies such as the Associated Press (AP), still in 2006, then Reuters and Agence France-Presse (AFP), which had also filed a lawsuit in the following year⁷⁷. The deals not only licensed content to the platform but also enabled Google to improve duplicate detection in the aggregation tool with the utilization of the databases of the three main news agencies in the world. “[T]he terms of the agreement[s] were kept secret so that other publishers would be discouraged from making similar claims. (...) This has the double benefit of avoiding publishers forming a coalition while optimizing the functionalities of infomedia services.” (Smyrnaioi & Rebillard, 2019, p. 40).

In 2010, another lawsuit against Google, this time filed by *Viacom* for infringement of copyrights on YouTube, exposed what was at the heart of the platform's strategies for dealing with the media. One of the pieces gathered in the litigation was a copy of an email sent by a Google senior executive to the company's former CEO, Eric Schmidt, and co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin, with guidelines to coerce top content providers to adopt a free model of publication on the Internet (Rashidian et al., 2018)⁷⁸. Under the guise of maintaining the supposedly democratic character of the

⁷⁶ The full decision of the first instance of the Belgian court can be accessed online at the following address: http://www.copiepresse.be/labo/jugement_copiepresse_google_fr.pdf.

⁷⁷ Auchard, E. (2007, April 7). AFP, Google News settle lawsuit over Google News. *Reuters*. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-google-afp-idUSN0728115420070407> on April 8, 2021.

⁷⁸ The full statement of undisputed facts presented by Viacom's lawyers is available on <https://www.scribd.com/document/28575386/Viacom-s-statement-of-undisputed-facts>.

Internet through the free flow of information, Google has been successful in keeping news organizations in line with this publishing model for more than a decade. The distribution of free news on the internet was all but a natural development: only at the end of 2017, for example, the tech company abandoned its notorious ‘first click free’ policy, which forced news outlets to provide at least three free articles a day before the user hit any kind of paywall in exchange for visibility on its search engine⁷⁹.

Aggregation – and cooptation – took a step further with the emergence of social media such as Twitter and mainly Facebook since the mid-2000s. An essential difference from these platforms to common news aggregators is that news circulates and competes for visibility on the same feed where several other types of content are distributed – specially pictures, videos and posts produced by users and brands (Rashidian et al., 2019). In that sense, social media enable users to potentially have a larger role in the process of distribution, whether through actively sharing, liking and commenting news posts or passively receiving content recommendations and spending time consuming it (Napoli, 2015).

Lured by the emancipatory potential attributed to digital intermediaries, early readings of this process largely overlooked the role of platforms and their algorithms in the selection of news, though, emphasizing mostly the fact that these infrastructures allowed a considerable transfer of control over the gatekeeping process from the media and professional journalists to the audience. Renowned gatekeeping theorists such as Shoemaker and Vos (2009) felt the need to update their theory to accommodate this transformation: “Journalists’ perceptions of the newsworthiness of an event interact with the reader’s perceptions of its personal relevance. (...) We must conceptualize readers as having their own gate, and they send news items to others in the audience when the interaction between newsworthiness and personal relevance is strong enough” (p. 124). Singer (2014) claimed that social media users had become ‘secondary gatekeepers’ to the media, accumulating important editorial roles that once belonged only to journalists and the outlets they worked for. In this sense, social media intensified a trend that was already growing as Internet access has spread, enabling the proliferation of

⁷⁹ Ruddick, G. (2017, October 2). Google to ditch controversial ‘first click free’ policy. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/02/google-to-ditch-controversial-first-click-free-policy> on April 8, 2021.

blogs and general interest websites, and the media was reluctant to accept: *participatory journalism*, that is, "the act of a citizen, or a group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information" (Bowman & Willis, 2003, p. 9).

At the same time, as the use of social media for content consumption grew, their users increased expectations that the most important news, tailored to their interests and needs, would naturally be presented to them on their Twitter timelines and personalized Facebook newsfeeds along a normal day (Gil de Zúñiga & Cheng, 2021). *Incidental news exposure* dates back to the early 2000s, when Tewksbury et al. (2001) noticed that news headlines were spread all over the Internet and people found information even when they were not actively seeking for. This phenomenon naturally intensified with the mass distribution of news through search engines and social media, and now individuals tend to have a (deceived) perception that they are well-informed because platforms' algorithms are finetuned to provide them with the information they supposedly need based on recommendations from verified sources and friends with similar views of the world (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Lee, 2020). Scholars noticed four conceptual dimensions for the so-called *news find me* perception: being informed, not seeking for news, reliance on peers and reliance on algorithmic news (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Gil de Zúñiga & Cheng, 2021; Lee, 2020; Song et al., 2020; Strauß et al., 2021). Unsurprisingly, individuals who are overreliant on social media to stay informed tend not to remember the sources of the news they received and consume only small parts of the content offered, not all of the information necessary to fully understand public affairs issues addressed (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2018; Lee, 2020).

Despite initial reluctance, in the late 2000s and early 2010s, virtually every news organization in the world created pages on social media to have their content shared for free and distributed through algorithms with opaque and constantly changing criteria. A very convincing reason for such a movement is that even before the emergence of social media, in the previous decade, traditional media had already been steadily losing readers and viewers and revenues both from advertising and subscriptions (Winseck, 2020). Efforts to generate new revenue by placing paywalls for subscriber-only content on the online websites of major newspapers had been largely ineffective, and publishers

that relegated their print versions to invest their efforts in the movement of monetizing their digital properties had been exchanging dollars for dimes (Chyi, 2012; Thurman & Myllylahti, 2009). For the media, social media platforms had become a promising path for regaining audiences and eventually revenues (Myllylahti, 2018)

These platforms have largely benefited on the impressive upsurge of smartphones sales to grow and gain importance over the news ecosystem. Around 170 million mobile devices were sold worldwide throughout 2009, but that number skyrocketed in the following years surpassing the barrier of 1 billion in 2013 and maintaining an annual average of over 1.4 billion devices sold since then⁸⁰. The consultancy Deloitte estimated that 80% of the world's population already owns a smartphone, a rate that remained constant in both developed and developing countries⁸¹. The smartphone surpassed the desktop as the main device for the consumption of news in most developed countries between 2016 and 2017: nowadays it is already used for this purpose by at least 73% of the Spaniards, 62% of the Britons, 59% of the French, and 58% of the Americans and the Germans (Newman et al., 2020). Facebook owns the four most downloaded mobile applications of the last decade: its main app tops the ranking with more than 4.6 billion downloads, followed by Messenger (4.4 billion), WhatsApp (4.3 billion) and Instagram (2.7 billion)⁸². By 2016, social media was already the main gateway to the news on mobile devices: 51% of the respondents of a survey from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism consumed information on these infrastructures. This number reached 64% among people aged 18 to 24 years old, and Facebook was the preferred source for 46% of the Americans, almost twice as much as in 2013, and more than doubling YouTube (Levy et al., 2016).

The growing importance of social media for news consumption has led publishers to increasingly rely on them (especially Facebook) for content distribution through

⁸⁰ O'Dea, S. (2020, February 27). Global smartphone sales to end users from 1st quarter 2009 to 2nd quarter 2018, by operating system. *Statista*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/266219/global-smartphone-sales-since-1st-quarter-2009-by-operating-system/> on April 6, 2021.

⁸¹ Global mobile consumer trends, 2nd edition (2017). *Deloitte*. Retrieved from <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/technology-media-telecommunications/us-global-mobile-consumer-survey-second-edition.pdf> on April 6, 2021.

⁸² Meisenzahl, M. (2019, December 20). Mark Zuckerberg dominated people's phones over the decade. Here are the 10 most downloaded apps, nearly half of which Facebook owns. *Business Insider*. Retrieved from <https://www.businessinsider.com/most-downloaded-apps-of-decade-facebook-instagram-whatsapp-tiktok-snapchat-2019-12?IR=T> on April 8, 2021.

network strategies, which refer to “the circulation of content links, headlines, and snippets through online platforms to drive audiences to news publishers’ websites, where they are served with ads or enticed to sign up for a subscription or give a donation” (Van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 60). Network strategies became the basic standard for news organizations on social media. The result was that, in July 2015, Facebook overtook Google as the main source of traffic for news publishers, according to the analytics firm Parse.ly. Algorithmic selection provided by the two platforms accounted for almost 80% of the entire audience of 400 news providers from the company’s network in that year – 39.3% from Facebook and 34% from Google⁸³. As the media ended up posting basically all the news it produced on these platforms and the consumption of news by users occurred mainly in the environment of these infrastructures, Google and Facebook amassed an immense competitive advantage over news organizations: “a kind of omniscience over supply (knowledge on which organization produces which content and when) but also over demand (knowledge on which user is consuming what information, where and when)” (Smyrnaio & Rebillard, 2019, p. 41).

The increase in audience provided by the platforms during most of the 2010s did not, however, result in an increase in revenue for news organizations as Google and Facebook dominated digital advertising (Ju et al., 2014). In her analysis of four New Zealand media companies, Myllylahti (2018) estimated that the total revenue they derived from social media distribution was around US\$ 990,000 per year: only 0.03% to 0.14% of their total revenue in the period – that is, the total financial cost these four media organizations together would have if they stopped publishing content on Facebook would be practically derisory in the face of their total budgets. Such kinds of perceptions, paired with the constant changes the major social media platform performed in its algorithms’ selection criteria, resulted in increased tension between platforms and the executives of the main media houses in recent years (Rashidian et al., 2018).

Overall, however, at least until 2018, concerns from publishers about becoming overly dependent on a platform such as Facebook and relinquishing excessive control over the production and distribution of their content to the point of affecting their editorial identity had not meant significant disruptions on their relationships with the

⁸³ Understanding traffic patterns from the top news topics of 2015 (2015, November 19). *Parse.ly*. Retrieved from <https://www.parse.ly/resources/data-studies/authority-report-9> on April 6, 2021.

platform. Nielsen and Ganter (2018) argued that publishers have been affected by fear of missing out on technological developments only platforms with incredible financial, technological and human resources would be able to provide. The authors claimed that the media presented basically three sorts of reaction to the increasing dominance of platforms over the news environment, depending on their specific characteristics:

“First, most simply *coexist* with platforms, and reactively adapt to the ways in which the dominant digital intermediaries develop new products and services that sometimes restructure and reconstitute how information is shared, accessed, and used. The basic position is, ‘They are huge. We are tiny. What do you expect us to do?’ A few have *confronted* the digital intermediaries over what they perceive to be unfair or even illegitimate use of their content as aggregated, displayed in search results, or shown within social networking sites. One high-profile example is the US-based News Corp. Their Executive Chairman Rupert Murdoch has publicly warned that ‘[people’s] ability to access information, independently and meaningfully, is put at risk by the overwhelming power’⁸⁴ of the dominant digital intermediaries. Finally, some news media organizations are offered opportunities to *collaborate* with the dominant digital intermediaries and have seized them” (Nielsen & Ganter, 2018, p. 1603).

Collaboration offerings have become a routine strategy for platforms to accommodate dissatisfaction from main media players, keep publishers hoping for new revenues, and allow digital intermediaries to remain on their growing path without compromising news distribution through their user interfaces (Rashidian et al., 2018; Smyrnaiois & Rebillard, 2019). In this sense, one of the most remarkable and ambitious projects was Facebook Instant Articles. Discreetly launched in May 2015 in cooperation with nine major US media companies such as *The New York Times* and *NBC News*, the program presupposed that articles from these publishers would be hosted directly on Facebook's servers with the justification that they would be featured on a more attractive format

⁸⁴ Kennedy, J. (2014, September 17). News Corp Opposed Google’s European Commission Settlement Offer; Welcomed Competition Commission Reconsideration. *News Corp*. Retrieved from <https://newscorp.com/2014/09/17/news-corp-opposed-googles-european-commission-settlement-of-fer-welcomed-competition-commission-reconsideration/> on August 25, 2022.

to users: clean pages that loaded up to 10 times faster than they normally would on the official websites of news organizations⁸⁵. *The New York Times* article announcing the project itself offered a series of justifications and presented the newspaper's participation in the initiative as inevitable given the size of the platform, at the time with 1.4 billion users:

“Facebook has gone to unusual lengths to court the publishers participating in the project. (...) The news publishers can either sell and embed advertisements in the articles, keeping all of the revenue, or allow Facebook to sell ads, with the social network getting 30 percent of the proceeds. Facebook is also permitting the news companies to collect data about the people reading the articles with the same tools they use to track visitors to their own sites. (...) Publishers have little choice but to cooperate with Facebook, said Vivian Schiller, a former executive at *NBC*, *The New York Times* and Twitter who now advises media companies and brands. ‘That’s where the audience is,’ Ms. Schiller said. ‘It’s too massive to ignore.’” (Goel & Somaiya, 2015, par. 4-7).

If not the first initiative of its kind, Facebook Instant Articles was certainly the most significant, the one which received the most coverage by the specialized media, a turning point towards the adoption of platform *native strategies* by news publishers – when the media hand over content to these infrastructures for consumption and connection to advertising completely outside of their proprietary sites (E. J. Bell et al., 2017): a development that meant the completion of Carr's (2008) great unbundling. It paved the road for the better acceptance, later, of a similar initiative from Google, the Accelerated Mobile Pages (AMP)⁸⁶. By early 2017, though, it was already clear that Instant Articles had not achieved the results expected by the media (further revenue) and most news organizations were silently abandoning it⁸⁷ (Brown, 2018). Creating revenue for publishers seemed not to have been Facebook's priority, and Instant Articles have

⁸⁵ Reckhow, M. (2015, May 12). Introducing Instant Articles. Meta for Media. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/formedia/blog/introducing-instant-articles> on August 26, 2022.

⁸⁶ AMP websites: A framework that amplifies page experience (n.d.). AMP. Retrieved from <https://amp.dev/about/websites/> on April 7, 2021.

⁸⁷ Newton, C. (2017, April 16). Instant recall: Facebook Instant Articles promised to transform journalism – but now big publishers are fleeing. *The Verge*. Retrieved from <https://www.theverge.com/2017/4/16/15314210/instant-articles-facebook-future-ads-video> on April 7, 2021.

actually become another distraction provided by the platform for publishers – or, as technology insider Mathew Ingram called, another bait-and-switch initiative⁸⁸, similar to previous ones such as the ‘pivot to video’, when Facebook convinced publishers to produce videos with financial incentives that soon would be cut and would leave them without measurable returns on their investment (Tandoc & Maitra, 2018).

Meanwhile, the platform began testing algorithm changes to privilege content posted by family and friends over news. Once again, *The New York Times* article that announced the measure set the tone for the feeling of publishers: this time, inevitability gave way to a sense of betrayal. “For years, Facebook has courted publishers of all sizes, asking them to depend more and more on the social media giant to expand their audiences. Now, Facebook has a new message for publishers: Tamp down your expectations” (Isaac & Ember, 2016, par. 1). The impact of the algorithm change completed by Facebook in January 2018 was different for each news organization, but it largely confirmed concerns that platforms had the power to cut the connection between audiences and news organizations overnight without notice. Cornia et al. (2018) reported that the number of organic interactions of 12 newspapers and commercial broadcasters across Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and the United Kingdom on the platform fell by an average of 9%, reaching drops of up to a third in the case of French *Le Monde* and *LCI* (*Groupe TF1*). An inquiry conducted by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission released in May 2018 disclosed that the impact of the changes on the country's media was even greater, causing traffic declines to news websites of more than 50% and obligating some media companies to initially even pay for boosting posts on the platform in order to keep audience rates that backed previous agreements with advertisers⁸⁹ – that is, for these publishers, Facebook not only did not revert advertising revenue but also made them paying advertisers on the platform at least for a while.

News organizations obviously reported frustration and regret after Facebook's move. Rashidian et al. (2019) mentioned that many American news executives they

⁸⁸ Ingram, M. (2017, April 18). How Facebook's Instant Articles became another bait-and-switch for publishers. *VentureBeat*. Retrieved from <https://venturebeat.com/media/how-facebooks-instant-articles-became-another-bait-and-switch-for-publishers/> on August 26, 2022.

⁸⁹ Duke, J. (2018, May 3). Facebook algorithmic changes cut publishers' traffic in half. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved from <https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/facebook-s-algorithm-changes-cut-publishers-traffic-in-half-20180503-p4zd3e.html> on February 19, 2019.

interviewed for their years-long study on the relationships between platforms and news organizations described the measure as ‘the end of a platform era’: “This era, one defined by the belief that the massive audiences platforms offer would lead to meaningful advertising revenue for publishers, was a ‘bubble’ and a ‘distraction’, they said. This promise has proven to be a broken bargain. Finally, publishers believe ‘the scale game is over’” (p. 8). Rashidian et al. (2019) reported that, in some cases, news executives’ targeted frustration with Facebook even reached levels of profound anger: “‘Facebook have never really been genuinely engaged with the idea that news has any value for their platform. I think they’re really focused on [giving money to] local news in the US because that’s the political hot topic [right now],’ one person said. Another called their recent journalism efforts ‘PR’” (p. 33).

According to Rashidian et al. (2019), though, the ‘end of a platform era’ did not mean that news organizations would completely cut ties with platforms. Instead, publishers manifested their intention to heighten the bar for collaborating with platforms, demanding more compensation – mainly financial – and assessing whether the cooperation efforts fit their business strategies before signing up (in the past, cooperation used to be almost automatic and news managers have even been eager to participate in the selected club of media houses approached by big tech powerhouses) (Rashidian et al., 2019). Concurrently, news organizations started attempting to use platforms with a third kind of strategy aimed at increasing online subscriptions and memberships as long-term sustainability of advertising-based media brands had become unlikely. “The *online subscription strategy* potentially enables news organizations to ‘rebundle’ content, audiences, and advertising, becoming more independent from platform mechanisms. It should be noted, however, that this strategy is only a viable option for news organizations with a strong and distinctive reputation, such as *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, for which people are willing to pay” (Van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 62).

In this new strategical approach, platforms would become mostly means for news organizations to promote and market their proprietary products, or, in other words, channels for subscribers/members acquisition. “Many interviewees from various newsroom types invoked the marketing language of ‘funnels’ with remarkable frequency when describing a new platform-publisher-audience dynamic,” recalled Rashidian et al. (2019, p. 41). “The difference now, however, is that instead of just spraying

content every which way and hoping for eyeballs, publishers are forming strategies around how to hook readers at that point of platform contact and reel them in, down the funnel” (p. 42) – see figure 7 for a representation of the mentioned funnel. As content becomes the main bait to catch the reader's attention and interest, it is essential that it denotes a unique capacity of the news organization: therefore, publishers have sought to publish less content but with supposedly higher quality (Jenkins, 2020). Publishers can even pay for the promotion of specific Facebook posts, so they can reach a larger number of people, as organic reach on social media is now very limited – a typical post tends to reach no more than 3% of a page's follower base on the platform (Cornia et al., 2018).

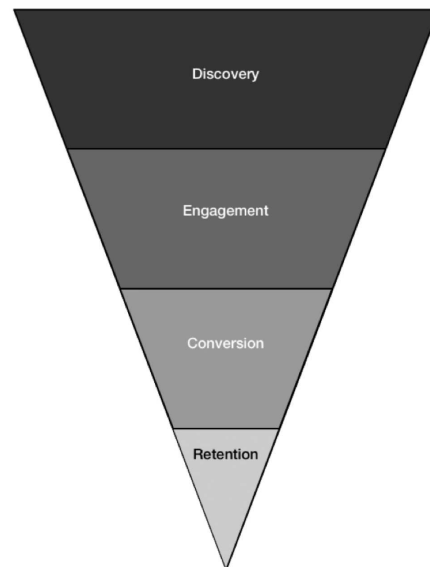


Figure 7. News organizations’ funnel for subscribers/members acquisition (Rashidian et al., 2019).

Rashidian et al. (2019) argued that this new strategical approach opens room for news organizations redefining the term *audience engagement* that was shaped by platforms such as Facebook around metrics that only considered actions that could be performed inside social media (e.g., liking, sharing, commenting, etc.). As one of the authors’ interviewees stated, “publishers are looking at that word ‘engagement’ and understanding that it’s much more about a relationship with a reader. For that to exist you have got to think beyond an interaction or platform. We have to think about retention and where do I move next with this person and how do I keep in contact with this

person” (Rashidian et al., 2019, p. 44). Perhaps hampered by the understanding of platforms, media executives, journalists and researchers have struggled to find a normative definition of audience engagement, concept that has had several different understandings according to the contexts and subjectivities involved (Nelson, 2018). It has been used, for example, to characterize public participation in the production and distribution of news or associated with editorial metrics that give an idea of readers' loyalty to a news brand (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Lawrence et al., 2018; Meier et al., 2018). Nelson, (2021) argued that the audience engagement definitions tend to focus solely on the audience, ignoring news producers deliberated attempts to reach them. In this sense, the author suggested a distinction between reception-oriented and production-oriented audience engagement:

“Reception-oriented definitions of audience engagement focus primarily on the audience’s reception of news: How much time did they spend with a story? How many times did they tweet about it or comment on it? (...) Reception-oriented audience engagement definitions appeal to for-profit publishers because these definitions can translate into quantifiable measures that may eventually be deemed worthwhile by advertisers. Production-oriented definitions, on the other hand, focus on news production: How many citizens participated in the creation of this story? How many diverse voices were included as sources? How much of the audience requested this story in the first place? These definitions matter more for nonprofit outlets, as these publishers are less concerned with ad revenue and instead want to measure their success by how much their audience feels included and empowered by their reporting. In other words, production-oriented audience engagement refers to the ways that journalists attend to their audiences, while reception-oriented audience engagement refers to the ways that audiences attend to the news” (Nelson, 2021, p. 7-8).

A few years after the turmoil caused by Facebook’s algorithmic changes, news editors and executives stated that it has been possible to recover and stabilize the audience lost in the first moment, eventually even add new numbers to it, but not necessarily on Facebook: most news outlets adopted a strategy of diversifying the distribution over

platforms and eventually resorted back to the channels provided by an older and well-known partner such as Google⁹⁰ (Cornia et al., 2018). Consequently, by early 2018, Google had already regained the position of top external traffic driver to news organizations' sites that had been taken over by Facebook in 2015⁹¹. There is no coincidence in the finding that, by then, Google already had a much better reputation among publishing executives than Facebook despite eventual previous disagreements. "As one interviewee said, 'Google has done I think a very clear job of aligning their business incentives with this stuff. They know that the more people search for news the more that it supports their bottom line'" (Rashidian et al., 2019, p. 55).

4.2.1. The institutionalization of platforms' boundary work towards the news media

Perhaps sensing the growing dissatisfaction from publishers and a shake-up to their reputation in general due to data breach scandals like the one involving Cambridge Analytica and the increased circulation of disinformation that allegedly influenced the outcome of the US presidential election and the UK Brexit referendum in 2016, Facebook launched its Journalism Project early the following year. The program was said to be focused on three broad fronts: 1) collaborative development of news products, 2) training and tools for journalists, and 3) training and tools for everyone⁹². Less pressured by publisher dissatisfaction and scandals, Google followed a similar path in 2018, with the announcement of the Google News Initiative (GNI), which committed US\$ 300 million to support news partners around the world. During the launch, though, Google claimed to have already redirected US\$ 12.6 billion in revenues to news organizations and 10 billion clicks to their websites in 2017⁹³. The extension and expected duration of

⁹⁰ Schwartz, J. (2018, April 11). Here's what we know so far about Google Chrome's mobile article recommendations, the next major traffic driver for publishers. *Nieman Lab*. Retrieved from <https://www.niemanlab.org/2018/04/heres-what-we-know-so-far-about-google-chromes-mobile-article-recommendations-the-next-major-traffic-driver-for-publishers/> on July 15, 2021.

⁹¹ Understanding traffic patterns from the top news topics of 2015 (2015, November 19). *Parse.ly*. Retrieved from <https://www.parse.ly/resources/data-studies/authority-report-9/> on July 15, 2021.

⁹² Simo, F. (2017, January 11). Introducing the Facebook Journalism Project. *Meta for Media*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/formedia/blog/introducing-facebook-journalism-project> on August 27, 2020.

⁹³ Castillo, M. (2018, March 20). Google launches a big news initiative to fight false news and help publishers make money. *CNBC*. Retrieved from <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/03/20/google-launches-journalism-program-google-news-initiative.html> on August 27, 2020.

Facebook's investments on its Journalism Project remained unclear, but in the end of 2021 it announced to have spent US\$ 230 million since 2019 only in one of its fronts: supporting local news organizations worldwide⁹⁴. In October 2021, Facebook announced that all its applications and technologies would be placed under the umbrella of a holding company called Meta, and its journalism support initiative was rebranded as Meta Journalism Project.

Both Meta Journalism Project and Google News Initiative have been involved by their parenting companies in the most recent developments of their dispute with publishers around compensation for the news content platforms display for free for their users on their interfaces. In 2019, after long conflicts in member states such as France, Germany and Spain, the EU directive 790 extended traditional press copyrights to the snippets of content produced by news organizations and showed by Google and Facebook on their products – which means these platforms would have to pay for this kind of content. France was the first country that implemented the directive after the signature of a five-year deal between Google and AFP in November 2021; two three-year deals, one between the *Alliance de la presse d'information générale* (APIG) – the largest union of French daily newspapers – with Meta in October 2021, and another one with Google in March 2022; and a three-year deal between the *Syndicat des éditeurs de la presse magazine* (SEPM) and Google in March 2022. Before that, in July 2021, when publishers and platforms were discussing the deals, the French competition authority fined Google with €500 million for not collaborating with the negotiations and condemned the US-based platform for attempting to connect the payment of publishers' related rights to their participation in the newly launched Google News Showcase. Announced in June 2020 and part of the GNI initiatives, Showcase is a licensing program through which Google intends to pay news publishers in exchange of curation and access rights for their users to news content, including articles that required subscriptions⁹⁵.

⁹⁴ Community News Project expands to 100 reporters with \$8m/£5.9m in new funding (2021, December 2). *Meta for Media*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/formedia/blog/community-news-project-expands-100-reporters> on April 27, 2022.

⁹⁵ Bender, B. (2020, June 25). A new licensing program to support the news industry. *The Keyword*. Retrieved from <https://blog.google/outreach-initiatives/google-news-initiative/licensing-program-support-news-industry/> on July 12, 2020.

The specific terms of the agreements remain largely ignored as they were not made public, but Papaevangelou and Smyrnaio (2022) claimed that the estimated remuneration is not balanced and some large publishers such as *Le Monde* have been privileged in initiatives such as Subscribe with Google and Google News Showcase. “This ‘divide and conquer’ strategy of monopolistic digital platforms contributes to further fragment the news ecosystem and weaken smaller publishers” (p. 11). In general, the authors also considered that the frameworks stipulated by the French Competition Authority are insufficient to deal with system asymmetries: “because they fail to challenge the concentration of power by a handful of oligopolistic private companies and, thus, give way to platforms and to the free markets’ idiosyncrasies to decide how they are implemented” (Papaevangelou & Smyrnaio, 2022, p. 12).

A similar controversy occurred in Australia, where the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission produced a report in 2019 which noted that “the unrestrained exercise of market power by digital platforms against advertisers and content creators could lead to market failure” (*Digital Platforms Inquiry: Final Report*, 2019, p. 10). The report recommended the reform of the communications regulatory (Flew & Wilding, 2021), which the government promptly accepted with a mandatory law that did not allow platforms to negotiate deals with publishers as they have previously done elsewhere:

“Perhaps because of the troubles European governments had faced, the Australian government sharply diverged from their model of legislation. Rather than pursuing a press copyright that would give publishers a narrow avenue to extract payment from digital platforms, the Australian government took a broader approach. Citing antitrust and public interest philosophies, it brought forth a mandatory news bargaining code governing platform-publisher relationships, the final version of which included provisions forcing platforms to, among other things: 1. Pay news publishers for the right to link to or show snippets from news stories to a rate subject to final offer arbitration. 2. Turn over data to news publishers about platform users’ interactions with their content. 3. Notify news publishers in advance about platform algorithm updates that might affect the ranking or display of their content” (Royal & Napoli, 2022, p. 52).

Platforms responded to the Australian law with exasperation and threats. Both argued that news content was responsible for just a small part of their traffic and revenue, assuring that they provided the media with referrals⁹⁶. While the law was still being discussed, Google started displaying ads that asked its users to put pressure on their political representatives and the Australian government against the law⁹⁷. Facebook threatened to block news organizations and even users to post and share news content⁹⁸. After the government demonstrated little enthusiasm with Showcase, Google also threatened to completely remove Google Search from the Australian market⁹⁹. On February 17, 2021, Facebook carried out its threats and finally blocked the news within its platform¹⁰⁰. The 'news blackout' lasted about a week, enough time for the Australian government to panic and make concessions given the public outcry, allowing the platforms to negotiate directly with publishers: if they reached a certain number of

⁹⁶ Barrett, J.; Kaye, B. (2020, September 1). Explainer: Facebook, Google battle Australia over proposed revenue-share law. *Reuters*. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-australia-media-facebook-explainer-idUSKBN25S3YZ> on October 12, 2020. Silva, M. (2020b, May 31). Official Google Australia Blog: A fact-based discussion about news online. *Google Australia Blog*. Retrieved from <https://australia.googleblog.com/2020/05/a-fact-based-discussion-about-news.html> on October 12, 2020. Facebook response to the Australian treasury laws amendment (news media and digital platforms mandatory bargaining code) Bill 2020 (2020, August 28). *Australian Competition & Consumer Commission*. Retrieved from https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/Facebook_0.pdf on October 12, 2020. 8 facts about Google and the news media bargaining code (2021, January 22). *The Keyword*. Retrieved from <https://blog.google/around-the-globe/google-asia/australia/8-facts-about-google-and-news-media-bargaining-code/> on March 3, 2021.

⁹⁷ Zhou, N. (2020, August 17). Google's open letter to Australians about news code contains "misinformation", ACCC says. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/aug/17/google-open-letter-australia-news-media-bargaining-code-free-services-risk-contains-misinformation-accs-says> on October 12, 2020.

⁹⁸ Cheik-Hussein, M. (2020, June 15). Facebook says it doesn't need news content for Australia. *AdNews*. Retrieved from <https://www.adnews.com.au/news/facebook-says-it-doesn-t-need-news-content-for-australia> on October 12, 2020.

⁹⁹ Samios, Z.; Visentin, L. (2021, January 26). Google backflips on news product launch amid political battle. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved from <https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/google-backflips-on-news-product-launch-amid-political-battle-20210126-p56wyc.html> on March 3, 2021. Cave, D. (2021a, January 22). An Australia with no Google? The bitter fight behind a drastic threat. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/22/business/australia-google-facebook-news-media.html> on March 3, 2021.

¹⁰⁰ Facebook blocks Australian users from viewing or sharing news (2021, February 18). *BBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-56099523> on March 3, 2021. Easton, W. (2021, February 17). Changes to sharing and viewing news on Facebook in Australia. *Meta*. Retrieved from <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/02/changes-to-sharing-and-viewing-news-on-facebook-in-australia/> on March 3, 2021.

agreements, they could avoid the bargaining code¹⁰¹. And so it was¹⁰². The legislation was passed on February 22, 2021¹⁰³, and, although platforms now have to compensate the media for their content, the power imbalance between platforms and publishers, especially smaller ones, has largely persisted.

Meta Journalism Project and Google News Initiative supposedly brought more transparency to boundary work towards news organizations that both platforms have been already performing since their origins only with selected partners and boundary resources such as data tools and APIs, native content hosting programs (e.g., Facebook Instant Articles and Google Accelerated Mobile Pages) and platform guidelines (Poell et al., 2021). It is worth remembering findings from Helmond et al.'s (2019) study, which monitored the partnerships promoted by Facebook since its origins until 2018 and found that the number of 'content and experience' partnerships (267) during that period was only smaller than those collaborations involving 'advertising and promotion' (598), 'social and relationships' (375) and 'data' (294) partners, essential complementors to the success of this type of platform's business model. "'Content & Experience' has been steadily growing since 2009, pointing to Facebook's key role in the platformization of cultural production" (Helmond et al., 2019, p. 137).

Partnerships involving data and APIs may seem less visible than the others, but they have been extremely important to consolidate the efforts of platforms to create dependencies in the news ecosystem (Poell et al., 2021). The flagship feature of the Google News Initiative launch in 2018 was Subscribe with Google, which allows a logged in Google user to easily buy a news subscription from several major legacy media outlets without the need to spend time filling in personal and payment information. To access

¹⁰¹ Isaac, M.; Cave, D. (2021, February 22). Facebook strikes deal to restore news sharing in Australia. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/22/technology/facebook-australia-news.html> on March 3, 2021. Meade, A.; Taylor, J.; Hurst, D. (2021, February 23). Facebook reverses Australia news ban after government makes media code amendments. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/feb/23/facebook-reverses-australia-news-ban-after-government-makes-media-code-amendments> on March 3, 2021.

¹⁰² News Corp and Google agree to global partnership on news (2021, February 17). *News Corp*. Retrieved from <https://newscorp.com/2021/02/17/news-corp-and-google-agree-to-global-partnership-on-news/> on March 3, 2020. Visentin, L. (2021, February 23). Facebook to restore Australian news content after media bargaining code amendments. *Sunday Morning Herald*. Retrieved from <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/government-agrees-to-last-minute-amendments-to-media-code-20210222-p574kc.html> on March 3, 2021.

¹⁰³ Whitley, A.; Scott, J.

content protected by a paywall, one can simply click in 'sign in with Google' and the walls to content will be removed – user subscriptions management can be done through the Chrome browser interface, where they keep their payment methods¹⁰⁴. Facebook has since developed a similar tool¹⁰⁵. Google Analytics is the standard tool for monitoring audience metrics, serving also as the basis for the analytics tools provided by third-party data aggregators such as Parse.ly and Chartbeat. Through the Google News Initiative, more specific metrics on news consumption and insights related to reading trends were also made available¹⁰⁶. In 2016, Facebook acquired CrowdTangle, a tool publishers used to understand what was going viral on social media and the people that have been influencing the diffusion of this kind of content¹⁰⁷. We are just mentioning a few of the features for publishers listed on both platforms websites.

For years, though, platforms that combine content from media, users and brands on the same interfaces have struggled to define what is news and which companies and individuals could be considered news publishers (Rashidian et al., 2019). The difficulty has been even greater when the task was to classify 'high quality news'. In 2019, shortly after the launch of tests for another feature aimed at supposedly giving more visibility to news in its main app, Facebook created a controversy by including *Breitbart News* in it: an explicitly alt-right conspiracy theory website created by Steve Bannon, Donald Trump's campaign ideologue for the presidency of the United States¹⁰⁸. The solution found by the platform to mitigate the problem occurred on the terms and conditions front of its boundary resources: Facebook created the News Page Index to identify credible news publishers posting content on the platform. Registration in the News Page

¹⁰⁴ Albrecht, I. (2018, March 20). Introducing Subscribe with Google. *The Keyword*. Retrieved from <https://blog.google/outreach-initiatives/google-news-initiative/introducing-subscribe-google/> on April 24, 2021.

¹⁰⁵ Early publisher results: News subscription account linking on Facebook. (2020, August 28). *Meta Journalism Project*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/journalismproject/publisher-account-linking> on April 24, 2021.

¹⁰⁶ Data tools for news organizations (n.d.). *Google News Initiative*. Retrieved from <https://newsinitiative.withgoogle.com/resources/analytics-tools/> on April 24, 2021.

¹⁰⁷ Newton, C. (2016, November 11). Facebook buys CrowdTangle, the tool publishers use to win the internet. *The Verge*. Retrieved from <https://www.theverge.com/2016/11/11/13594338/facebook-acquires-crowdtangle> on April 24, 2021.

¹⁰⁸ Carrie Wong, J. (2019, October 25). Facebook includes Breitbart in new 'high quality' news tab. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/oct/25/facebook-breitbart-news-tab-alt-right> <https://www.theverge.com/2019/10/25/20932653/facebook-news-breitbart-mark-zuckerberg-statement-bias> on April 24, 2021.

Index is not automatic: news organizations have to submit an application that follows several criteria established by the platform, such as being active in the last 90 days, being linked to a news website with a verified domain, primarily creating journalism that reports on current events and timely information, not having repeatedly spread misinformation according to Meta's fact-checking partner organizations and not posting more advertising than news, among others¹⁰⁹. Individual journalists are not accepted in the News Page Index, a basic requirement to participate in various media-oriented initiatives from the platform, such as the aforementioned Facebook News tab, sending direct messages and creating chatbots in Messenger and even onboarding the WhatsApp Business API¹¹⁰.

Although it does not condition the use of its products aimed at news producers to the registration in an index, Google also establishes basic criteria for a news publisher to be able to appear among Google News' content sources, for example¹¹¹. There is similarity to Facebook's News Page Index in aspects such as amounts of ads and misinformation, but the validation of a news source as authentic according to journalistic standards occurs through somewhat vague criteria, opening room for more subjective evaluations¹¹². For example, Google claims that it seeks for information about the news source that a regular person would find helpful in evaluating the credibility of a news website, such as publishing dates, contact information, authors' bios and bylines. It is not clear if every piece of content should have all those information, though, and we have already found news articles without any bylines being distributed on the platform. On the other hand, recent studies on the diversity of news offered by Google News have shown that the content recommendations made by the tool are usually homogeneous, with legacy news brands dominating and lack of traces of personalization performed by algorithms, weakening the theory that news aggregators contribute to filter bubbles (R. Evans et al., 2022; Nechushtai & Lewis, 2019).

¹⁰⁹ Registration guidelines for the News Page Index (n.d.). *Meta Business Help Center*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/business/help/270254993785210?id=644465919618833> on April 24, 2021.

¹¹⁰ About News Page Index (n.d.) *Meta Business Help Center*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/business/help/377680816096171?id=644465919618833> on April 24, 2021.

¹¹¹ Google News policies (n.d.). *Publisher Center Help*. Retrieved from <https://support.google.com/news/publisher-center/answer/6204050?hl=en> on August 13, 2021.

¹¹² Granito, J. (2021, June 1). Understanding the sources behind Google News. *Google Search Central Blog*. Retrieved from <https://developers.google.com/search/blog/2021/06/google-news-sources> on August 13, 2021.

Google's biggest problems appear to be on its other platforms, where source accreditation processes are more lenient. Studies focused on covid-19 related subjects, found that YouTube is one of the main gateways for mis- and disinformation (Donzelli et al., 2018; Hussein et al., 2020). Furthermore, most websites that distribute unreliable information about the disease and the vaccines are funded through Google Ads, which distributes ads all over the Internet (Taylor et al., 2020). However, partnerships with the legacy media around YouTube seem to be a major focus of the Google News Initiative, with programs aimed at developing not only news organizations but also independent journalists¹¹³, as well as providing prominent specific tabs for news on its landing page¹¹⁴.

Despite publishers' dissatisfaction with the return on investment of distributing content across platforms, both Meta Journalism Project and Google News Initiative seem to be meeting their non-announced goals of keeping news organizations under their control on major social media and content aggregators. Every week new case studies of news organizations that have benefited from Meta Journalism Project are being published on its official blog, while GNI's official website states that more than 7,000 journalistic projects have benefited in more than 120 countries¹¹⁵ (Papaevangelou, 2022). These kinds of close and sometimes almost invisible connections for the average audience make it virtually impossible these days for a news organization to 'deplatform', even if it intends to pursue a subscription-based and platform-independent business model. Regardless of a steady decline since 2016, Facebook is still the most important social medium for news consumption: 32% of the respondents of the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021 stated they have used the platform for this purpose in the last week against 20% from YouTube (Newman et al., 2021). According to reports from third-

¹¹³ YouTube and the News industry (n.d.). Google News Initiative. Retrieved from <https://newsinitiative.withgoogle.com/info/youtube/> on August 13, 2021.

¹¹⁴ Matney, L. (2017, August 18). YouTube starts delivering 'breaking news' on its homepage across platforms. *TechCrunch*. Retrieved from <https://techcrunch.com/2017/08/18/youtube-starts-delivering-breaking-news-on-its-homepage-across-platforms/> on August 13, 2021.

¹¹⁵ A more informed world has always been core to Google's mission (n.d.). Google News Initiative. Retrieved from <https://newsinitiative.withgoogle.com/about/> on August 27, 2022.

party analytics companies that provide tools for the media, nowadays Facebook accounts for 18% to 20% of their total external traffic¹¹⁶.

Despite recent developments that caused fissures in relationships that have been increasingly heading towards coopetition, the wave of concerning findings about the dominance of the platforms over the news sector made in the previous years before the pandemic of covid-19 (E. J. Bell et al., 2017; Rashidian et al., 2018, 2019; Smyrnaioi & Rebillard, 2019) remains absolutely valid and up to date. “Platform companies are now at the core of every stage of the publishing process, from newsgathering and editorial strategy to distribution and communication with audiences, to monetization.” (Rashidian et al. 2018, p. 13). Control over content distribution was translated into control over the advertising market, still the main source of revenue for news producers as the final results of the shift for online subscriptions/memberships business models remain to be seen. Google and Facebook accounted for almost 60% of the digital ad share in the United States in 2020 – 28.9% for the former and 25.2% for the latter¹¹⁷, – a similar trend in most of the largest markets except China already for some years now.¹¹⁸ According to PwC, US\$ 120.9 million were spent on online advertising in the US in 2020, while all American television stations earned US\$ 62 million, radio US\$ 14.8 million and newspapers US\$ 13.1 million.¹¹⁹ “Platforms wield more power over formats and data, and earn significantly more advertising dollars in aggregate than publishers, even as platform choices increasingly inform publishers’ editorial strategies, distribution strategies, and workflows” (Rashidian et al. 2018, p. 15). The consequences of this asymmetrical distribution of power on the news industry will be addressed in the next section.

¹¹⁶ Stenberg, M. (2022, July 15). 4 charts reveal how facebook traffic to publishers has changed. *AdWeek*. Retrieved from <https://www.adweek.com/media/facebook-traffic-publishers-changed/> on August 27, 2022.

¹¹⁷ Bruell, A. (2021, April 6). Amazon surpasses 10% of US digital ad market share. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/amazon-surpasses-10-of-u-s-digital-ad-market-share-11617703200> on April 7, 2021.

¹¹⁸ Burrell, I. (2019, March 13). Are Google and Facebook killing advertising? *Raconter*. Retrieved from <https://www.raconteur.net/marketing/google-facebook-duopoly/> on April 7, 2021.

¹¹⁹ Global entertainment and media outlook 2021-2024 (2020, September). *PwC*. Retrieved from <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/industries/tmt/media/outlook.html> on April 7, 2021.

4.3. Consequences of the platformization of the news

As explained in Chapter 3, journalism's position of power is traditionally weak in relation to external pressures such as those exerted by governments and advertisers, and the same can be said about platforms' position of power with their various forms of control over the media (Vos & Russell, 2019). As we saw in the previous section, platforms apply *regulatory pressures* over the news industry through their boundary resources and the institutionalization of partnership programs. They also apply *normative pressures* "to the extent algorithms reflect Silicon Valley values" (Vos & Russell, 2019, p. 11). The reported fear of missing out on the technological developments led by platforms, which seemed to be an important trend among news publishers before Facebook's algorithm changes concluded in 2018, is part of a third form of pressure: *cognitive*, as these infrastructures' innovation-oriented logics, with the constant release of new features supposedly loaded with transforming potential and accompanied by carefully crafted emancipatory discourses, collaborate to build a narrative in which only technological powerhouses such as platforms would have the necessary resources to create the conditions for the media to reconnect with their audiences and survive the complete transition to digital (Vos & Russell, 2019). This little recapitulation sought to emphasize the understanding that "Silicon Valley pressures probably affect journalism more than journalists' gatekeeping choices" (Vos & Russell, 2019, p. 13).

Poell et al. (2021) identified four dimensions through which platforms influence cultural production and expression: nichification, metrification, branding and authenticity. For the authors, "four tensions that structure discourses and practices of creativity in platform-dependent cultural production stand out: (1) mass versus niche, (2) qualification versus quantification, (3) editorial versus advertising, and (4) authenticity versus self-promotion" (Poell et al., 2021, p. 139). In the remainder of this section, I attempt to take these tensions into account to explain how the pressures exerted by platforms influence the structuring of the news media and journalistic practices in all these dimensions and which are their consequences.

4.3.1. Greater media fragmentation

The emergence of platforms such as the infrastructures that control the distribution of online news forces news producers to constantly adapt to their changing nature turning the news into a contingent commodity similarly to the other products of the cultural industries (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Different kinds of news producers adapt differently to these constant changes, though, and platformization Internet accelerated a process that was initiated with the rise of cable TV in the 1980s and intensified with the Internet and the proliferation of blogs and general interest websites since the 1990s: the fragmentation of the media (Poell et al., 2021). The same platforms that have allowed legacy news organizations to reach once unthinkable audience numbers since the late 2000s also afforded digital news natives and even individual news producers to rise and find their publics through search engines, social media and news aggregators:

“An explosion of new websites and services sprang up in the US over this period. From nationally focused players such as *Huffington Post*, *ProPublica*, *Business Insider Quartz*, *BuzzFeed*, and dozens of others to local innovators like *The Texas Tribune*, *Patch*, *Deseret News*, and others. Larger legacy organizations like *CNN*, the *BBC*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post* were in a state of constant revolution, with varying degrees of success” (Bell et al., 2017, p. 16-17).

The variety of new online-born news players is not limited to the United States. These kinds of initiatives are spread all over any country one decides to examine: *El Español*, *eldiario.es*, *Maldita* and *Newtral* in Spain; *Mediapart*, *Brut* and *Jam* in France; *Agência Pública*, *Nexo* and *Meio* in Brazil; *Animal Político* in Mexico, just to name a few in the countries in which this study is focused on (Carpes & Gruszynski Sanseverino, 2020; Negredo et al., 2020; Nielsen et al., 2016). Not to mention journalists who work alone, and a recent phenomenon produced by social media: the influencer, who can often be classified as a journalist or not, depending on the always very subjective criteria of those who evaluate their work (Duffy, 2017, 2020). Such a complexity made the Dutch scholar Mark Deuze, one of the most cited authors when it comes to journalism values, recognize that his previous conceptions about the profession can hardly be applied

nowadays (Deuze, 2019). The author argued that journalism – even the one practiced in large commercial news organizations – was a professional ideology based on five main values: public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy and ethics (Deuze, 2005). He believed these values “squared rather nicely with the arrangement of news as an industry in society, where expert institutions such as mainstream newspapers and broadcast news organizations would function as the ‘go to’ places for the latest and most reliable sources of news and quality journalism, and where hardworking journalists would go about their business in the relative safety of the newsroom” (Deuze, 2019. p. 1). But now “the industry that had arisen around journalism is not responsible for defining what it is – the idea(l)s, debates, and practices of journalists inhabiting these institutions do” (Deuze, 2019, p. 3). Anderson et al. (2012) had a similar view.

These different news players developed different approaches to deal with platforms (Cornia et al., 2018; Rashidian et al., 2018). During the golden years of abundant Facebook-driven traffic, the online-born *BuzzFeed*, for example, was all in platform distribution and its executives got used to brag about the company’s incredible capacity to understand the functioning of the opaque algorithms from social media to reach large audiences¹²⁰. Legacy news organizations have been envious, and their executives have wondered if they were on the right track on their coopetition efforts with platforms: an internal report produced by *The New York Times*, for example, cited *BuzzFeed* several times to question its own digital strategy and the newsroom’s commitment to work on content and products that could help the most famous legacy news outlet in the world to reach larger audiences¹²¹. As we know, although the *NYT* has been always among the first group of participants in the experiments proposed by Facebook, its main digital accomplishment has been the development of a benchmark digital subscription program that recently reached 10 million subscribers with the acquisition of the sports website *The Athletic*¹²² (Myllylahti, 2016, 2019; Pickard & Williams, 2014).

¹²⁰ Roman, D. (2014, February 1). How BuzzFeed mastered social sharing to become a media giant for a new era. *Wired*. Retrieved from <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/buzzfeed> on August 23, 2020.

¹²¹ Benton, J. (2014, May 15). The leaked New York Times innovation report is one of the key documents of this media age. *Nieman Lab*. Retrieved from <https://www.niemanlab.org/2014/05/the-leaked-new-york-times-innovation-report-is-one-of-the-key-documents-of-this-media-age/> on August 21, 2020.

¹²² Tracy, M. (2022, February 2). The Times hits its goal of 10 million subscriptions with the addition of The Athletic. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/02/business/media/nyt-earnings-q4-2021.html> on August 29, 2022.

Eventually, it became clear that betting highly on platform distribution and integrating its monetization and marketing practices to these infrastructures meant that *BuzzFeed* and its counterparts' level of dependence to platforms has been significantly higher than legacy media's too (Van Dijck et al., 2018b) – and the company's capacity to quickly tweak its business model almost completely based on advertising revenues proved to be inversely proportional¹²³. BuzzFeed's ability to produce content that stimulated engagement (in this case, the concept means interactions and 'viral' sharing on social media) eroded when Facebook made changes on the functioning of their algorithms that downgraded creative content, and the social news company started to face struggles similar to the ones that already disrupted the sustainability of legacy and local news publishers focusing on much smaller niche audiences: a large part of its advertising income has just vanished. Four years after Facebook's changes, Buzzfeed has struggled to make profits and its news division has lost around US\$ 10 million every year even after the acquisition of *HuffPost*, making shareholders urge for its CEO Jonah Peretti to completely shut the company's newsroom down¹²⁴. Peretti's main recent suggestion was merging his company to five or six former rivals such as *Vox*, *Vice* and *Refinery*, also struggling to make revenues on content distribution through platforms these days, with the goal of negotiating better terms with the controlling entities of the Internet¹²⁵. The idea seems to be inspired by the agreement that Rupert Murdoch's *News Corp* managed to reach with both Google and Facebook in Australia recently to have its content better compensated by platforms¹²⁶.

The unstable relationships between platforms and news publishers cause precarious work situations in newsrooms in general. Many of the newsrooms that survived

¹²³ Bienaimé, P. (2020, March 10). BuzzFeed CEO Jonah Peretti: 'We've transformed how BuzzFeed makes money'. *Digiday*. Retrieved from <https://digiday.com/media/buzzfeed-ceo-jonah-peretti-reve-nue-pie-affiliate-commerce-branded-attribution-news/> on August 29, 2022.

¹²⁴ Sherman, A. (2022, March 22). BuzzFeed investors have pushed CEO Jonah Peretti to shut down entire newsroom, sources say. *CNBC*. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/22/buzzfeed-investors-have-pushed-ceo-jonah-peretti-to-shut-down-newsroom.html> on August 29, 2022.

¹²⁵ Lee, E. (2018, November 19). Founder's Big Idea to Revive BuzzFeed's Fortunes? A Merger With Rivals. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/19/business/media/buzzfeed-jonah-peretti-mergers.html> on August 29, 2022.

¹²⁶ Meade, A. (2021, March 15). Rupert Murdoch's News Corp strikes deal as Facebook agrees to pay for Australian content. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/mar/16/rupert-murdochs-news-corp-strikes-deal-as-facebook-agrees-to-pay-for-australian-content> on September 3, 2022.

massive closures and cuts during the 2010s – newsroom employment has fallen 26% in the United States since 2008¹²⁷ – did not withstand the devastating economic effects of the covid-19 pandemic (Miller, 2021). Even before the spread of the disease and the lockdown of entire cities around the world, in early 2019, *BuzzFeed* employees at several newsrooms across the US took an afternoon off work to pressure the company to recognize the union they had created four months earlier, one of the largest in the country¹²⁸. Journalists still employed have to adapt to an exhausting logic of news production 24 hours a day and seven days a week for circulation over several different platforms – from print, radio and TV to mainstream social media such as Facebook but also emerging ones such as TikTok (Petre, 2018; Usher, 2014). In the absence of formal and permanent jobs, journalists have been led to invest in the risky path of entrepreneurial journalism, a model based on self-promotion and even fostered by big tech companies, which sponsor courses and training initiatives at institutions such as the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and universities such as the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York (CUNY), among others (Cohen, 2015, 2016; Deuze & Witschge, 2018; Holton & Molyneux, 2017).

4.3.2. *From editorially-driven to data-driven news production*

Going all in on platform distribution also meant that *BuzzFeed's* and its counterparts approach to content production was peculiar: its main attribute was 'virality', that is, reaching the widest possible audience in the popularity contest sponsored by the platforms, and not necessarily the best journalistic quality possible according to Deuze's (2005) news values, which supposedly guided news production before the emergence of platforms. As already mentioned, these infrastructures provide news publishers similar data resources they afford advertisers, so they can quantify the reach and the engagement from each news piece. However, the process of embracing these analytics tools and the understanding given by their metrics have been traditionally conflictive in

¹²⁷ Walker, M. (2021, July 13). US newsroom employment has fallen 26% since 2008. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/07/13/u-s-newsroom-employment-has-fallen-26-since-2008/> on September 3, 2022.

¹²⁸ Campbell, A. F. (2019, June 17). BuzzFeed journalists just walked off the job in 4 cities. Here's why. *Vox*. Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/2019/6/17/18682131/buzzfeed-news-union-walkout> on September 3, 2022.

the newsrooms of legacy media, as they have proved that the content delivered to the highest journalistic standards is rarely rewarded with proportionate audience metrics (Belair-Gagnon & Holton, 2018; Petre, 2015). While professional journalists treated metrics with cynicism, emerging media organizations such as BuzzFeed

“have invested in supplying platform users with a steady stream of infotainment and breaking news in the form of videos, slideshows, (live) blogs, listicles, quizzes, as well as constant Twitter and Facebook updates. They have also specifically focused on creating more video content for their lifestyle, technology, and sports sections because such content is seen to boost social media traffic and is a crucial source of native advertising revenue” (Van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 67).

Poell et al. (2021) argued that journalists’ skepticism about data-driven quantification of news production pointed to the broad and historical tension in the cultural industries between creativity and commerce. Originally, it could have aided media companies fend off pressure from platforms, as “platform-dependent instances of news production are not only more data-driven, they become subject to the values embedded in platform data” (Poell et al., 2021, p. 91). The authors recalled, though, that nothing is particularly lasting in the platform age. Recent research has demonstrated that journalists have been developing a more favorable perception about metrics (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Christin & Petre, 2020; Hanusch, 2017). Perhaps this compromise comes as news organizations reconnect with their most loyal audiences through their own editorial properties, a trend that seems to be in vogue according to recent research.

4.3.3. The effacement of the metaphorical wall between the editorial and the commercial

The platformization of the news have not entailed only dependence from news publishers, it also paved the way for new ‘opportunities’. The distribution of news, content from friends and family and from brands in the same interfaces of the platforms, with minimal differences in formats, made users naturalize the so-called “branded content” (van Dijck et al., 2018). According to a definition provided by Facebook, branded

content is “produced by a publisher or creator for payment by a business partner, where the partner influences the content or is featured in it”¹²⁹.

Legacy media has historically avoided such forms of advertising to give the impression that their journalistic work remained independent of commercial pressures (Maras, 2013). Many editors and even scholars used the metaphor of the separation between church and state to justify the measure and, effectively, publishers have always sought to install newsrooms and the commercial departments of news organizations at least on different floors in a perhaps naive and dubious attempt to shield the journalists from commercial questions (Carlson, 2015; Coddington, 2015). Tough financial realities, however, have led to a situation where “the metaphorical wall has been effaced by [a] 'rhetoric of survival and industry crisis'” (Coddington, 2015, p. 78-79). The business models of platform-focused publishers such as *BuzzFeed* have been extremely (if not solely) reliant on branded content revenue since their conception, mastering the production of listicles, quizzes and videos that engaged large audiences despite unabashed association with brands – sometimes even leaving the social media user in doubt whether the content they were consuming was linked to brands or not (Carlson, 2015).

Cornia et al. (2020) found that European newspapers and commercial broadcasters are increasingly integrating editorial and commercial operations, and editors and managers are playing a central role in this cultural change, which has been very difficult to negotiate at the newsroom level. Journalists input has been increasingly used in the production of the so-called “native advertisements”, which “take on the appearance of real news stories and are crafted by people inside news publications who want to create and spread commercial messages that don't look like traditional advertisements that overtly push product” (Sirrah, 2019, p. 3). According to *eMarketer*, native ads already accounted for almost 65% of the total investment in display advertising in the United States in 2020 – the spending in this type of category of ads totaled US\$ 43.9 billion in that year¹³⁰.

¹²⁹ Branded Content (n.d.). *Meta for Media*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/formedia/tools/branded-content> on September 6, 2022.

¹³⁰ Benes, R. (2019, April 16). Driven by social, native accounts for nearly two-thirds of display ad spend. *Insider Intelligence*. Retrieved from <https://www.insiderintelligence.com/content/driven-by-social-native-accounts-for-nearly-two-thirds-of-display-ad-spend> on August 18, 2022.

According to Carlson (2016), “journalism’s status as an authoritative form of knowledge creation is not guaranteed or static, but the product of discourses that both delimit and legitimate its cultural forms” (p. 13). That is, as we have already shown, the profession has always received political and commercial pressures – sometimes from inside the news organizations themselves, especially when owned by powerful media moguls (Bagdikian, 2004; McChesney, 2008). These kinds of pressures force journalists to constantly renegotiate their boundaries with all actors involved (especially the audience) (Carlson, 2015). The direct intrusion of commercial interests in the production of news content further complicates this constant renegotiation and tends to diminish the authority of traditional journalism forces (E. J. Bell et al., 2017).

4.3.4. The erosion of the audiences’ trust in journalism

At this point in this problematization, it should not be surprising that the trust in news has reached a historic low in recent years – to the point the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism has organized a specific ongoing project around the subject¹³¹. The percentage of people that trust most news most of the time has fallen over double-digit percentage points between 2015 and 2019 in countries such as Brazil (-14%), France (-14%), Germany (-13%) and the United Kingdom (-11%) (Fletcher, 2020). Before the covid-19 pandemic, only 38% of the people across 40 markets stated they trusted most news (Newman et al., 2020): a gap that has diminished six percentage points in the following year, according to Newman et al. (2021), as the world has gone through what the World Health Organization classified as an ‘infodemic’: the over circulation of information during and about a disease outbreak that includes false or misleading information in physical but specially digital news¹³².

In countries where the responses to the new coronavirus have dominated the agenda, especially ones with a strong public news service, the Reuters Institute noticed an increase in the consumption of news from trusted news brands: “At the same time,

¹³¹ Trust in News Project (n.d.). *Reuters Institute for Digital Journalism*. Retrieved from <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/trust-news-project> on August 18, 2022.

¹³² Briand, S. (2020, April 23). Managing the Infodemic: A critical condition for an effective global response to the COVID-19 pandemic. *OECD Forum Network*. Retrieved from <https://www.oecd-forum.org/posts/66752-managing-the-infodemic-a-critical-condition-for-an-effective-global-response-to-the-covid-19-pandemic> on August 17, 2022.

trust in news from search and social has remained broadly stable. This means that the trust gap between the news in general and that found in aggregated environments has grown with audiences seemingly placing a greater premium on accurate and reliable news sources” (Newman et al., 2021, p. 9). The situation seems to confirm Boczkowski and Mitchelstein's (2013) findings that the news gap between press coverage (mainly focused on topics related to public affairs such as politics and economics) and audience interests (usually non-public affairs such as crime, entertainment and sports) is reduced during times of crisis, when news consumers seek to learn more about matters of public interest.

Providing an overview of the evolution of conceptions of news trust over the last decades, Fisher (2016) noted a difficulty in finding an agreed definition or measure for trust in the news. However, the author pointed to a variety of factors that can influence news credibility, ranging from trust or credibility in sources, journalists, news outlets, to news organizations (Fisher, 2016). Recent research has shown the pervasive role of platforms in news consumers' perceptions of trusted news sources. Kalogeropoulos et al. (2019), for example, carried out a survey in 35 countries and found that both mainstream and alternative sources of news are associated with higher levels of trust, while the use of social media for news consumption generates a lower sense of trust – perhaps because of accounts of widespread dissemination of mis- and disinformation through these platforms. Karlsen and Aalberg (2021) carried out an interesting experiment to investigate the effect that the distribution of a news story through Facebook had on the content's credibility: the authors presented the same news piece for different groups directly on the websites of different media and for a control group on Facebook. They found that Facebook affected the credibility of the news story, a result that suggested that news distribution through platforms could be considered a factor influencing trust in news (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2021).

4.4. The rise of messaging applications for news consumption

Facebook's algorithmic changes that in some cases simply cut most of the connection between news organizations and their audiences not only altered the state of the relationship between the platform and the media. News consumption has been

increasingly migrating to other mobile tools since then, diminishing the gap between Facebook and other applications – most cannot be called competitors, though, since they are owned by Meta (Newman et al., 2021). The percentage of respondents that stated they have used Facebook to consume news in the previous week fell 13% points from 2016, when it peaked at 45%, to 2021, according to the Digital News Report 2021 from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ). Meanwhile, WhatsApp usage for the news grew from 7% to 17%, Messenger reached 8% and Telegram was mentioned by 3% of respondents (Newman et al., 2021). But, according to the report, the use of these tools for news consumption can be much higher than the overall average in some regions such as Africa (where 61% use WhatsApp and 18% employ Telegram for that purpose), Latin America (40% usage of WhatsApp) and Asia (25% usage of WhatsApp).

The rise of the messaging apps for news consumption and the upcoming decline of Facebook made RISJ produce a standalone report on the subject focused on specific countries with different levels of usage of these kinds of tools (from higher to lower): Brazil, Germany, United Kingdom and the United States. It found that “messaging apps provide an antidote to the problems that arise when engaging with news in Facebook. They feel personal and intimate – rather like Facebook once felt – and the news that is shared feels more relevant. They also feel more immediate and allow greater freedom of expression because they shield users from the public glare of open platforms” (Newman et al., 2018, p. 3).

Essential characteristic of these tools, their predominant focus on interpersonal and private communication makes the circulation of news through them occur most of the time via messages sent by family members, friends and acquaintances (Frankel, 2018; Matassi et al., 2019; Yamamoto et al., 2018). In this sense, the exchange of news on messaging applications frequently tends to serve the purpose of social endorsement, strengthening social bonds by sharing topics that can bring users together (Swart et al., 2019): a different logic from open social media, where this practice occurs through interactions such as sharing, liking and commenting (Anspach, 2017; Borah & Xiao, 2018; Metaxas et al., 2015).

Differently from research on search engines, open social media and news aggregators (Bail et al., 2018; Bakshy et al., 2015; R. Evans et al., 2022; Fletcher, Cornia, et al.,

2020; Nechushtai & Lewis, 2019), which found different levels of polarization on platforms that rely on algorithmic curation of content, studies about filter bubbles on messaging applications are scarce and pose serious methodological and ethical hurdles to researchers because of the private essence of these tools. Masip et al. (2021) manifested concern that interpersonal communication mostly limited to family, friends and acquaintances could reinforce patterns of selective exposure and stimulate the creation of echo chambers of political and ideological affinity on tools such as WhatsApp: “The relationship between problematic content and closed platforms is twofold. First, users become central in defining the creation and sharing of information; and second, the confidence environment that characterizes WhatsApp makes it difficult for users to develop a critical approach regarding problematic and antagonistic content, particularly when the content questions one’s beliefs and values” (p. 7). Fletcher et al. (2020) has already noted that in platforms such as search engines, where users’ agency in looking for specific subjects is higher, selective exposure to political content tends to be more present.

According to Dimmick, Feaster and Hoplamazian (2011), news consumption on mobile devices occurs in so-called ‘interstices’: brief free moments during users’ daily routines. As people spend more time connected to their mobile phones, news have actually become interlinked with their activities. Hence, news consumption has been turned into several ‘snacks’ throughout the day, behavior that scholars have called ‘news snacking’ or ‘news grazing’ (Costera Meijer & Kormelink, 2015; Van Damme et al., 2015). Prioritization of efficiency makes these quick checks on smartphones even shorter than on other platforms (Molyneux, 2018). A potentially bad consequence of this behavior is that readers get used to having a superficial knowledge of public affairs (Costera Meijer, 2007). In this sense, scholars manifested the concern that the historical gap between the types of subjects journalists favor in their coverage (public affairs such as politics and economics) and topics that readers would like to consume (non-public affairs such as sports, entertainment and crimes) becomes larger, making press work more difficult and, eventually, decreasing participation in public debate (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013).

Masip et al. (2021) identified four affordances of WhatsApp that directly impact news engagement: privacy, personalization, replicability and segmentation – and at

least other three that do not impact news consumption considerably: interactivity, immediacy and multimedia. All of them are intertwined and affect each other and at least two of them, privacy and segmentation, are exclusive to WhatsApp, according to the authors. “The perception of privacy and security in WhatsApp groups is based on trusted ties. Paradoxically, focus groups show that users are oblivious to the end-to-end encryption systems which WhatsApp boasts as its central safety and privacy feature” (Masip et al., 2021, p. 10). The ability to segment users (and, therefore, news sources) by groups decisively influences the rest of the affordances. Not exclusive to WhatsApp, personalization refers directly to the social endorsement of the news, as abovementioned: “The personalization of content on WhatsApp is intricately linked to replicability in that it allows users to share and reuse content sent to them by other users” (Masip et al., 2021, p. 10).

The authors noticed that news consumption and engagement on WhatsApp is an activity with secondary importance for users: it is associated with the practice of checking the messaging app for entertainment or everyday purposes, not based on conscious decisions, and news content do not carry a sense of urgency, being usually shared into groups that are silenced to be checked later when the user has more time available (Masip et al., 2021). Following the interpersonal essence of the application, “engagement with news needs to be understood here as engagement not with media brands or with news media institutions, but with news items or news stories individually” (p. 17) – although they were produced by news organizations, professional authority and hierarchy over the content has less relevance.

In their study on Telegram, Lou et al. (2021) found three main motivations for people to consume news on the platform: socialization, information and efficiency. Socialization refers to the communicative value of news consumption, the use of news for starting or holding conversations (Costera Meijer & Kormelink, 2015). Information-driven news consumption is based on the obvious need for information that people have (Wei, 2008): Lou et al. (2021) divided it in two categories, general information and professional information. Finally, efficiency refers to “users’ increased desire to consume news with the least time and effort required” – the motivation was classified by the authors in three subcategories: coping with information overload, effortless access to news and convenience.

According to the authors, these motivations connect with four major affordances of Telegram for news consumption: customizability, increased accessibility, aesthetics and simultaneity of activities. Similarly to WhatsApp, Telegram allows users to personalize their information preferences: the only difference is that it allows news consumers to subscribe to open channels that can be managed by news organizations or not. Authors defined accessibility as “the ability of persons to access news via a given platform. The affordance of accessibility in Telegram facilitates users news grazing behavior by enabling effortless access and consumption of news” (Lou et al., 2021, p. 10). Aesthetics refers to the appearance of the mobile application, which is determinant for usability and user experience. Beyond previous definitions on simultaneity that considered users’ exposure to several screens or devices or different kinds of media at the same time, Lou et al. (2021) focused on activities that can occur within one application and one device: “Telegram Chats page enables access to multiple functions, one to one chat, group chat, channels, saved messages and bots” (p. 12).

Research about affordances of messaging applications for news organizations is also scarce and it usually does not mention the concept. The privacy afforded by WhatsApp and even WeChat has allowed journalists to use these platforms as safe forms of contact with their sources during the coverage of political unrest in Taiwan and Chile (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2017; Dodds, 2019). In the view of Belair-Gagnon et al. (2017), the use of these tools provided the offer of more granular information to news narratives, but also required journalists to create mechanisms to spend more time checking the information given before publication. For Dodds (2019), the use of messaging applications impacted journalists’ relationship with sources, creating more intimacy and trust and, at the same time, important professional and ethical implications. WhatsApp has also allowed Brazilian journalists to discuss their work covering a sensitive issue such as the drug cartels that dominate several territories in Rio de Janeiro and put the work of the press at risk (Baroni & Mayr, 2018).

Fares (2018) made a historical recap of the first publishers to test the use of WhatsApp for news distribution and the collection of user-generated content and tips from the audience. According to her, the first news outlet to notice the potential of the tool for audience engagement was the local newspaper *Extra*, from Rio de Janeiro, which made a mobile number available for the audience to send tips and content in June 2013:

a move that drew attention from other Brazilian media and attracted larger publishers such as *Folha de S. Paulo*, *O Estado de S. Paulo* and *Zero Hora* for experimenting with the platform. In the following year, *BBC* started experimenting with news distribution on WhatsApp and the late BBM (Blackberry Messenger) in India and Nigeria. “In the pilot of the Indian elections coverage, infographics with the electoral map and images of the events of the day were sent to readers, but the most outstanding aspect experimented with was the use of emoticons writing of the alerts” (Fares, 2018, p. 83-84, the translation is mine).

4.4.1. Local media: recovering part of the audience lost on Facebook with news distribution channels on WhatsApp

The first news outlet to continuously send newsletters on WhatsApp, though, was the *Oxford Mail* (UK) which started the service on June 2014: the readers had to add the newspaper’s telephone number to their list and send messages with their full name and the subject they were interested to receive messages about (news, sport news or both) – soon the readers would receive a newsletter three times a day (at 7AM, 5PM and 11PM) with the links for an average of six news pieces each time, setting a standard strategy for news outlets distribution practices on the platform (Fares, 2018). WhatsApp’s limitations, which will be described in the following section, made Spanish publishers with national reach and larger audiences reluctant to using the platform. For local newspapers with a lower audience ceiling, however, using WhatsApp to recover at least a portion of the audience lost with Facebook's algorithm changes seemed to make sense – at least editors in Spain, Germany and Finland thought so back in 2018 (Fares, 2018; Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018). Perhaps the most successful in this regard was *El Periódico de Catalunya*, which reached 15,000 subscribers of the service with the automation of the process with a third-party application (Fares, 2018).

Scholars noticed that, despite eventual experiments with audience engagement (Angeluci et al., 2017; McIntyre & Sobel, 2019), most publishers seemed to view messaging apps such as WhatsApp as just another distribution channel. In a pioneering content analysis of the news channels of five regional and local Spanish news outlets on WhatsApp and Telegram, Negreira-Rey et al. (2017) found that messages with a call to

participation did not exceed 3% of the total number of messages sent. A larger but still low percentage (10.4%) of messages with calls to engagement was found among the WhatsApp channels of local German news publishers and radio/TV broadcasters from the province of North Rhine-Westphalia – and audience engagement attempts occurred in the channels of only five of the 15 media organizations analyzed (Boczek & Koppers, 2020). The authors also applied a survey among journalists from the newsrooms of the analyzed media: 59% of them stated that their news organizations would actively ask users to send input via WhatsApp (Boczek & Koppers, 2020).

Both studies confirm previous research, which showed that journalists adaptation to Twitter has been mostly on a technological level (e.g., incorporation of these tools to maintain established journalistic practices such as using social media to redirect audiences to news websites) than on a relational level (e.g., development of new practices connected to the affordances of these tools that enable closer contact and relationships with readers/listeners/spectators) (Bruns, 2012; Hermida, 2013; Lasorsa et al., 2012). Both studies on the media use of messaging applications also seemed to demonstrate that the engagement-focused employment of WhatsApp described by Angeluci et al. (2017) in Brazil and McIntyre and Sobel (2019) in Rwanda remain as exceptions to widespread media practices on these tools. A limitation of both articles that should be stressed is that they were based solely on interviews with journalists, who usually only reported successful experiences they had building a closer relationship with audiences on WhatsApp – a narrative that promoted interviewees innovative approaches to the tool. In practice, though, it seems necessary to employ other research methods that can confirm, reject or bring new nuances to their largely romanticized reports. Apart from that, one of the reasons that might explain, at least in part, news organizations' limited use of WhatsApp to stimulate engagement with the audience and the low adoption of the tool by larger national publishers could be the limitations imposed by the platform's architecture, design and boundary resources to the fluid work of journalists.

4.4.2. WhatsApp's limitations for news distribution

At the time of the first experiments by news publishers on the platform, WhatsApp still limited to 512 the maximum number of users who could join a single

group or receive messages through a broadcast list (when the sender has all the recipients' phone numbers and opts to send a message to all of them at the same time). This limit was reduced to 256 users in 2016 for two reasons: in theory, to reduce the misinformation that was beginning to circulate with force through these features and for technical aspects – WhatsApp catalogs each user with a unique 8-bit identifier, therefore, in the two-digit binary system (0 and 1), the maximum number of unique identifiers contained in a group would be 2 (the number of digits) raised to the eighth power (the number of bits), or 256^{133} . Users could (and still can) create as many groups and broadcast lists as they wanted, but the manual work of registering the telephone numbers of many users and keeping them on smartphones' hard disks with very limited capacities would be considerable, if not practically impossible – WhatsApp still did not have a web or desktop version that allowed storing all contacts and contents shared on a computer (Fares, 2018). That was WhatsApp's main large limitation, according to news professionals and experts interviewed by Fares (2018), and it might well be intentional, as the platform neither anticipated nor valued the presence of media in the tool.

Until December 2019, it was still possible for news organizations to use (with a fee) accredited third-party automation tools from providers such as MessengerPeople to circumvent the great workload required to send messages to relatively small bases of users. But supposedly in an attempt to mitigate the spread of disinformation on the platform, WhatsApp changed its terms of service during that year: first, after tests in India, the platform banned bulk-messaging, allowing users to forward a limit of only five messages a day – the previous limit was 20 messages¹³⁴. Later, the platform banned automation of messages and, besides banning accounts that insisted to maintain these kinds of practices with non-accredited tools, WhatsApp announced it would take legal actions against users that did not respect the new guidelines¹³⁵. Those were particularly

¹³³ Bacelar, R. (2021, February 16). O motivo para os grupos de WhatsApp terem limite de 256 pessoas. *4gnews*. Retrieved from <https://4gnews.pt/o-motivo-para-os-grupos-de-whatsapp-terem-limite-de-256-pessoas/> on September 1, 2022.

¹³⁴ Hazard Owen, L. (2019, January 22). WhatsApp limits message forwarding in order to fight “misinformation and rumors”. *Nieman Lab*. Retrieved from <https://www.niemanlab.org/2019/01/whatsapp-limits-message-forwarding-in-order-to-fight-misinformation-and-rumors/> on January 25, 2019. Hern, A.; Safi, M. (2019, January 21). WhatsApp puts limit on message forwarding to fight fake news. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/jan/21/whatsapp-limits-message-forwarding-fight-fake-news> on January 25, 2019.

¹³⁵ Unauthorized use of automated or bulk messaging on WhatsApp (n.d.) WhatsApp Help Center. Retrieved from https://faq.whatsapp.com/1104252539917581/?locale=en_US on June 24, 2019. Hazard

hard news for news publishers in Germany, where MessengerPeople is based and from where most of the company's clients were. An article from the International Journalists Network (IJN) reported that online news natives such as *inFranken.de*, which started news distribution on WhatsApp in 2014 and even decided to quit sending email newsletters to focus solely on the most popular messaging platform in the country, were caught by surprise: the company would have to completely rework its strategies and find new channels to connect with their readers after building their WhatsApp service for five years¹³⁶.

The new guidelines increased WhatsApp's strictness to ban accounts that could be sending more messages than what the platform considered normal usage. Earlier that year, the company published a white paper that detailed procedures for unilaterally deplatforming users with abusive behavior on the platform. An approach that differentiated the platform from competition, according to its own directive board, was the utilization of telephone numbers for users to sign up while for other messaging applications email addresses were enough: "Buying a SIM card is often simple for a normal user, but SIM cards can be logistically difficult to acquire at scale. (...) Sending mass messages from a mobile phone is time consuming. It's why people trying to send bulk messages often build hardware or software to try and automate the process" (*Stopping Abuse: How WhatsApp Fights Bulk Messaging and Automated Behavior*, 2019, p. 5). WhatsApp already had scanning systems enabled with machine learning technologies, which identified accounts that could be using unauthorized tools or having abusive behavior, since before the new guidelines. Hence, having a telephone number blocked from WhatsApp have not been an unusual situation for news publishers that experimented with the platform for news distribution since 2013. The constant blockings were the main reason *El Periódico de Catalunya* decided to quit using the platform for news distribution despite its growing base of subscribers, according to one of its former executives interviewed by Fares (2018): "WhatsApp blocked phone numbers preventing the distribution of content

Owen, L. (2019, June 21). As of December, publishers will no longer be allowed to send out newsletters on WhatsApp. *Nieman Lab*. Retrieved from <https://www.niemanlab.org/2019/06/as-of-december-publishers-will-no-longer-be-allowed-to-send-out-newsletters-on-whatsapp/> on June 24, 2019.

¹³⁶ Maas, D. (2019, June 18). Why outlets in Germany are using WhatsApp to distribute their newsletters — and why that might be ending. *International Journalists Network*. Retrieved from <https://ijn.net.org/en/story/why-outlets-germany-are-using-whatsapp-distribute-their-newsletters-%E2%80%94-and-why-might-be-ending> on June 25, 2019.

to users, which never realized the cancellation of the service, so we gave them the impression that it did not work on our end” (p. 88, the translation is mine).

Other limitations presented by WhatsApp, according to the news executives and experts interviewed by Fares (2018) were lack of analytics and lack of communication between the platform and news publishers. The first refers to the impossibility to track users interactions with the messages sent by publishers on the platform even through the WhatsApp Business API – something almost unthinkable for news publishers that got used to accessing audience metrics in real time through analytics tools provided by the platforms, as aforementioned in this study. Therefore, it is not possible to know how many users actually opened each message sent, how long they spent in contact with the content – through the transmission lists, it is not even possible to confirm if they received a message (in case they have deleted the news outlet’s phone number from their list of contacts, for example, they would cease to receive them). The only possible way to verify if users clicked on the links contained in the messages is by installing a UTM parameter to track the action (Fares, 2018). The later refers to the fact that WhatsApp did not have staff responsible to keep a relationship with the media as Facebook or Google have been used to. As a result, news executives used to receive changes to the platform's guidelines only through official announcements on the WhatsApp website. These announcements were not always clear and, when there were doubts about the functioning of the platform, news publishers had no one to turn to. The same thing happened in the case of blocking the phone numbers of news organizations: no explanation was provided by the messaging application about the measure and there was simply no person they could turn to, as the professionals responsible for Facebook's relationship with the press did not usually respond inquiries about the messaging app their company owned (Fares, 2018).

These limitations opened room for publishers to experiment with other messaging applications, especially Telegram, which provides channels where the media can basically do the same type of content distribution and promotion that they traditionally do on open social networks. Telegram’s primary obstacle for media adoption has also been the reduced usage of the tool, normally employed as a second messaging application by those who already have WhatsApp on their mobile devices (Negreira-Rey et al., 2017). We could not find further research addressing other benefits and limitations of Telegram

for news distribution. At first glance, the tool seems, indeed, easier for publishers to use (it is possible to automate sending messages on the platform and channels can have an unlimited number of members and be customized with the usage of bots¹³⁷) and it provides basic metrics such as number of subscribers of each channel and conversion rates (how many of them actually read the messages). Channel subscribers can also comment on each message but not on the same timeline, if channel owners allow, keeping the interface clean even in case of high participation – what is usually not allowed on WhatsApp groups, for example, because the original message becomes lost in the conversation it triggered.

4.4.3. News publishers' strategies for distributing news on messaging applications

There is also a scarcity of studies that seek to understand news distribution strategies in messaging applications: we found only two articles on the subject. Negreira-Rey et al. (2017) examined 84 messages sent by five news publishers on WhatsApp and 33 sent by two of those five news outlets on Telegram during the span of one week in the end of 2016, while Boczek and Koppers (2020) performed a more robust content analysis over a sample of 3.745 messages from 15 publishers on WhatsApp collected during four months in the middle of 2018 – therefore, both studies occurred before WhatsApp changed its guidelines to effectively stop automation and bulk-messaging. According to Negreira-Rey et al. (2017), news publishers who accepted to deal with all the limitations of WhatsApp basically employed two news distribution strategies in the tool – and simply repeated them on Telegram, when that was the case: “on the one hand there are some online media that generally send two notifications a day, one in the morning and another in the afternoon, in which they concentrate the most important news, as does *El Comercio*; and on the other hand there are those who carry out a progressive sending of the most relevant news throughout the day, such as *Faro de Vigo*” (p. 70). Similarly,

¹³⁷ Channels FAQ (n.d.). *Telegram*. Retrieved from https://telegram.org/faq_channels on June 28, 2022. Telegram integrations (n.d.). *IFTTT*. Retrieved from <https://ifttt.com/telegram> on June 28, 2022. How to automatically and repeatedly send messages in Telegram groups (every few minutes or hours) (2022, March 30). *Medium*. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/best-software-for-pc-mac/how-to-automatically-and-repeatedly-send-messages-in-telegram-groups-every-few-minutes-or-hours-b571f2a6fced> on August 26, 2022.

Boczek and Koppers (2020) noticed their sample was composed mainly by short one-topic messages, generally breaking news, and longer newsletters with various different topics sent one or several times a day.

The average number of messages sent per day by each news publisher on the Spanish sample (2.4) was slightly higher than on the German one (1.96). Boczek and Koppers (2020) noted, though, that the smallest mean of an outlet was 1 and the highest 4, and one of the publishers managed to send 18 messages in a single day during a special event. Only Boczek and Koppers (2020) examined messages by their time of the day, finding that they were usually sent between 6 am and 10 pm, period in which the audience is presumed to be awake – prime times were 10 am and 5 and 6 pm (more than 8% of total messages in each interval). “WhatsApp distribution channels are not ubiquitous if focusing on the frequency of messages. (...) WhatsApp distribution channels are ubiquitous if focusing on the hour of day that the messages were sent” (Boczek & Koppers, 2020, p. 137).

Again, only Boczek and Koppers (2020) analyzed message lengths sent by news publishers, finding they varied a lot: “The average length of a message (without links and references to media attachments added when exporting the data) is 508 characters (median: 399, minimum 0, maximum 2027)” (Boczek & Koppers, 2020, p. 136). The authors found that message shortness was compensated with links and media attachment: “Seventy-seven percent of the messages contain a link. Ten percent of all messages contain a media attachment, of which photos are most common (7.8%). Eighty-three of all messages contain a link or a media attachment. About 4% contain both” (p. 136). All cases examined by Negreira-Rey et al. (2017) sent at least one link per message.

The analysis of the news topics contained in the messages took a considerable space in both studies: Boczek and Koppers (2020) did not computationally examine their whole sample, though, only human-coded a smaller one with 220 messages. The most frequent subject in both studies was crime: 34,4% of the messages in Boczek and Koppers (2020) and a dominant theme for four of the five cases in Negreira-Rey et al. (2017) – varying from 16.25% to 33.8% of the messages sent by each publisher as the authors did not calculate the average of all cases. Other subjects frequently found in Boczek and Koppers (2020) were politics (10.6%), sports (10.5%), transportation (10.0%), entertainment (9.0%), and economy (5.6%), while Negreira-Rey et al. (2017)

added meteorology, culture, social and sports to the mix. These findings are particularly relevant because they show that, in general, on messaging applications, the media from both countries sought at least to a certain extent reduce the gap noticed by Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2013) between readers' subjects of interest (non-public affairs such as crime and entertainment) and the topics journalists usually deem more important for them to know (public affairs such as politics and economics). Of course, differences were noticed from case to case, as some news outlets are particularly specialized in themes such as politics and economics and recognized by readers as credible sources in those niches.

5. Methodology

5.1. Qualitative dominant mixed methods approach

In order to answer the proposed research and sub-research questions, this study adopted a mixed methods approach, which refers to the collection, analysis and interpretation of qualitative and quantitative data in various possible combinations “for the broad purpose of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration” (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 123). Mixed methods research is considered to be the third methodological movement or paradigm after quantitative and qualitative research:

“Quality refers to the what, how, when, where, and why of a thing – its essence and ambience. Qualitative research, thus, refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things. In contrast, quantitative research refers to counts and measures of things, the extents and distributions of our subject matter: how large a thing is, how many of them there are, or how likely we are to encounter one” (Lune & Berg, 2017, p. 12).

Traces of mixed research could be already observed in the work of anthropologists and sociologists such as Gans, 1963; Hollingshead, 1949; Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, & Zeisel, 1931/2003; Lynd & Lynd, 1929/1959) since the early 20th century (Johnson et al., 2007). Also called blended research (Thomas, 2003), integrative research (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004), multimethod research (Hunter & Brewer, 2003; Morse, 2003), triangulated studies (Sandelowski, 2003), ethnographic residual analysis (Fry, Chantavanich, & Chantavanich, 1981), and mixed research (Johnson, 2006; Johnson & Christensen, 2004), mixed methods research has gained momentum after the turn to the 21st century, when it has consolidated as a full research methodology and not only measurement and construct validation techniques (Johnson et al., 2007). Mixed methods research would supposedly pacify the so-called ‘paradigm wars’, conflicts between academics and scholars that defended the superiority of a qualitative or a quantitative methodological approach over the other (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Tashakkori et al., 2003). Actually, though, at least in communication studies, the approach has not been as prevalent as in neighboring fields such as psychology and education –

quantitative studies are still largely dominant in major communication journals, at a rate of approximately 70% (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2017).

Some scholars claimed that a truly mixed method study would incorporate the different approaches in all research stages: problem identification, data collection, data analysis, etc. Moreover, data and analysis would be transformed by another method from the opposing methodological paradigm (Tashakkori et al., 2003). Though, Jick (1983) argued that, instead of competing, both approaches should be considered complementary: one would compensate the weaknesses and blind spots of the other. In this sense, the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods could provide (1) converging results that support similar conclusions, (2) divergent or contradictory findings, or each methodological approach could (3) focus on different aspects of a research problem, providing a bigger picture of the studied situation or process (Kelle and Erzberger, 2004).

Greene et al. (1989) identified five purposes or rationales that justify the utilization of mixed method research: (1) triangulation (seeking for convergence, corroboration, correspondence of results from the different methods); (2) complementarity (seeking elaboration, enhancement, illustration, clarification of the results from one method with the results from the other method); (3) development (seeking to use the results from one method to help develop or inform the other method); (4) initiation (seeking the discovery of paradox and contradictions for potentially reframing research questions); and (5) expansion (seeking to extend the breadth and range of inquiry by using different methods for different inquiry components).

Whether qualitative or quantitative, the methods chosen should be justified by their appropriateness to the issue under study and to the formulated research questions (Flick, 2014). Interestingly, Johnson et al. (2007) considered the dominance of either of the two research paradigms a valid and even more frequent approach in mixed methods research in addition to a 'pure' design in which both kinds of methods would provide an equal contribution and weight to the final results (see figure 8). A qualitative dominant mixed methods research, thus, "is the type of mixed research in which one relies on a qualitative, constructivist-poststructuralist-critical view of the research process, while concurrently recognizing that the addition of quantitative data and approaches are likely to benefit most research projects" (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 124).

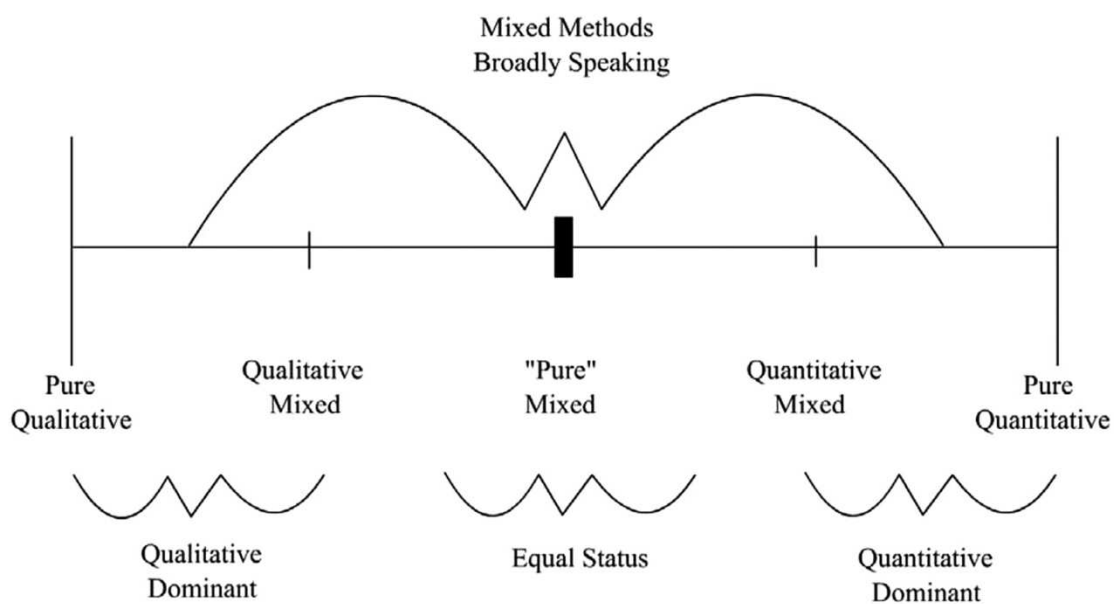


Figure 8: Representation of the three major research paradigms, including subtypes of mixed methods research in the continuum (Johnson et al., 2007).

A qualitative dominant mixed methods research allowed me to employ different qualitative methods at different research stages, initially refining the formulated research questions formulated and gathering important data to make an initial analysis that informed the development of the fieldwork, the most important methodological step of this research, which largely confirmed some aspects of the theory about the platformization of the news but also brought new insights about news organizations' employment of messaging applications for news distribution and engagement with their audiences. Quantitative methods were employed at a later stage of the research both with the purpose of triangulating the results of the qualitative steps and providing more elaboration and clarification on the real practices of news publishers in these tools beyond their own discourses. The next session is devoted to explaining the decisions around this research design and clarifying the methodological steps taken.

5.2. Comparative research

A frequent constraint with research about the global process of platformization of the news is the limitation of cases and interviewees to the specific universe of researchers and research institutes that they are part of – that is, to news organizations

and experts to which they have easier access to and speak the same language of. Hence, for example, as part of the prestigious Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism based in Oxford (UK), Cornia et al. (2018, 2020), Jenkins (2020), Jenkins and Nielsen (2018), and Nielsen and Ganter (2018) examined news publishers' strategies to deal with digital intermediaries in a universe of mostly Western European countries, with a special prevalence of British cases. Likewise, Columbia University's Tow Center for Digital Journalism based in New York has funded an ongoing project that has sought to understand the evolution of the media's relationship with platforms and, so far, the cases studied and executives interviewed have been limited to the territory of the United States (E. J. Bell et al., 2017; Rashidian et al., 2018, 2019). The same can be said about the studies by Smyrnaio and Rebillard (2009, 2019), based respectively in Toulouse and Paris, on the strategies of French publishers to deal with Google and Facebook. Esser and Vliegenthart (2017) argued that this approach has tended to lead to an overrepresentation of wealthier countries in communication studies: "While this is not problematic per se, it does limit the generalizability of the findings and thus the opportunities for prediction" (p. 5).

Since the beginning, this was intended to be a comparative research, which "is conventionally understood as the contrast among different macro-level units, such as world regions, countries, sub-national regions, social milieus, language areas and cultural thickenings, at one point or more points in time)" (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017, p. 2). Some hypotheses formulated early in the research process were that (H1) news organizations in different national contexts maintained different level of relationships with messaging applications and that (H2) different patterns of adoption of these tools on the user level in distinct national contexts would create varying levels of pressure on news publishers to effectively employ chat apps for news distribution and audience engagement – that is, more intense and widespread use of an app such as WhatsApp, for example, in a country like Brazil would make the country's media feel more pressured to create a channel on the app than their counterparts in France, where the app's general use is still limited, according to Newman et al. (2021). These are fairly obvious suspicions, I admit, but they needed empirical confirmation.

Esser and Hanitzsch (2012) defended that comparative communication research should involve at least two macro-level cases (systems, cultures, markets, etc.) in which

at least one is particularly relevant to the broader research field. “Comparative research differs from non-comparative work in that it attempts to reach conclusions beyond single cases and explains differences and similarities between objects of analysis and relations between objects against the backdrop of their contextual conditions” (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017, p. 2). Hence the intention, since the theoretical framework of this study, to describe the different contexts of the media development in different countries.

Contextual descriptions, according to the authors, are part of the first practical step for performing comparative research. They provide the foundations for a following stage: finding functional equivalents in the different systems. Functional equivalents, according to the authors, help to solve a fundamental problem of comparative studies: comparability. “For example, having drawn a media sample in country A, what are the equivalents in countries B, C, and D? The same holds for specific objects and concepts of analysis. Only objects that meet the same function (or role) may be meaningfully compared with each other” (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017, p. 2).

A third stage of comparative research is building classifications and typologies of cases to reduce complexity, that is, grouping and organizing cases in categories with shared key characteristics. “Typologies can be considered the beginning of a theory on a subject matter, such as media systems, and can help to classify cases in terms of their similarities and differences” (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017, p. 4). Classifications help the researcher to find aspects for explaining how different contexts shape and influence communication processes differently – the fourth step for producing comparative research (Landman, 2008). Generalizations allowed by the confirmation or rejection of hypotheses from the study of a first country or system provide researchers the ability to make predictions about future results in other possible contexts as well as finding solutions to issues that could be present in different countries, a fifth practical step for comparative research (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017).

Additionally, authors suggested that the researcher should present a rationale for system and case selection that connects to a framework justifying design decisions (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012). Esser and Vliegenthart (2017) warned that communication researchers have tended to adopt a shortcut and refer to existing typologies such as the three models of media and their relationships to national politics provided by Hallin and

Mancini (2004) without deeper justification about the links of the variables of their own studies and the authors' well-known dimensions of comparison.

Access was, indeed, an important starting point for this particular research as it was an essential condition for the careful examination and description of the relationships of news organizations and (messaging) platforms, but it certainly was not the only or the most important one. As we have already mentioned in previous chapters, even though the United States, the United Kingdom and France, among other developed nations, host news organizations that serve as references for Western societies and scholars – and digital platforms developed mostly under US frameworks, – these countries' populations hardly embody Internet usage patterns that can be easily generalized for outside their borders. As large economies, their markets and the content produced by these countries' national media are certainly of great importance to the platforms, however, the usage of the Internet and digital platforms in less developed regions such as the Global South is far more intense, playing an even more important role in peoples sociality and leisure – and specific applications such as WhatsApp are more popular and widely adopted there than in most of Europe or North America (Arora, 2019). The large size of these emerging markets and their lack of regulations have also drawn the attention of platforms, which have often experimented with new features in countries such as India and Brazil before deciding whether or not to take them to developed countries, as we have already shown in this study.

Thus, of course, taking advantage of the fact that the researcher was born in Brazil and is fluent in Spanish, from the outset this study sought to give prominence to the research of the platformization of news in the largest Portuguese-speaking country in the world and some of its Latin American neighbors. At the same time, this research could not overlook the realities from media systems close to the University of Toulouse, where the researcher was based during the project, and JOLT, the research consortium funded by the European Union it was part of. Therefore, this study also focused on cases from France and Spain. Apart from their political, economic and media development differences, which were largely covered in the previous chapters and will be used in the following chapters to attempt making contextual connections, this selection seems particularly interesting also because it compares countries with different patterns of use of digital platforms both for general purposes and news consumption.

Brazil is the largest Latin American state, 80% of its population has access to the Internet¹³⁸, and it is recognized for having some of the most enthusiastic world wide web users, spending on average over 10 hours a day online (the global average is around 6h58min a day)¹³⁹. According to Statista, most of that time is spent on social media and messaging applications such as WhatsApp, by far the most popular application in the country (used by 148 million people/70.5% of the population)¹⁴⁰. A report produced by Twillio and released in February 2022 estimated that 99% of the people who own a smartphone in Brazil have WhatsApp installed in their devices, while 71% had Facebook Messenger and 60% had Telegram. This situation places Brazil as an interesting system for analyzing the adoption of WhatsApp for news: several of the most recent editions of the Digital News Report have put the country at the forefront of the world in this regard, with the application being used by more than 40% of the country's population for finding news (Newman et al., 2019, 2020, 2021), situation that supposedly influences the media to adopt the chat app for content distribution and audience engagement – some pioneering experiments in this sense date back to 2013 (Fares, 2018). The usage of Facebook in the country for finding the news is almost the same: 47% (Newman et al., 2021)

The other Latin American countries addressed in this research have relatively similar usages. Chile ranks higher than Brazil in Internet access at 88%, while Mexico (72%) and Guatemala (50%) rank lower, according to the World Bank. There is no data available on the average daily internet usage for Chile and Guatemala, but we can infer that it would rank high in the rankings just like the rest of the Latin American countries analyzed by the We Are Social/Hootsuite annual report. Colombia (9h38min) and Argentina (9h10min) are in the top 5, and Mexico is in the top 10 of this statistic with its average user spending 8h55min/day on the web. WhatsApp is also the most popular social application in Mexico (84% of the respondents of a survey performed by the country's Federal Institute of Telecommunications declared to have the platform installed in their

¹³⁸ Individuals using the Internet (% of the population) (2020). The World Bank. Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS> on October 23, 2022.

¹³⁹ Kemp, S. (2022, January 26). Digital 2022 Global Overview Report. We Are Social/Hootsuite. Retrieved from <https://wearesocial.com/uk/blog/2022/01/digital-2022-another-year-of-bumper-growth-2/> on October 23, 2022.

¹⁴⁰ Most used social network apps in Brazil as of June 2017 (2022, July 27). Statista. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/746969/most-popular-social-network-apps-brazil/>

mobile devices)¹⁴¹ and Chile (97% of the respondents of a survey from Accenture and Facebook¹⁴²). I could not find data on the subject for Guatemala. According to the Digital News Report 2021, 36% of the Chilean and 34% of the Mexican already use WhatsApp for consuming the news, but these numbers are still well below the consumption of news on Facebook in both countries: 54% in Chile and 60% in Mexico (Newman et al., 2021).

European countries tend to have high access to the Internet, and it is not different with Spain and France, where 93% and 85% of the populations, respectively, are on the world wide web, according to the World Bank. On the other hand, the average daily Internet usage time is below the world average (6h58) in both countries: the Spanish stay online for 6h01min every day, while the French spend 5h34min on the web. On WhatsApp usage, though, statistics between the neighboring nations are very contrasting: according to Statista, the penetration of the messaging application in Spain is the higher in Europe (91%), placing the Iberian country closer to Latin American countries than to France, where WhatsApp is used by only 55% of the population – the lower rate among the countries in this research¹⁴³. This contrast is also seen in the use of WhatsApp for news consumption: while 35% of Spaniards use the tool for this purpose, only 15% of the French do the same, according to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Newman et al., 2021). Although WhatsApp is already the leader in the messaging application sector in France, its leadership is not as loose as in other countries: the Digital News Report 2021 showed that its use in the country is still similar to that of Messenger, although its growth rate has been higher in the last years (Newman et al., 2021). In Spain, Telegram has emerged as an option for WhatsApp: 23% of people already use the application to send messages in general, while 8% consume news on the platform.

¹⁴¹ Primera encuesta 2020: Usuarios de servicios de telecomunicaciones (2020). Instituto Federal de Telecomunicaciones. Retrieved from <http://www.ift.org.mx/sites/default/files/contenidogeneral/usuarios-y-audiencias/primerencuesta2020vacc.pdf> on October 23, 2022. Reach of leading social networks in Mexico as of April 2022 (2022, October 17). *Statista*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/449869/mexico-social-network-penetration/> on October 23, 2022.

¹⁴² Arturo, M.; Ghilini, D. (2020, August). WhatsApp, um canal chave em las compras del retail em Chile. Accenture/Facebook. Retrieved from <https://www.anda.cl/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Estudio-Chile-Whatsapp-OK.pdf> on October 23, 2022.

¹⁴³ Ceci, L. (2022, May 9). WhatsApp penetration rate in selected European countries in 3rd quarter 2021. *Statista*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1005178/share-population-using-whatsapp-europe/> on October 24, 2022.

In brief, therefore, there is a more intense use of the Internet in Latin America than in Europe, but a similar use of WhatsApp in Spain and Latin American countries. The only country where WhatsApp's leadership is still threatened is France, where the use of this type of platform is not as developed as in the other countries covered in this research (see table 2). These data alone already give an idea of the different levels of pressure publishers can face to adopt messaging apps for news distribution and audience engagement, subject that was deepened in the development of case studies.

Country	Access to Internet	AVG use Internet	Top chat application	Use for all purposes	Use for news	Use of Facebook	For news
Brazil	80%	10h19	WhatsApp	80%	43%	72%	47%
Chile	88%	-	WhatsApp	84%	36%	78%	54%
Mexico	72%	8h55	WhatsApp	82%	35%	80%	60%
Guatemala	50%	-	WhatsApp	-	-	-	-
Spain	93%	6h01	WhatsApp	83%	35%	66%	39%
France	85%	5h34	WhatsApp	38%	15%	60%	39%

Table 2. Countries in this research and their populations' usage of the Internet and the leading messaging application (World Bank; We Are Social/Hootsuite; Newman, 2021).

5.3. Research design: Multiple case studies

Within the spectrum of available methods that could employ an interesting combination of qualitative and qualitative approaches, case study research seemed to be the most appropriate for providing comprehensive answers to the variety of the three research questions and the eight sub-research questions formulated in this study. Yin (2017) offered a twofold definition of case studies: on the one hand, it is a method for in-depth investigation of contemporary events or phenomena within their real-world contexts, “especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 45); on the other hand, case study research deals with a set of variables usually larger than data points, providing results that benefit from the prior development of design, collection and analysis, and relying on multiple sources of evidence, which enhances triangulation.

Many scholars listed case study research among the purely qualitative methodological approaches (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Yin, 2017; Flick, 2014). Yin (2017), however, argued that case studies could also integrate quantitative data in order to increase confidence in the results and enrich the descriptive and explanatory process about a phenomenon or event, opening room for what we could perhaps refer to as ‘mixed methods

case-study research': "the features and core characteristics of case studies – for example, the necessity for defining a 'case,' the triangulation among multiple sources of evidence, and the ability to rely on quantitative data – seem to push case study research beyond being a type of qualitative research" (Yin, 2017, p. 49).

Social groups have been classically considered a 'case' in sociological studies, but also events and entities have been selected as such in studies about several topics in other research fields (Ragin & Becker, 1992). Hence, it is not surprising that case study research has been considered one of the most common methods for addressing organizations (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Lune & Berg, 2017) as well as a good fit for research that is not intended to present a clear and single set of results (Yin, 2017). A comparative research obviously asks for multiple case studies instead of the description of a single case, as one should "not observe the case as a whole and in its complexity, but rather a multiplicity of cases with regard to particular excerpts" (Flick, 2014, p. 233). In this sense, multiple-case studies allow the collection and analysis of larger and more diversified types and sets of data and more generalizable findings than the analysis of a single case (Yin, 2013).

The cases in this specific study refer to news organizations from the countries and media systems selected and previously addressed, and the research focused on aspects about their relationships with platforms in general and messaging applications in particular as well as their adoption of chat apps for news distribution and audience engagement. In the next sections of this chapter, we explain the methodological steps performed in this research for answering the proposed research questions (see figure 9).

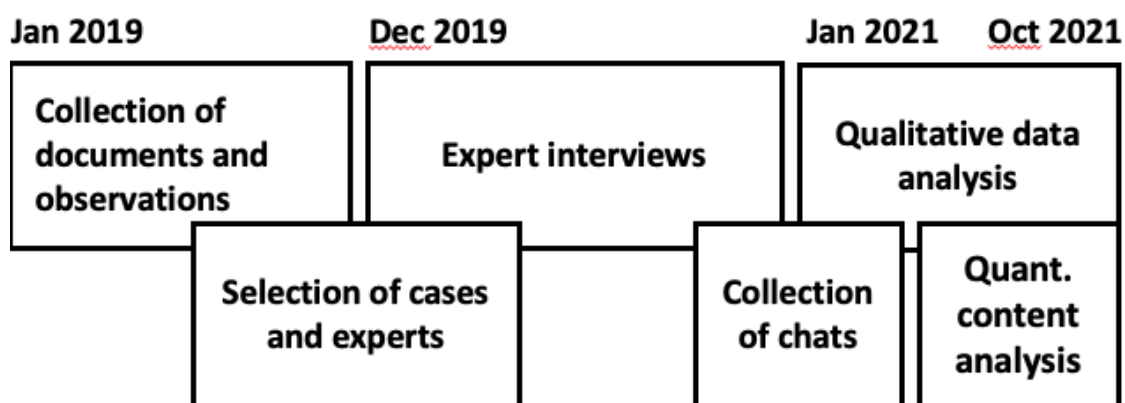


Figure 9. Timeline of implementation of each methodological step applied in this research.

5.3.1. Collection of documents and observations

Initially, I performed a broad literature review and started monitoring possible cases and collecting the documental data that served as the basis for the selection of the news organizations and experts that would be addressed and interviewed for this study. Wolff (2004) defined documents as “standardized artifacts, in so far as they typically occur in particular formats: as notes, case reports, contracts, drafts, death certificates, remarks, diaries, statistics, annual reports, certificates, judgements, letters or expert opinions” (p. 284). Particularly interesting for this research were statements, corporate reports and news articles from the companies themselves, journalism foundations and specialized media announcing messaging applications as channels for readers to receive the news from their preferred publishers and describing the functioning of news services on these kinds of platforms.

In our consideration of documents, we can also move beyond stable, static and predefined artifacts. “Instead we must consider them in terms of fields, frames and networks of action” (Flick, 2014, p. 620). Hence, simultaneously, I started an observation of news organizations’ websites and their pages on social media to see if they documented there the existence of news distribution channels on messaging applications the way they usually do with mainstream social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. If so, I sought to subscribe to these channels to monitor their operation and to take notes about their functioning. These are among the three main reasons provided by Flick (2014) for using documental data to enrich qualitative research:

“First, there is the desire on the part of the researcher to go beyond the spoken word and what participants report about actions in favor of analyzing the actions themselves as they naturally occur. Second, there is the advantage to be gained from the fact that some forms of observations work without the need for the researcher to make any interventions in the field under study. Finally, there is the possibility of obtaining knowledge through observing by participating and by intervening in the field and then observing the consequences in the field” (Flick, 2014, p. 516).

Thus, this initial documental collection and observation already provided hints for the response of *Sub-RQ2.1: Which are the most adopted messaging applications by news organizations?* and to improving the set of questions that would be made to experts during the interviews, the next methodological step performed in this research.

5.3.2. Expert interviews

This study's main source of data for describing the relationships that news organizations and platforms are building in the domain of messaging applications (RQ1), pointing out the main motivations for publishers to adopt a chat app for content distribution (RQ2), and addressing the strategies employed by the media for reaching news audiences on messaging platforms (RQ3) were interviews with executives and editors from news organizations and professionals from third-party companies that assisted some media players to establish a presence in these kinds of mobile apps. Rubin and Rubin (2012) situated interviews as in-depth procedures with three main characteristics: (1) researchers' interest in rich and detailed information (e.g., examples, experiences, narratives, stories), (2) the use of open ended questions in the sense interviewees can respond them the way they prefer, including with disagreements and raising new issues, and (3) the avoidance of fixed questions or a predetermined order in which they should be presented: the interviewer should be allowed to modify them to different interviewees and even add new questions adapted to the flow of conversation.

A particular type of interview that seemed appropriate for this study was the semi-structured interview, in which "the researcher has a specific topic to learn about, prepares a limited number of questions in advance, and plans to ask follow-up questions" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 31). I particularly believe that what the authors called 'responsive interviewing' tends to present larger potential for deepening the understanding of processes and phenomena, the main goals for the usage of interviews as a research method (Kumar et al., 1993; Yin, 2017). Responsive interviewing refers to a specific style of interview that seeks to establish a relationship of trust between the interviewer and the interviewee: "The tone of questioning is basically friendly and gentle, with little confrontation. The pattern of questioning is flexible; questions evolve in

response to what the interviewees have just said, and new questions are designed to tap the experience and knowledge of each interviewee” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 36).

This study’s research questions asked for a particular kind of interviewees: experts, or people with authoritative knowledge about a specific subject (Deeke, 1995). This initial definition, however, is rather broad and could even characterize a person with knowledge about a specific event that occurred in front of him or her, such as an automobile accident: it certainly would not justify an interview technique that could be distinguishable from the others (Meuser & Nagel, 2009). A more detailed definition was needed: “Experts have technical process oriented and interpretive knowledge referring to their specific professional sphere of activity. Thus, expert knowledge does not only consist of systematized and reflexively accessible specialist knowledge, but it has the character of practical knowledge in big parts” (Flick, 2014, p. 401). Therefore, when researchers employ expert interviews, they are focusing mostly on organizations’ staff members with specific functions (Flick, 2014).

Expert interviews actually allow the reconstruction of different specific knowledges, according to scholars: first, *technical knowledge*, “which contains information about operations and events governed by rules, application routines that are specific to a field, bureaucratic competences, and so on” (Bogner & Menz, 2009, p. 52). The authors argued that this is actually the kind of knowledge that provides an advantage for expert interviews. Second, *process knowledge*, which is more practical and enabled by the professional position of the expert and “relates to the inspection of and acquisition of information about sequences of actions, interaction routines, organizational constellations, and past or current events” (Bogner & Menz, 2009, p. 52). Finally, experts tend to possess context knowledge, which refers to the set of circumstances and connections that surround and influence their professional activities and the processes they are involved in (Flick, 2014).

Experts interviews can also have different objectives: they can be aimed at exploration, providing orientation in a new field, structuring the understanding about this field in subjects and allowing the generation of hypotheses; and/or they can be focused on collecting context information that complement insights gathered from other methods; as well as they can be used to develop typologies or theories about some issues (Bogner & Menz, 2009, p. 52).

One defining challenge of conducting expert interviews is dealing with time pressure: the schedules of expert professionals are often busy, and they rarely have much time available to meet researchers, who should definitely take that situation in consideration when preparing the interviews. Therefore, interviewers need to be careful to make the best use of the time available, prioritizing the most important topics over the others. Hence, the preparation of a good interview guide becomes crucial in assisting the researcher not to get lost in less irrelevant subjects but also to ensure that they do not present themselves to experts as incompetent interlocutors (Meuser & Nagel, 2002). Other relevant issues for expert interviewing highlighted by Flick (2014) are possible excessive specialization from experts, which could restrict the scope of potentially useful information they could provide; and the possible lack of sufficient experts to reflect and discuss specific issues in a professional field, limiting the available sample of experts for the researcher to address. Besides them, experts may also overemphasize positive accounts of their work and minimize or even hide negative aspects.

In this research, I faced similar problems: there was usually only one person, or at most two, responsible for devising news distribution strategies through messaging applications in each of the news organizations addressed, and they were not usually responsible for the operation of these services. Hence, in most cases, it became difficult to triangulate the information an expert reconstructed during an interview with the perspectives from one of his or her colleagues within the same organization. The solution found both for this problem and for the question of expert statements that excessively value the positive side of their work was to perform triangulation with other methods.

Another issue was that I started conducting the interviews in December 2019, just a few months before the covid-19 pandemic hit Europe and Latin America. The plans to conduct face-to-face interviews like the first ones, with Brazilian experts, had to be revised and most of the interviews took place online through applications such as Zoom, Google Meet and similar ones. Flick (2014) stated that, in some contexts, online interviews can even offer some advantages, such as being easier to carry out and taking less time for respondents, who do not have to worry about transporting or preparing to receive the researcher. On the other hand, a sense of context could be lost, since it would not be possible to observe, even quickly and superficially, the interviewee's work environment. I had similar impressions, but I think the advantages were more relevant than

the disadvantages, in fact: perhaps it would not be possible to interview as many experts in different regional contexts if the interviews were not to be conducted online. Three editors asked to give interviews by email, an alternative also included by Flick (2014) on the alternatives for experts interviews. In this case, interviews should preferably become a series of email exchanges with one or two questions being sent by the researcher each time instead of a presentation of all questions at the same time, format that would be closer to sending out a questionnaire in a survey (Flick, 2014).

5.3.3. Selection of cases and experts

Patton (2002) argued that sampling – or case selection – should be purposive: at the same time, integrate extreme or deviant cases and include typical ones (that reflect a perceived average or the situation of the majority of cases) with the intention to provide the maximal variation possible for the sample. Additionally, it could be adequate to add politically important or sensitive cases to the sample. The author did not forget to mention convenience among the criteria for selecting cases since access is an essential aspect of case studies, as we have already mentioned.

Taking those recommendations into consideration, this research selected cases (news organizations in the countries selected) that (1) were actively using a messaging application for news distribution between November 2019 and December 2020 or (2) have at least experimented with a messaging application for news distribution before deciding not to adopt it. Based on the reasoning provided in the previous section, we looked for experts that were part of the staff of these news organizations (1) involved directly in the decisions of effectively adopting or not these kinds of platforms for news distribution, and/or (2) participated in shaping the content distribution strategies for these channels and/or (3) were even responsible for directly operating these tools in the day to day of these organizations. Complementarily, as we learned that some news organizations have used companies that assisted them in the implementation of these channels, we also approached staff members of these intermediaries that were directly involved in these kinds of partnerships.

After confirming that WhatsApp, Messenger and Telegram were the main messaging applications used by news organizations studied, I attempted to approach these

platforms with the intention of interviewing experts from their staff that could confirm or even confront reports from news organizations' editors and executives. Unfortunately, Telegram does not have regional or communication offices in the areas of this research. We sent emails to company staff members that we were able to locate on LinkedIn, but we never received a response. We sent emails to Meta's regional communications offices in Brazil, France and Spain. The only one that responded was from Brazil and we started a negotiation to interview at least one executive from the company responsible for messaging apps – our target was Dario Durigan, WhatsApp's head of public policies in the country. I even sent the question guide and extended our deadline to carry out the interview in two months, but the executive gave the justification that he had no schedule available.

I started the fieldwork in the peripheral media system of Latin America and more specifically in Brazil, where I was able to jump-start the study with a larger number of cases and interviewees. As briefly mentioned before, during the process, though, the research was hit by the covid-19 pandemic, which delayed interviews as editors and executives from news organizations had to lead their newsrooms adaptation to remote work. Eventually I managed to interview 25 experts (four in person, 18 online via Zoom or similar applications and two by email) from 16 cases in Brazil, and other four experts (all online) from three organizations in Chile, Guatemala, and Mexico. In France, I interviewed three editors and executives (one in person, two online) from three news outlets; and in Spain, five professionals (four online and one by email) from six cases as one interviewee, Maria Ramírez, worked as a strategy director for *eldiario.es* and founded a startup called *Politibot* for sending news through a chatbot on Messenger and Telegram. In addition, we also conducted (online) interviews with one expert from each of the following intermediaries between news organizations and messaging applications: MessengerPeople (Germany), Meedan (US) and Newspayper (now rebranded as Kokoshka, from France). In total, this research conducted 40 interviews with experts in 28 media cases and three intermediary companies (a complete list is on table 3 and the descriptions of each case are below).

News organizations	Interviewees (total: 40)	
BRAZIL (16 cases)	(total: 25)	
O Estado de S. Paulo	Luciana Cardoso (Chief product owner)	Leonardo Cruz (Executive editor)
Editora Globo	Fábio Gusmão (Editor of special projects)	
Gazeta do Povo	Gladson Angeli (Social media manager)	
UOL	Lilian Ferreira (BI, metrics and strategy)	Gabriel Ribeiro (Editor of technology)
The Intercept Brasil	Gabriel Sukita Matos (Audience director)	Juliana Gonçalves (Social media director)
Pública	Nyle Ferrari (Social media coordinator)	
Aos Fatos	Bernardo Moura (Social media editor)	Luiza Bodenmüller (Strategy manager)
Correio Sabiá	Maurício Ferro (Founder and editor)	
Panorama	Fernando Rotta (Co-founder and editor)	
Tribuna do Paraná	Rafael Maia (Product manager)	Rodrigo Cunha (WhatsApp operator)
O Município	Andrei Paloschi (Editor-in-chief)	Adriano Assis (Editor)
Diário Gaúcho	Caren Baldo (Editor)	
GZH	Débora Pradella (Man. digital product)	Laís Soares (Community manager)
Matinal	Filipe Speck (Chief executive officer)	FêCris Vasconcellos (WhatsApp editor)
O Mirante	Fernando Costa (Editor)	
Deutsche Welle	Sebastian Katthover (Head of audience)	Francis França (Head of Brazilian service)
LATIN AMERICA (3)	(total: 4)	
Nómada (Guatemala)	Jose Davila (Community manager)	
Robot LaBot (Chile)	Francisca Skoknic (Co-founder & director)	Paula Molina (Co-founder)
Animal Politico (Mex-)	Fernando Montes de Oca (C. manager)	
FRANCE-SPAIN (9)	(total: 8)	
Le Monde	Stéphanie Lechelon (Audience develop.)	
El Confidencial	Eva Moreno (Social media manager)	
eldiario.es / politibot	María Ramírez (Director of strategy)	
Newtral	Marilín Gonzalo (Head of digital strategy)	
Maldita	Clara Jimenez Cruz (Co-founder & CEO)	
Le Journal des Entreprises	Bruno Dussourt (General director)	
Centre France	Cédric Motte (Director of digital product)	
Vocento	Fernando Belzunce (Gen. edit. diretor)	
INTERMEDIARIES (3)	(total: 3)	
Messenger People	Katharina Kremming (Comm. manager.)	
Meedan	Isabella Barroso (Program manager)	
Newspayper	Assen Lekarsky (Co-founder)	

Table 3. List of news organizations addressed, and professionals interviewed.

***O Estado de S. Paulo* (Brazil)**

Funded almost 145 years ago, *O Estado de S. Paulo* is one of the most traditional newspapers in Brazil. It ranks third in daily print circulation in the country behind the popular *Super Notícia* and the national *O Globo* with 63,800 copies¹⁴⁴. Owned by the Mesquita

¹⁴⁴ Yahya. H. (2022, August 1). Jornais no 1º semestre: impresso cai 7,7% e digital tem alta tímida. *Poder 360*. Retrieved from <https://www.poder360.com.br/midia/jornais-no-1o-semester-impresso-cai-77-e-digital-tem-alta-timida/> on October 22, 2022.

family for over a century, the newspaper and other proprieties of *Grupo Estado* underwent a broad restructuring in 2003 due to a major financial crisis. This move removed family members from the company's management, leaving some of them only with editorial positions¹⁴⁵. The company started using WhatsApp to collect user-generated content in 2015 and, at least since 2016, is sending news bulletins on the messaging application owned by Facebook¹⁴⁶ – and also on Telegram¹⁴⁷. Early in 2019, *Estadão* (as it is informally called by readers and even the company itself) created groups on WhatsApp to send bulletins and receive user-generated content for *Verifica*, a project that fact-checks rumors spread on the Internet¹⁴⁸.

Experts interviewed: Luciana Cardoso, former Chief Product Owner (CPO); and Leonardo Cruz, Executive Editor.

Editora Globo (Brazil)

Editora Globo is the publishing arm of *Grupo Globo*, the largest media conglomerate in Brazil. It comprises 21 publications, including *O Globo*, the second largest national newspaper in the country with a daily print circulation of 65,300 copies, and *Extra*, a local/popular newspaper based in Rio de Janeiro with a daily circulation of 33,300. *Extra* is considered the pioneering publication to use WhatsApp for the collection of user-generated content and also provide news bulletins for specific neighborhoods of the city since late 2013 (Fares, 2018). *O Globo* employed the tool only for the coverage of specific events, such as the famous Carnival of Rio¹⁴⁹.

Expert interviewed: Fábio Gusmão, Editor Local News.

¹⁴⁵ Grupo Estado passa por reestruturação histórica (2003, February 19). *Conjur*. Retrieved from https://www.conjur.com.br/2003-fev-19/grupo_estado_passar_reestruturacao_historica on August 17, 2021.

¹⁴⁶ Receba as manchetes do Estadão no seu WhatsApp (2016). O Estado de S. Paulo. Retrieved from <https://www.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,receba-as-manchetes-do-estadao-no-seu-whatsapp,10000085122> on October 3, 2019.

¹⁴⁷ Estadão lança notificações no Telegram (2016). Meio & Mensagem. Retrieved from <https://www.meioemensagem.com.br/home/ultimas-noticias/2016/05/09/estadao-lanca-notificacoes-no-telegram.html> on October 3, 2019.

¹⁴⁸ Receba checagens de boatos no seu WhatsApp: se inscreva no grupo do Estadão Verifica (2019). Retrieved from <https://politica.estadao.com.br/blogs/estadao-verifica/receba-checagens-de-boatos-em-seu-whatsapp-se-inscreva-no-grupo-do-estadao-verifica/> on October 3, 2019.

¹⁴⁹ Carrera, M. (2015). WhatsApp do Globo transforma leitores em coprodutores da notícia. *O Globo*. Retrieved from <https://oglobo.globo.com/rio/whatsapp-do-globo-transforma-leitores-em-coprodutores-da-noticia-15849641> on June 21, 2019.

Gazeta do Povo (Brazil)

Gazeta do Povo is another centenary newspaper from Brazil (founded in 1919) and part of *Grupo Paranaense de Comunicação (GRPCom)*, owned by the families Cunha Pereira and Lemanski, which also own the local newspaper *Tribuna do Paraná*, RPC TV station (affiliated to TV Globo) and several radio stations. It is based in Curitiba, in Southern Brazil, and remained with a predominantly regional focus (covering the state of Paraná) until the mid-2010s, when it started carrying out a significant restructuring. In June 2017, with the aim of transforming itself into a primarily digital newspaper financed by subscriptions, the company extinguished its print editions during the week, initially keeping it only on the weekend but lately only once a month, and also took an editorial turn towards conservatism, which grew up in the country. The result is that, today, only 20% of its subscriber base is from Paraná¹⁵⁰. In 2018, after the algorithmic changes that limited the reach of news content on Facebook, the company started experimenting with WhatsApp, Messenger and Telegram for content distribution.

Expert interviewed: Gladson Angeli, Social Media Manager.

UOL (Brazil)

UOL is the second most important news website (or news portal, like they like to refer to it) of Brazil behind G1 from *Grupo Globo*. It is part of Grupo Folha, owned by the Frias family, who also owns the national newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo*, the largest in the country. In 2016, it shared a WhatsApp number with readers in order to send a daily news bulletin called Giro UOL.¹⁵¹ The product was later taken out of circulation for unknown reasons (experts interviewed did not even remember it). In 2019, largely on the personal initiative of manager Lilian Ferreira, the company returned to testing WhatsApp, opening groups for a technology-oriented channel, *UOL Tilt*¹⁵². Later, in 2020, the company

¹⁵⁰ Bermúdez, D. (2022, May 4). Del papel a digital: Los casos de éxito de Copesa (Chile) y Gazeta do Povo (Brasil). *WAN-IFRA*. Retrieved from <https://wan-ifra.org/2022/05/del-papel-a-digital-los-casos-de-exito-de-copesa-chile-y-gazeta-do-povo-brasil/> on July 23, 2022.

¹⁵¹ Agora você pode receber o Giro UOL pelo WhatsApp (2016). UOL. Retrieved from <https://noticias.uol.com.br/ultimas-noticias/redacao/2016/06/21/agora-voce-pode-receber-o-giro-uol-pelo-whatsapp.htm?fbclid=IwAR1tWb-17FFmj9y34tYy8qjioezLzebifd3EaQdXWGmdbuZJAlaGFdXVjtQ> on June 21, 2016.

¹⁵² Ferreira, L. (2019, August 13). Chegou Tilt, o canal sobre tecnologia do UOL. UOL. Retrieved from <https://www.bol.uol.com.br/noticias/2019/08/13/chegou-tilt-canal-sobre-tecnologia-do-uol.htm> on August 13, 2019.

also began distributing content from a subscription-based product called *UOL Economia+* (which recently was rebranded to *UOL Investimentos*), focused on economics, business and investments.

Experts interviewed: Lilian Ferreira, General Manager of Business Intelligence, Metrics and Strategy; and Gabriel Ribeiro, Assistant editor and SEO Analyst.

The Intercept (Brazil)

The Intercept is a digital-only nonprofit news organization backed by a foundation (Pierre Omidyar) and its readers through crowdfunding campaigns¹⁵³. It was founded in 2013 by Glenn Greenwald, who received a Pulitzer prize after largely publishing the material collected by the whistleblower Edward Snowden on the online surveillance made by NSA. Even though it is based in the United States, The Intercept has a very strong presence in Brazil, where Greenwald lives since 2011 (he is married to a Brazilian politician and the couple recently adopted two Brazilian children) and set up a newsroom with some of the country's most promising young journalists. Noticing that WhatsApp has become the most used mobile application in Brazil¹⁵⁴, it started to distribute content on the platform in 2019 in the wake of important reports about the partiality of the main judge of the Car Wash Operation (the one that ended up putting in prison several politicians of the country, including former president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva)¹⁵⁵. Later, in 2020, the company also opened a channel on Telegram.

Experts interviewed: Juliana Gonçalves, former Social Media Director; Gabriel Sukita Matos, former Audience Director.

Agência Pública (Brazil)

September 3, 2019. Receba notícias de Tilt no WhatsApp e no Telegram (2021, May 5). UOL Tilt. Retrieved from <https://www.uol.com.br/tilt/noticias/redacao/2021/05/05/tilt-estreia-canal-no-telegram-com-noticias-de-tecnologia-conheca.htm> on June 14, 2021.

¹⁵³ About the Intercept (nd). Retrieved from <https://theintercept.com/about/> on June 20, 2019.

¹⁵⁴ Payão, F. (2019). WhatsApp é o app mais usado na tela do celular do brasileiro. TecMundo. Retrieved from <https://www.tecmundo.com.br/dispositivos-moveis/142669-whatsapp-app-usado-tela-celular-do-brasileiro.htm> on June 20, 2019.

¹⁵⁵ Greenwald, G., Reed, B. & Demori, L. (2019). Como e porque o Intercept está publicando chats privados sobre a Lava Jato e Sergio Moro. The Intercept Brasil. Retrieved from <https://theintercept.com/2019/06/09/editorial-chats-telegram-lava-jato-moro/> on June 21, 2019.

Pública is the first investigative online nonprofit news organization in Brazil. It was founded with the inspiration on the US-based ProPublica (focus on investigating public administration) and it has a similar business model – it is basically financed by foundations, such as Open Society and Ford, and its readers through crowdfunding campaigns. By the end of 2018, the organization started to distribute content on WhatsApp and Telegram in an attempt to boost its content dissemination and improve its contact with readers and possible funders¹⁵⁶.

Experts interviewed: Nyle Ferrari, Social Media Coordinator.

Aos Fatos (Brazil)

Aos Fatos is a Brazilian fact-checking agency funded in 2015 by the journalist Tai Nalon. In four years, the company managed to reach an annual total revenue of R\$ 580.000 (around 130.000 euros) and become one of the most respected news organizations in the field, developing editorial collaboration with main players of the Brazilian news industry and technological partnerships with Facebook and Google¹⁵⁷. It started using WhatsApp to distribute daily updates on August, 2018¹⁵⁸ and shortly after it developed a chatbot on Facebook Messenger “to assist people in the verification process of online content”¹⁵⁹. Nowadays, the company also has a chatbot on Telegram with a similar objective.

Experts interviewed: Bernardo Moura, Social Media Manager; Luiza Bodenmüller, former Strategy Manager.

Correio Sabiá (Brazil)

In September 2018, before the national elections, journalist Mauricio Ferro then a political reporter for the news site *Poder 360* in Brasília (DF) decided to start curating the

¹⁵⁶ Mudanças na Agência Pública (2018). Agência Pública. Retrieved from <https://apublica.org/2018/12/mudancas-na-agencia-publica/> on June 20, 2019.

¹⁵⁷ Nosso financiamento (n.d.). Aos Fatos. Retrieved from <https://aosfatos.org/nossos-parceiros/> on October 3, 2019.

¹⁵⁸ Aos Fatos agora está no WhatsApp; veja como usar (2018). Aos Fatos. Retrieved from <https://aosfatos.org/noticias/aos-fatos-agora-esta-no-whatsapp-veja-como-usar/> on October 3, 2019.

¹⁵⁹ Aos Fatos e Facebook unem-se para desenvolver robô checadora (2018). Aos Fatos. Retrieved from <https://aosfatos.org/noticias/aos-fatos-e-facebook-unem-se-para-desenvolver-robo-checadora/> on October 3, 2019.

main political news and send a daily newsletter via WhatsApp every morning¹⁶⁰. The product soon grew and reached over 3,000 subscribers. In 2020, the journalist was selected for the program 'A Digital Path to Entrepreneurship and Innovation for Latin America' from the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ). Following the program, the company started a membership program, hired collaborators and expanded to other platforms, including Spotify, where it now has a daily podcast of about 10 minutes.

Expert interviewed: Mauricio Ferro, Founder and Editor.

Panorama (Brazil)

In 2020, a group of Brazilian journalists based in different cities of the world decided to launch an initiative that curated the main news subjects of the day and send a newsletter via WhatsApp broadcast lists. It was the beginning of the Panorama newsletter, a content of no more than five minutes. The idea of the founders was expanding fast on the messaging application before expanding to other platforms and providing subscription-based special editions every Saturday about an important topic discussed during the week. After a bit more than a year, the initiative was silently discontinued by mid-2021.

Expert interviewed: Fernando Rotta, Co-Founder and Editor.

Tribuna do Paraná (Brazil)

Although it is also part of the *Grupo Paranaense de Comunicação (GRPCom)* as well as *Gazeta do Povo*, *Tribuna do Paraná* was dismembered as a specific case in this research because there is no integration of the strategies and social media teams of both newspapers: each one acts regardless. *Tribuna do Paraná* was founded in 1956 as a popular newspaper (coverage mostly of crime, entertainment and sports) with a local focus on the metropolitan area of Curitiba and the coast of Paraná and was acquired by *GRPCom* in 2011¹⁶¹. It started its transition to digital in the mid-2010s, when it launched a website

¹⁶⁰ Conheça o Correio Sabiá (n.d.). *Correio Sabiá*. Retrieved from <https://correiosabia.com.br/quem-somos/#sabiá> on October 16, 2022.

¹⁶¹ Marques, L. F. (2011, December 10). GRPCom anuncia compra da Tribuna do Paraná. *Gazeta do Povo*. Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20120107053458/http://www.gazetadopovo.com.br/economia/conteudo.phtml?tl=1&id=1201621&tit=GRPCom-anuncia-compra-da-Tribuna-do-Parana> on October 19, 2022.

optimized for mobile devices¹⁶². In late 2013, the newspaper launched an audience participation project called 'Caçadores de Notícias' (News Hunters), and the means by which readers interacted with the newsroom was WhatsApp. In 2016, the news outlet began distributing content on the messaging app, developing a full strategy of groups for each large neighborhood of the city of Curitiba as well as the regions of the metropolitan area and the rest of the state of Paraná.

Experts interviewed: Rafael Maia, Product Manager; Rodrigo Cunha, WhatsApp Operator.

O Município (Brazil)

O Município is a local newspaper founded in the small city of Brusque (135,000 inhabitants), state of Santa Catarina, in the south of Brazil, in 1954. It circulated once a week in print until 2002, when it became a daily. It launched its news website in 2012 and later opened local branches focused only on digital in other two cities of the state: Blumenau (360,000 inhabitants), in 2017, and Joinville (600,000 inhabitants), in 2020¹⁶³. O Município started distributing news on WhatsApp groups in 2019 and the messaging app quickly became one of the main sources of audience for its local websites with over 50,000 members at the end of 2020¹⁶⁴. By that time, it also launched similar channels on Telegram.

Experts interviewed: Andrei Paloschi, Director of Journalism and Operations; Adriano Assis, former Editor Joinville branch.

Diário Gaúcho (Brazil)

Diário Gaúcho is a local popular newspaper founded in 2000 by *Grupo RBS*, one of the largest media conglomerates in Brazil with operations in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, in the south of the country – it is owned by the Sirotsky family. The newspaper has a rather unusual strategy with an almost total focus on selling its print edition directly at

¹⁶² Tribuna do Paraná segue tendência e lança site otimizado para celular (2016, August 1). *Gazeta do Povo*. Retrieved from <https://www.gazetadopovo.com.br/economia/tribuna-do-parana-segue-tendencia-e-lanca-site-otimizado-para-celular-1v9q0qoh26shx06iehqmaibfn/> on October 19, 2022.

¹⁶³ O Município (n.d.). *O Município*. Retrieved from <https://omunicipio.com.br/o-municipio/> on October 19, 2022.

¹⁶⁴ Receba notícias de Brusque e região (2019, April 1). *O Município*. Retrieved from <https://omunicipio.com.br/receba-noticias-de-brusque-e-regiao-via-whatsapp/> on October 19, 2022.

newsstands at a low cost (R\$ 2 or 0.40 euros) throughout the metropolitan area of Porto Alegre: its daily circulation is said to be around 60,000, but the last numbers I found were of 105,000 (December 2018)¹⁶⁵. Since 2014, it keeps a WhatsApp number available for the readers to interact with and send content to the newsroom. The newspaper even tried to create broadcast lists to distribute content on the platform, but it gave up due to the company's strategic focus being solely on print at this point.

Expert interviewed: Caren Baldo, Editor.

GZH (Brazil)

GZH is a news website also owned by *Grupo RBS* with a regional focus on the state of Rio Grande do Sul. It was launched in September 2017 as *GaúchaZH* with the aim of integrating online the content from two of the main properties of the company: *Rádio Gaúcha* (founded 1927) and the print newspaper *Zero Hora* (founded in 1964, with a daily print circulation of 43,900 copies), both market leaders in the state. Before the covid-19 pandemic, the website managed to reach around 110,000 digital subscriptions¹⁶⁶. As with the *GRPCom* newspapers, I decided to separate the two news outlets of *Grupo RBS* in two different cases because they do not have the same strategies and even the teams are different, despite the fact that the company has integrated the digital newsrooms of its news vehicles in 2018. Since 2018, GZH experiments with news distribution channels on WhatsApp and Telegram, including one dedicated solely to news about the covid-19 pandemic¹⁶⁷.

Experts interviewed: Débora Pradella, Product and Digital Experience Manager; Laís Soares, Digital Content Analyst.

Matinal (Brazil)

¹⁶⁵ Diário do interior gaúcho foi o quarto em crescimento no país em 2018 (2019, February 1). *Coletiva.net*. Retrieved from <https://www.coletiva.net/pelo-rs/diario-do-interior-gaucha-foi-o-quarto-em-crescimento-no-pais-em-2018,292309.jhtml> on October 21, 2022.

¹⁶⁶ Etchichury, C. (2019, September 20). GaúchaZH completa dois anos. GZH. Retrieved from <https://gauchazh.clicrbs.com.br/colunistas/carlos-etchichury/noticia/2019/09/gauchazh-completa-dois-anos-ck0so4kvm015701nwidkgjuse.html> on October 19, 2022.

¹⁶⁷ RBS lança iniciativas inéditas para informar o público sobre coronavírus (2020, March 13). Portal Press. Retrieved from <http://revistapress.com.br/revista-press/rbs-lanca-iniciativas-ineditas-para-informar-o-publico-sobre-coronavirus/> on October 19, 2022.

Matinal is a local news initiative also from Porto Alegre originated of the union of the Matinal newsletter (content curation), the *Parêntese* print magazine (focused on literature) and the website *RogerLerina.com.br* (focused on entertainment and culture) in 2019. The company business model is focused on premium subscriptions that give access to exclusive parts of its content¹⁶⁸. In 2020, it received a grant from the United States Embassy in Brazil to provide news to an underprivileged community in the city of Porto Alegre through a newsletter on WhatsApp¹⁶⁹. Soon the project expanded to the general public, giving a free trial of the content curated and produced by the company. **Experts interviewed:** Filipe Speck, CEO; FêCris Vasconcellos, former WhatsApp editor.

O Mirante (Brazil)

O Mirante was an independent local online newspaper focused on politics launched in Joinville in April 2017, a period the city was basically left without a local newsroom as the one from Grupo NSC that published the newspaper *A Notícia* was closed¹⁷⁰. After a year of trying to finance itself through advertising from merchants in the city, the newspaper started a crowdfunding campaign in 2018 and tried to increase its audience through WhatsApp groups. The newspaper, however, was never able to generate significant revenue to fund its news coverage and ended up closing in mid-2021.

Expert interviewed: Fernando Costa, former Editor.

Deutsche Welle (Brazil and Latin America)

Launched in 1953, *Deutsche Welle* is Germany's international public broadcaster, which provides content in 32 languages, including Portuguese (focused on Brazil) and Spanish (focused on the rest of Latin America)¹⁷¹. Its mission is "to convey the country as a nation rooted in European culture and as a liberal, democratic state based on the rule of law,

¹⁶⁸ Quem somos (n.d.). *Matinal*. Retrieved from <https://www.matinaljornalismo.com.br/quem-somos/> on October 19, 2022.

¹⁶⁹ Serviço gaúcho de notícias via Whatsapp ganha subsídio da Embaixada dos EUA (2020, July 15). *Coletiva.net*. Retrieved from <https://coletiva.net/noticias/servico-gaucha-de-noticias-via-whatsapp-ganha-subsidio-da-embaixada-dos-eua,363916.jhtml> on October 19, 2022.

¹⁷⁰ Apoie (n.d.). *O Mirante*. Retrieved from <https://omirantejoinville.com.br/contribua/> on October 19, 2022.

¹⁷¹ Unbiased information for free minds (n.d.). *Deutsche Welle*. Retrieved from <https://corporate.dw.com/en/about-dw/s-30688> on October 19, 2022.

as well as to promote exchange between the world's cultures and peoples"¹⁷² (par. 1). DW Brasil was launched on July 1st, 1962, and is formed only by Brazilian journalists based in Bonn and Berlin and correspondents in Brazil. The company had automated news bulletins in several languages on WhatsApp before December 2019, when the platform banned automation and bulk messaging, obligating the service to be interrupted. As an alternative, the news organization started distributing content in Brazilian Portuguese on Messenger and in Spanish on Telegram.

Experts interviewed: Sebastian Katthöver, Head of Audience Development; Francis França, Head of the Brazilian Service.

***Nómada* (Guatemala)**

Nómada was an investigative online news outlet based in Guatemala City: it started on August 7, 2014, and closed on October 15, 2020, after its founder and director Martín Rodríguez Pellecer was accused of sexually harassing at least five women, three of them former employees of the company¹⁷³. Its business model was based on alliances with foundations and companies, to which the news organization sold content and services. In addition, *Nómada* held a membership program¹⁷⁴. At the beginning of 2018, the company began to send daily newsletters on WhatsApp.

Expert interviewed: José Davila, former Community Manager.

***LaBot* (Chile)**

LaBot is a nonprofit journalism foundation based in Santiago (Chile) aimed at delivering quality content in innovative formats. Its founding product was a news chatbot with the same name, which distributes content through Telegram and Facebook Messenger since 2017. Founded by three female journalists, the news organization has already received

¹⁷² The foundations for independent journalism (2013, January 18). *Deutsche Welle*. Retrieved from <https://corporate.dw.com/en/the-foundations-for-independent-journalism/a-16532635> on October 19, 2022.

¹⁷³ De Assis, C. (2019, December 11). Founder and director of Guatemalan news site *Nómada* is accused of sexually harassing at least five journalists. *LatAm Journalism Review from Knight Center*. Retrieved from <https://latamjournalismreview.org/articles/founder-and-director-of-guatemalan-news-site-nomada-is-accused-of-sexually-harassing-at-least-five-journalists/> on October 19, 2022.

¹⁷⁴ Quiénes somos (n.d.). *Nómada*. Retrieved from <https://nomada.gt/quienes-somos/> on October 19, 2022.

grants from the International Women's Media Foundation (IMWF) and the Open Society Foundation to develop journalistic products related to its main chatbot¹⁷⁵.

Experts interviewed: Francisca Skoknic, Co-Founder and Editor; Paula Molina, Co-Founder.

Animal Político (Mexico)

Animal Político is a Mexican digital news native initiative founded in 2011 focused on public interest subjects such as corruption, insecurity, inequality, gender violence and discrimination¹⁷⁶. The news organization has diversified revenue sources such as training, consulting, verification; sponsored content; advertising; its subscription program; and donations. Recently the company received subsidies from the Ford Foundation for developing investigative reporting, the Mexican Business Council for information and consulting services and Facebook for detection and verification of disinformation¹⁷⁷. In 2020, aiming at reaching younger audiences and incorporating new revenue streams, *Animal Político* launched other news websites specialized in different niches: *Animal MX* (entertainment and culture) and *Animal Gourmet* (cooking)¹⁷⁸. In the same year, the news organization started sending news bulletins of the three websites on a channel on Telegram.

Expert interviewed: Fernando Montes de Oca, former Community Manager.

Le Monde (France)

One of the most respected newspapers in the world, *Le Monde* was founded shortly after the Liberation of Paris in 1944. In 2021, the newspaper recorded a print daily circulation of 445,000 copies, ranking as the first among the French newspapers¹⁷⁹. *Le Monde* was one of the first French newspapers to have an online edition, launched on

¹⁷⁵ Sobre LaBot (n.d.). *LaBot*. Retrieved from <https://www.labot.cl/nosotros/> on October 20, 2022.

¹⁷⁶ Quiénes somos (n.d.). *Animal Político*. Retrieved from <https://www.animalpolitico.com/quienes-somos/> on October 20, 2022.

¹⁷⁷ Hacia el 2020 (2019, December 6). *Animal Político*. Retrieved from <https://www.animalpolitico.com/blog-invitado/hacia-el-2020/> on October 20, 2022.

¹⁷⁸ Tillmann, P. (2020, May 20). Media Start-up: Animal Político in Mexico. *DW Akademie*. Retrieved from <https://akademie.dw.com/en/media-start-up-animal-politico-in-mexico/a-53517964> on October 20, 2022.

¹⁷⁹ Ranking of national daily newspapers in paid outreach in France in 2021, by daily circulation volume (2022, February 24). *Statista*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/784974/paid-circulation-volume-national-dailies-by-publication-france/> on October 20, 2022.

December 19, 1995¹⁸⁰. It part of Groupe Le Monde, which also owns other publications such as *L'Obs*, *Télérama*, *Courrier International*, *HuffPost France*, *La Vie* and is a major shareholder of *Le Monde Diplomatique*¹⁸¹. The group has four main private investors: the telecoms tycoon Xavier Niel, the former banker Matthieu Pigasse, the heirs of industrialist and co-founder of Yves Saint-Laurent Pierre Bergé and the Czech energy industrialist Daniel Křetínský, who bought 49% of Pigasse's shares in a secret operation in 2018¹⁸². Like most traditional newspapers, *Le Monde*'s main sources of revenue are print and digital advertising and subscriptions. The news organization started using WhatsApp for distributing Africa-related news in a daily newsletter in 2018 and quit the service in December 2019, keeping only updating its status on the platform since then. The publisher also experimented with Telegram for a year between December 2019 and December 2020.

Expert interviewed: Stéphanie Lechelon, Head of Audience Development.

El Confidencial (Spain)

El Confidencial is the pioneering digital news native initiative launched in 2001 by José Antonio Sanchez, former general director at Terra (a news portal owned by Telefónica that had ramifications in several Latin American countries), and his friends Juan Perea, Antonio Aporta, Pedro Pérez, Antonio Casado and Jesús Cacho. It was mainly focused on politics, business and economics since its foundation but, similarly to a print newspaper, it slowly grew its coverage to other news subjects such as international, culture and sports. A couple years ago the digital newspaper launched a subscriptions program, but advertising remains as its main source of revenue¹⁸³. *El Confidencial* started using WhatsApp to distribute short newsletters at the beginning of 2016 and quit around

¹⁸⁰ Hemery, C. (2013, December 19). Quand la presse française s'emparait du web. *La Revue des Médias*. Retrieved from <https://larevuedesmedias.ina.fr/presse-francaise-premiers-sites-internet-web> on October 20, 2022.

¹⁸¹ Présentation du Groupe (n.d). Société des Lecteurs du Monde. Retrieved from <https://sdl-lemonde.fr/groupe-le-monde/presentation-du-groupe/> on October 20, 2022.

¹⁸² Willsher, K. (2019, September 10). Le Monde journalists warn of threat to editorial independence. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/10/le-monde-journalists-warn-of-threat-to-editorial-independence> on October 20, 2022.

¹⁸³ Sánchez, J. A. (2021). 20 años construyendo um sueño. *El Confidencial*. Retrieved from https://www.elconfidencial.com/el-valor-de-la-informacion/2020-06-22/20-anos-persiguiendo-un-sueno-bra_2643676/ on October 21, 2022.

September 2017 because it did not have enough human resources to manage the service on the platform.

Expert interviewed: Eva Moreno, former Social Media Manager.

***Eldiario.es* (Spain)**

El Confidencial has certainly inspired Ignacio Escolar and his colleagues to found *eldiario.es* in September 2012, a digital news native with a focus on political, economic and social news. Since the very beginning the news organization that has 27 shareholders – most of them journalists at the company – invested effort in a business model based on memberships: today *eldiario.es*' 60,000 *socios* account for almost half of the company's turnover, which still has advertising as its main source of revenue¹⁸⁴. In recent years, the organization has created local special editions in different regions of Spain such as Andalusia, Aragon, Catalonia, among others. *Eldiario.es* experimented with WhatsApp and Telegram for news distribution for the first time during the 2015 local and general elections and preferred to stick with the latter platform because of the usage limitations of the former¹⁸⁵.

Expert interviewed: María Ramírez, Director of Strategy.

***Politibot* (Spain)**

Politibot was a chatbot for Messenger and Telegram launched in June 2017 by the Spanish couple of journalists María Ramírez and Eduardo Suárez after they parted ways with the digital news native *El Español*, which they were also co-founders two years earlier. After successfully covering the general elections in Spain that year, *Politibot* received a US\$ 50,000 grant from Google News Initiative to build a bot-making platform that could serve other companies (it was the initial platform used for *LaBot* in Chile)¹⁸⁶. The

¹⁸⁴ Escolar, I. (2022, September 23). Las cuentas de *eldiario.es* en su décimo aniversario: un periódico sin deudas ni hipotecas. *Escolar.net*. Retrieved from https://www.eldiario.es/escolar/cuentas-eldiario-decimo-aniversario-periodico-deudas-hipotecas_132_9564964.html on October 21, 2022.

¹⁸⁵ Rull, A. (2015, April 15). Algunas ideas sobre el uso de WhatsApp para coberturas informativas. *El blog de la redacción de eldiario.es*. Retrieved from https://www.eldiario.es/redaccion/whatsapp-castigo-medios_132_4274797.html on January 17, 2019. Que aprendimos usando WhatsApp y Telegram durante el 20D (2015, December 21). *El blog de la redacción de eldiario.es*. Retrieved from https://www.eldiario.es/redaccion/aprendimos-usando-whatsapp-telegram_132_4258051.html on January 17, 2019.

¹⁸⁶ Wang, S. (2017, July 28). On the heels of its own success, Spain's *Politibot* is opening up a chatbot builder for other outlets. *Nieman Lab*. Retrieved from <https://www.niemanlab.org/2017/07/on-the->

company silently closed its doors in 2020 as Ramírez and Suárez were not able to turn it profitable on the side of their main jobs (she is the Director of Strategy at eldiario.es and he is the Head of Communications at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism).

Expert interviewed: María Ramírez, Co-Founder.

***Newtral* (Spain)**

Newtral is a media startup founded in 2018 by Ana Pastor, a well-known Spanish journalist for her work on national TV (RTVE, CNN and La Sexta), who is its own shareholder. The company acts in three business areas: the production of programs (for television and platforms), new narratives in social media, and innovation in journalism through fact-checking (data verification). In addition, *Newtral* has a research arm in artificial intelligence. The company's business model revolves around revenues from the three main business areas, signing deals for film productions to Netflix and HBO, and fact-checking partnerships with Meta, Google and TikTok, among others¹⁸⁷. *Newtral* uses WhatsApp for collecting rumors from the audience to be fact-checked and Telegram for news distribution.

Expert interviewed: Marilin Gonzalo, Head of Digital Strategy.

***Maldita.es* (Spain)**

Another fact-checking-focused initiative from Spain is *Maldita.es*, which was actually founded before *Newtral* when co-founders Clara Jimenez Cruz and Julio Montes started verifying rumors on social media in 2014. It became a non-profit digital news native in 2018 as founders managed to make it sustainable with the first grants received. Nowadays, its main sources of revenues come from partnerships with WhatsApp and the Meta Third-Party Fact-Checking, grants (including some from Google and Twitter), prizes and donations and contributions from members¹⁸⁸. Maldita.es started a channel on

[heels-of-its-own-success-spains-politibot-is-opening-up-a-chatbot-builder-for-other-outlets/](#) on January 26, 2019. Pachico, E. (2018, October 30). Challenges to watch out for when building a news bot. *International Journalists Network (IJNet)*. Retrieved from <https://ijnet.org/en/story/challenges-watch-out-when-building-news-bot-0> on January 26, 2019.

¹⁸⁷ Quiénes somos (2022, October). *Newtral*. Retrieved from <https://www.newtral.es/quienes-somos/> on October 21, 2022.

¹⁸⁸ Las Malditas Cuentas: de dónde vienen y a dónde van nuestros ingresos (2019, December 4). *Maldita.es*. Retrieved from <https://maldita.es/malditas-cuentas-de-donde-vienen-donde-van-nuestros-ingresos/> on October 22, 2022.

WhatsApp to collect rumors from users and to distribute verification right from the summer of 2018 and it was turned into a chatbot as they signed a technological collaboration with the platform. The Telegram channel was initiated even before, in the beginning of 2017.

Expert interviewed: Clara Jimenez Cruz, Co-Founder and CEO

Le Journal des Entreprises (France)

Le Journal des Entreprises is an online newspaper created in 2003 focused on informing executives and managers about the developments of over 30 French economic hubs. It is edited by Manche Atlantique Presse, situated in Nantes, and owned mostly by Financière Gaspard. Its business model is focused on advertising and subscriptions¹⁸⁹. Curiously, the social channel that redirects more readers to the publication is LinkedIn. Since May 2020, *Le Journal des Entreprises* distributes a newsletter to its readers on WhatsApp as it realized the platform has been increasingly used by the French entrepreneurial community¹⁹⁰.

Expert interviewed: Bruno Dussourt, General Director

Groupe Centre France (France)

Groupe Centre France is a local media group with eight daily titles, nine weekly titles and a press agency, keeping an editorial presence in 15 departments, a circulation of around 300,000 copies in its daily print publications and 70,600 in its weekly print publications¹⁹¹. The conglomerate's main headquarters are in the city of Clermont-Ferrand, 420 km from Paris, where the daily *La Montagne* was founded in 1919 by Alexandre Varenne¹⁹². The crisis in the local press since the 2000s led the owners of *La Montagne* to make a series of acquisitions in the late 2000s and early 2010s that led to the group's

¹⁸⁹ Qui sommes-nous (n.d.). *Le Journal des Entreprises*. Retrieved from <https://www.lejournaldesentreprises.com/qui-sommes-nous> on June 19, 2020.

¹⁹⁰ Le Journal des Entreprises mobilisé sur WhatsApp (2020, May 6). *Le Journal des Entreprises*. Retrieved from <https://www.lejournaldesentreprises.com/france/article/le-journal-des-entreprises-mobilise-sur-whatsapp-495165> on June 19, 2020.

¹⁹¹ Qui sommes-nous ? (n.d.) Centre France. Retrieved from <https://www.centre-france.com/fr/presse/groupe/presentation/> on October 22, 2022.

¹⁹² *La Montagne* (1919-1944) (n.d.). *Overnie, Bibliothèque Numérique du Patrimoine*. Retrieved from <https://overnia.bibliotheques-clermontmetropole.eu/presse.php?titre=La%20presse%20au-vergnate&id=2795> on October 22, 2022.

current configuration¹⁹³. *Groupe Centre France*'s main source of revenue is still advertising, but the company has made a great effort in recent years to strengthen its subscription program and also to promote events. In January 2020, the media group created a Messenger chatbot called Bonjour Marianne that allowed readers to follow the municipal elections that year in an innovative and interactive way: "Like a soap opera, Marianne will invite you each week to discover the role of the City hall around the major issues of the election such as ecology, the desertification of the rural world, etc."¹⁹⁴ (par. 3). Later, the initiative also started addressing the subject of the covid-19 pandemic for a couple months¹⁹⁵.

Expert interviewed: Cédric Motte, Director of Digital Products and Editorial Development.

Grupo Vocento (Spain)

Grupo Vocento owns several publications in Spain: *ABC*, one of the three main national newspapers in the country with a daily circulation of 51,000 copies¹⁹⁶, and a chain of local newspapers such as *Hoy*, *El Correo*, *La Rioja*, *El Norte de Castilla*, *Diario Vasco*, among others¹⁹⁷. The group, owned by several shareholders¹⁹⁸, was funded in 2002 with the merger of *Grupo Correo* and *Prensa Española*. The newspaper *El Pueblo Vasco*, founded by the Ybarra brothers in 1910, is the seed of *Grupo Correo*, while the first publication of *Prensa Española* was the magazine *Blanco y Negro* in 1891. Years later, in 1903, the first issue of *ABC* was published¹⁹⁹. Like other traditional news organizations,

¹⁹³ Meynard, D. (2011, January 26). Centre France multiplie les acquisitions. *Les Echos*. Retrieved from <https://www.lesechos.fr/2011/01/centre-france-multiplie-les-acquisitions-386275> on October 22, 2022.

¹⁹⁴ "Bonjour Marianne !", une autre façon de suivre les élections municipales (2020, January 28). *La Montagne*. Retrieved from https://www.lamontagne.fr/clermont-ferrand-63000/actualites/bonjour-marianne-une-autre-facon-de-suivre-les-elections-municipales_13732735/ on February 15, 2020.

¹⁹⁵ La crise sanitaire vue sur Bonjour Marianne (2020, June 15). *La Montagne*. Retrieved from https://www.lamontagne.fr/clermont-ferrand-63000/sante/la-crise-sanitaire-vue-sur-bonjour-marianne_13800482 on July 20, 2020.

¹⁹⁶ Cano, F. (2021, March 8). OJD: 'ABC' recorta distancias en Madrid y ya está a solo 5.000 ejemplares de 'El País'. *El Español*. Retrieved from https://www.elespanol.com/invertia/medios/20210308/ojd-abc-recorta-distancias-madrid-ejemplares-pais/564444139_0.html on October 20, 2022.

¹⁹⁷ La misma portada no vale para todos (n.d.). *Vocento*. Retrieved from <https://www.vocento.com/nosotros/prensa> on October 20, 2022.

¹⁹⁸ La firma de los Luca de Tena, socios de Vocento, cambia el accionista de control (2021, March 4). *El País*. Retrieved from https://cincodias.elpais.com/cincodias/2021/03/03/companias/1614785422_559616.html on October 20, 2022.

¹⁹⁹ Nuestra historia es una suma de historias (n.d.). *Vocento*. Retrieved from <https://www.vocento.com/nosotros/historia> on October 20, 2022.

each of *Grupo Vocento*'s publications relies on different sources of revenue: the main ones are advertising, subscriptions and events. The company experimented with WhatsApp in several of their local *cabeceras* (news outlets) but decided to abandon it after it started using its own notification service based on the web browsers used to access each news website.

Expert interviewed: Fernando Belzunce, General Editorial Director.

MessengerPeople (Germany)

MessengerPeople, founded in Munich in 2015 by Franz Buchenberger and Maximilian Tietz as WhatsBroadcast, has self-declared as “the leading software-as-a-service provider for messenger communication”²⁰⁰ (par. 2). The company provides a platform for businesses to offer professional customer service on messaging applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Apple Business Chat, Telegram and Viber. Until December 2019, MessengerPeople provided its intermediary services for several news organizations seeking to distribute newsletters massively on WhatsApp – among its clients were *Le Monde*, *Deutsche Welle*, *The Washington Post* and basically all German media that used the platform for news distribution. WhatsApp's new policies and its focus on its Business API forced the company to change its business model for customer service only, making it lose most of their media clients.

Experts interviewed: Katharina Kremming, Head of Communications.

Meedan (United States)

Meedan is a nonprofit technology company based in San Francisco “that builds software and programmatic initiatives to strengthen journalism, digital literacy, and accessibility of information online and off”²⁰¹ (par. 1). Its main product is Check, a platform for creating chatbots and optimizing the collection of rumors, managing the workflow of fact-checking initiatives and publishing verifications on social media in general and messaging applications such as Messenger, WhatsApp, Telegram and Line in particular²⁰². On

²⁰⁰ We are the Messenger communication experts (n.d.). *MessengerPeople*. Retrieved from <https://www.messengerpeople.com/about-us/> on October 22, 2022.

²⁰¹ Mission (n.d.). *Meedan*. Retrieved from <https://meedan.com/mission> on October 22, 2022.

²⁰² Check: Scale up your fact-checking (n.d.). *Meedan*. Retrieved from <https://meedan.com/check> on October 22, 2022.

October 2019, Meedan developed a pilot project supported by Meta/WhatsApp with five newsrooms in Brazil, South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria and India for election coverage that performed over 5,700 fact-checks on the platform's Business API²⁰³. After this, the company was endorsed by WhatsApp for the expansion of the project to other newsrooms from fact-checking initiatives in other countries²⁰⁴.

Expert interviewed: Isabella Barroso, Program Manager Latin America.

Kokoshka (former Newspayper, France)

Newspayper was a startup founded by Assen Lekarsky and Maxime Blaszyk in 2017 as part of an acceleration program by *Groupe Centre France* with the aim of developing chatbots for news organizations²⁰⁵. The company helped the local media conglomerate launch the Bonjour Marianne chatbot on Messenger in 2019 and also provided consultancy for the local newspaper *L'Ardennais* and the science magazine *Sciences et Avenir* to produce similar initiatives on the same platform²⁰⁶. In 2020, the startup was rebranded as Kokoshka as it started producing chatbots for companies from other economic sectors²⁰⁷.

Expert interviewed: Assen Lekarsky, Co-Founder.

5.3.4. Qualitative data analysis

Data collection and data analysis in qualitative research are frequently indistinguishable steps as qualitative research is largely dependent on interpretation (Cassell & Symon, 1994). Hence, while researchers are collecting data, they are already making initial interpretations and, consequently, analyzing data. This has been particularly the

²⁰³ Insights from 5,700 fact-checks on the WhatsApp Business API (2020, June 25). *Meedan*. Retrieved from <https://meedan.com/post/insights-from-5-700-fact-checks-on-the-whatsapp-business-api> on October 22, 2022.

²⁰⁴ See the Meedan Blog on <https://meedan.com/blog>.

²⁰⁵ Newspayper, c'est terminé ! (2021, February). *Newspayper*. Retrieved from <https://www.kokoshka.fr/newspayper> on October 22, 2022.

²⁰⁶ Colliat, V. (2019, October 21). Recevez tous les jours un résumé de l'actualité scientifique sur Facebook Messenger. *Sciences et Avenir*. Retrieved from https://www.sciencesetavenir.fr/ultrabrevs/recevez-tous-les-jours-un-resume-de-l-actualite-scientifique-sur-facebook-messenger_138392 on October 22, 2022. Avec «Charlie!», suivez l'actualité de Charleville-Mézières autrement (2020, October 8). *L'Ardennais*. Retrieved from <https://www.lardennais.fr/id196765/article/2020-10-08/avec-charlie-suivez-lactualite-de-charleville-mezieres-autrement> on October 22, 2022.

²⁰⁷ Retrouvez la patte de Kokoshka parmi ces quelques références (n.d.). *Kokoshka*. Retrieved from <https://www.kokoshka.fr/#Nos-References> on October 22, 2022.

case during the beginning of this study, when I carried out desk research to collect documents and made observations that could give me clues about the adoption and functioning of messaging applications for news distribution and audience engagement. Thus, describing the process of analyzing qualitative data in this research proved to be a complicated task that I attempt to make in this single section.

A procedure that permeated the qualitative analysis of the documents and the interviews used in this research was thematic analysis: “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently it goes further” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Antaki et al. (2003) argued that the absence of clear and concise rules for the application of thematic analysis led the approach not to be recognized as a full method and to give the impression that ‘everything goes’. However, Braun and Clarke (2006) claimed that the method is actually flexible – and that would be a positive feature.

The authors, hence, attempted to provide guidelines for a more rigorous application of thematic analysis: an essential recommendation is making explicit justifications about the themes. What makes a theme is not a question that can be answered with a simple formula, though. According to the authors, “a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Therefore, a thematic analysis can be (1) inductive, when codes and themes are developed from the data, or (2) theoretical, when it is mostly driven by previous theory or the researchers’ interest (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This research used, most of the time, the second model, looking for codes and themes in the existing literature about the subject of the study. Thus, frequent codes were the names of the messaging applications or platforms studied (e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram) in conjunction with related subjects (e.g., strategic use, business model-subscriptions, news distribution, audience engagement-contact) mentioned in this study’s research questions.

Braun and Clarke (2006) recommended six basic steps for conducting rigorous thematic analysis and, curiously, four of them are related to defining and refining codes and themes: (1) familiarizing with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and finally (6) producing the report. Similarly, Miles and Huberman (1994) divided the analysis into three broad

procedures: (1) data reduction, (2) data display and (3) data drawing and conclusions. The first stage refers to “a form of analysis that sharpens, sorts, focuses, discards, and organizes data in such a way that ‘final’ conclusions can be drawn and verified. (...) Qualitative data can be reduced and transformed in many ways: through selection, through summary or paraphrase through being subsumed in a larger pattern and so on” (p. 11). A first step of data reduction is preparing and organizing the content; it is followed by the selection of sentences that could be used to answer the research the research questions of a study; and then they are broken in smaller segments and themes. The aim of data display is assembling the data that was already prepared into a compact representation so the researcher can see its ‘bigger picture’ to, finally, establish relations and understand patterns between themes and draw conclusions. Regardless of the authors, the understanding is that thematic analysis is a cyclical process rather than one organized in a chain of procedures: each step should inform the others and be constantly repeated not only to ensure reliability of the findings but also the reduction of codes and categories that can be of an excessive quantity with open coding (Flick, 2017).

Main themes emerge from thematic analysis by the combination of width and depth: their incidence on data sets and their importance for the complete interpretation of the data – measures that largely depend on the subjectivity of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While documents can be analyzed almost immediately after an assessment of their quality based on criteria such as authenticity (do they come from reliable sources?), credibility (do they contain errors?), representativeness (what is the importance of the document?) and meaning (the information understandable?) (Scott, 1990), interviews should pass by a process of transcription that can be lengthy before undergoing thematic analysis. Meuser and Nagel (2009, p. 35–37) recommended a pragmatic approach to transcribing expert interviews, focusing mostly on statements that can have relevance for the study’s research questions and not all the material. The non-transcribed sections of interviews can be summarized or become bullet points, remaining on the research.

Interestingly, though, during the process of thematic analysis of the interviews with the experts selected for this study, I did not feel comfortable transcribing only parts of the interviews, which, in general, rarely lasted more than an hour. The process of

conducting the interview in a controlled time frame has already required a lot of attention to ask the questions related to the most important topics. Even writing down the main passages, I was afraid of missing important statements. Perhaps this slowed down the research process a bit, but I preferred to have more security and as much content as possible to code, especially because this research involved a set of several different research questions.

5.3.5. (Computational and manual) Quantitative content analysis

Sometimes interviews with experts may allow somewhat idealized reconstructions of a process, as professionals provide accounts about their own work and may be tempted to promote their accomplishments a little beyond what they really are. That is, in the words of the executives who lead the use of messaging apps for news distribution and audience engagement, the strategies they are implementing can seem more successful and innovative than they really are and the relationships their news outlets are building with their audiences can appear closer than they really are. I realized that this research needed a further methodological step to confirm or even confront experts' reports about their news organizations' strategies for distributing content on messaging apps (RQ3). To what extent are news organizations adapting to the specific characteristics of news consumption on messaging applications? (sub-RQ3.1). Are they really using these tools' supposed potential for interpersonal communication and stimulating interactions with their readers through these mobile applications? Or do they view these applications mostly as channels for content distribution? (sub-RQ3.2). Is the strategical turn that news executives and editors reported in other studies, viewing content distribution on platforms as a way to promote their own subscription and membership programs instead of only stimulating click views on their websites, being taken also for the domain of messaging applications? How? To what extent? (sub-RQ3.3). The examination of the messages that news organizations sent on their channels in chat apps could possibly provide clearer and more accurate answers to these questions, and content analysis seemed to be the appropriate method for this.

Content analysis refers to “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (Berelson,

1952, p. 18). Coding is also an essential aspect of quantitative content analysis. Though, differently from other qualitative research methods such as qualitative content analysis, textual analysis and discourse analysis that look for describing, explaining and even interpreting not only manifest but even hidden meanings in texts, coding in quantitative content analysis is specially aimed at the systematic observation and quantification of patterns in texts (Riffe et al., 2019). Quantitative content analysis is usually focused on larger sets of texts and is employed to make numerical generalizations about patterns. The application of the method tends to be time consuming and involve a group of researchers that create, revise and test a codebook in order to guarantee reliability (Krippendorff, 2012).

Computational methods of content analysis potentially overcome the limitations of the manual application of the method. Regarding sampling, algorithms allow the researcher to collect complete data sets of interest – and they can even be larger than data sets collected manually (e.g., thousands of articles published by a news outlet during a whole year). “Thereafter, algorithmic techniques can be used to ‘slice’ a vast corpus of data into smaller pieces for specialized analyses” (Lewis et al., 2013, p. 38). In terms of coding, it is possible to employ textual analysis tools for the identification of frequently used keywords.

In practice, though, computational content analysis still seems largely incapable of interpreting nuanced meanings (for example, when the author of a text makes usage of irony and sarcasm), providing only a superficial analysis of text (Conway, 2006). Thus, some authors recommended the utilization of a combination of computational and manual approaches in a complementary fashion (Sjøvaag, Moe, & Stavelin, 2012; Sjøvaag & Stavelin, 2012). “For the literature on content analysis and its evolution, this approach suggests that the structural features of new media can, and should, be more fully subjected to algorithmic analysis, while the sociocultural contexts built up around those features need the careful attention of manual methods” (Lewis et al., 2013, p. 39).

This research attempted to follow this recommendation. The first step for performing a quantitative content analysis on the messages sent by the selected cases on chat apps was observing which ones remained actually active on these platforms. In early November 2020, when data collection started, 15 out of the 29 media cases addressed in this research were actively sending messages on groups or broadcast lists on

WhatsApp – four of them, *O Município*, *Gazeta do Povo*, *UOL* and *GZH* had more than one channel for general news on this platform, making it 19 the final number of channels that I collected data from on WhatsApp. Nine cases had active channels on Telegram (only *O Município* had more than one), while only one case (*Deutsche Welle Brasil*) remained sending messages on Messenger. As there would be no possibility of making comparisons with other channels and the use of Facebook’s messaging application by news organizations for content distribution proved to be very limited, I opted for not collecting the content of messages sent by the Brazilian service of the German public news company, focusing all comparative efforts on the two most popular platforms among our cases, WhatsApp and Telegram.

Both WhatsApp and Telegram allowed the members of their groups, broadcast lists and channels to export the content of chats with specific functions inside the applications. While each chat on WhatsApp could be exported only as a .txt file, the content of each Telegram channel could be both downloaded as .html or .json files (on both platforms, multimedia content could be exported in separate in a zip folder) or even through its API with a Python script – I used this last alternative. While subscribing to a channel on Telegram demanded the simple actions of finding the chat on the application search function and then clicking ‘subscribe’, doing the same on WhatsApp was more complicated. Subscribing to a group usually demanded finding a link on the website of the news organization and then clicking ‘join chat’, while becoming a member of a broadcast list usually demanded sending a message for the news organization’s telephone number, which was not always easy to find, asking to be added and waiting for receiving the messages. Nine of the 19 channels on WhatsApp were groups, while other 10 were broadcast lists.

I collected 8.648 messages sent by news organizations on their chats on WhatsApp and 6.484 messages on their channels on Telegram between November 9, 2020 and March 8, 2021 – four months or exactly 120 days, the same period of analysis used by Boczek and Koppers (2020) in their study about German news media usage of WhatsApp for news distribution, and a period I considered sufficient for the kind of analysis needed to answer RQ3 and its sub-RQs. Identifying the metrics that would be essential for our analysis of each channel was an important further step. These were total numbers of (1) messages, (2) characters, (3) emojis, (4) images, (5) videos, (6) audios,

(7) messages per day of the week, and (8) messages per time of the day. On Telegram, it was also possible to visualize each channel's (9) number of followers, and view rates (the percentage of users that viewed content) (10) per message and (11) per day.

Python scripts were composed for counting occurrences of these components on the data sets containing all the messages for each platform. The selection of this general-purpose computer programming language is justified by its power and high-level application despite its simplicity and by its suitability for developing scripts for parsing through large bodies of textual data (Van Rossum, 1995). Nowadays it is already possible to find similar ready-made scripts for analyzing chats on both messaging platforms on GitHub, as well as using online tools such as WhatsAnalyze²⁰⁸ (for WhatsApp) and Popsters²⁰⁹ (for Telegram, as well as other social media) with the same purpose. The numbers generated by the Python scripts were automatically added to two CSV files – each concentrating all data for each platform. This arrangement allowed me to easily filter and sort through the data, facilitating interpretation and the analysis by the elaboration of chart visualizations.

This research's computational content analysis, therefore, was mostly focused on simple quantifications of the incidences of formats, message lengths and frequencies aimed at, for example, understanding if news organizations take into consideration specific habits of news consumption on mobile devices and messaging applications such as news snacking – that is, if publishers maintain a constant frequency of shipments attempting for a ubiquitous presence on chat platforms. From these quantifications, it was possible to start understanding if the strategies described by the cases' editors and executives during the interviews could be confirmed in practice.

Meanings were analyzed only during a following step, a manual content analysis of a smaller sample of the messages (958 on WhatsApp and 736 on Telegram) and their attachments sent by cases in a two-week period (January 11 to 24, 2021) inside the broader set data. Each of these 1.694 messages were coded for news topics, types of audience engagement requests and direct mentions to news organizations' business models. The definition of 14 categories of topics (politics, international affairs, economy, crime, disaster, weather, arts, sports, entertainment, lifestyle, science, transportation,

²⁰⁸ See <https://whatsanalyze.com/>

²⁰⁹ See <https://popsters.com/app/>

prize competitions, and events calendars) was based on Boczek and Koppers (2020). After a pretest on coding data, I added a 15th topic (health) that seemed important in the context of the covid-19 pandemic. Seven types of requests for audience engagement (survey, contact, share, promotion, feedback, questions, crowdsourcing) were considered also after coding pretest data and refining codes used by Boczek and Koppers (2020). Categories related to business models were based on the main revenue models generally employed by news organizations: advertising, subscriptions and memberships.

Coding on both qualitative data analysis and quantitative content analysis allows for generating and structuring categories and classifications, which are important for the descriptions I intended to produce and present in this study. During the next chapter, the reader will realize that the cases of this research can be grouped into different categories according to the different perspectives in which they can be analyzed (in relation to their types, their national contexts, their business models, their strategies for the messaging apps, etc.). These classifications and categorizations afford the researcher to “make statements about implicit and explicit dimensions and structures of meaning making in the material and what is represented in it” (Flick, 2014, p. 648).

6. Findings and discussion

This chapter is dedicated to describing the findings of this study based on the research questions that were formulated and guided the fieldwork. Section 5.1 is focused on understanding the relationships news organizations and platforms are building in the domain of messaging applications (RQ1). To do so, I believe it is important to situate the state of their previous relationships in the broader front of search engines, news aggregators and social media, sectors that impacted the news industry before the emergence of chat apps. Thus, I asked our interviewees questions about digital intermediaries' importance for news organizations' business models (sub-RQ1.1), the return on the investment they make on content distribution across these platforms (sub-RQ1.2), and how publishers' level of satisfaction with big tech companies that own these tools has affected the adoption of messaging applications without losing sight, for example, that a company with a considerable importance for news consumption such as Facebook owns some of the most popular chat apps (WhatsApp and Messenger) in the regions where this research is focused, notably Southern Europe (France and Spain) and Latin America (Brazil and a few other countries) (sub-RQ1.3). The following sections are aimed at stating the main reasons for news organizations' adoption of messaging applications for content distribution (RQ2) and delving deep on these companies' strategies for reaching news audiences on these tools (RQ3).

6.1. News organizations' growing caution with Facebook's dynamics

In chapter 4, we learned about the impact digital intermediaries have made on the news industry during the process of platformization of the Internet, which accelerated the 'unbundling of the news' described by Carr (2008). By increasingly assuming the role of distributing news online, platforms such as Google and Facebook not only disrupted the business model of publishers, taking the largest share of the global digital advertising revenue (Siapera, 2013; Van der Wurff, 2012), but also accumulated other functions of journalism, such as the selection of what types of news would receive more visibility in the platformed ecosystem and even the definition of what formats would be more conducive to the consumption of this content (e.g., the algorithms valuing short videos posted natively on the platforms to the detriment of links that redirect the reader

to pages dominated by written text on the websites of news organizations) (Bell et al., 2017; Smyrnaios & Rebillard, 2019). This situation of publishers' dependence on platforms, which has been worrying editors and news executives for some time (Nielsen & Ganter, 2018), became completely apparent with the changes in Facebook's algorithms between 2016 and 2018. These measures, taken by the platform responsible for much of the traffic redirected for the websites of news organizations, caused the disconnection of news outlets and part of their audiences (Cornia et al., 2018; Jenkins, 2020), the migration of part of the news consumption to other tools such as messaging apps (Newman et al., 2021), and, of course, huge dissatisfaction for publishers, which found themselves in a situation of finding quick solutions to recover the lost audience almost overnight (Rashidian et al., 2019).

Whether a small local news publisher in Brazil or a major national newspaper in France, in general, news organizations approached in this research noticed a loss of audience on Facebook between 2016 and 2018. As the bulk of those changes occurred some years ago, very few editors approached by this research were able to recall more detailed figures about their losses. Anyway, this introductory finding of this study appears to confirm previous research (Cornia et al., 2018; Jenkins, 2020; Rashidian et al., 2019) and reports from companies that support news publishers with analytics tools such as *Parse.ly*, which noticed a general decrease of 25% in the traffic volume referred by Facebook to news sites from February to October 2017²¹⁰.

Perhaps more important than the exact numbers of audience losses, which varied significantly from publisher to publisher, is to understand these changes' long-lasting impact on the dynamics of the relationships between news organizations and platforms – especially, of course, Facebook. Reacting similarly to previous algorithmic moves made by the company controlled by Mark Zuckerberg (e.g., when it decided to privilege formats such as native videos instead of the publication of links that redirected the users to the publishers' websites), most editors attempted to adapt based on their own experience but also on the consultancy they received from the platform. In countries such as France, Spain, Brazil and Mexico, Facebook has dedicated staff focused on handling the

²¹⁰ 2018 traffic sources by content categories and topics (2018, June 6). *Parse.ly*. Retrieved from <https://www.parse.ly/resources/data-studies/authority-report-15> on July 15, 2021.

relationships with the media: these professionals usually hold functions such as ‘strategic partnerships managers’ or ‘news partnerships managers’.

Publishers reported that these consultants’ broader suggestion was diversifying the platform features used instead of focusing all their efforts on the news feed, Facebook’s main real state property, and eventually even considering alternative platforms from the company, such as Instagram and Messenger. Thus, some news outlets resorted to the production and publication of more native videos on both social media sites as an attempt to please algorithms, others focused on the employment of *livestreams* and *stories*, and some created specific private groups for subscribers on Facebook following one of the company’s most recent pivots²¹¹. This finding is hardly surprising if we consider previous research that noticed the contingent condition of cultural production on the platformed ecosystem: first, news producers are obligated to become malleable and adaptable to the frequent changes proposed by big tech companies, resort to datafied user feedback in order to keep as much relevance as possible; then, they are increasingly subjected to a condition of dependence on the distribution made by the platforms and their unpredictability (Nieborg & Poell, 2018).

A few years after the turmoil caused by those algorithmic changes, news editors and executives stated that it has been possible to recover and stabilize the audience lost in the first moment, eventually even add new numbers to it, but not necessarily on Facebook: most news outlets turned to an older and well-known partner such as Google. While the former was increasingly limiting the distribution of news content, the latter was investing in various initiatives to regain space with news producers – although, of course, not always in completely friendly terms. The company expanded its Accelerated Mobile Pages (AMP), a project announced in late 2015 and put in practice with some key partners in the middle of the following year²¹², launched *Subscribe with Google* and Chrome Mobile Article Recommendations²¹³ in 2018, and increased the investment in

²¹¹ Leetaru, K. (2019, May 11). Facebook’s pivot to groups could help it create privacy-protecting ads. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kalevleetaru/2019/05/11/facebooks-pivot-to-groups-could-help-it-create-privacy-protecting-ads/> on July 19, 2021.

²¹² O’Reilly, L. (2016, February 24). Google’s ambitious project to speed up the entire mobile web launches today. *Business Insider*. Retrieved from <https://www.businessinsider.com/google-amp-officially-launches-mobile-internet-speed-up-2016-2> on July 15, 2021.

²¹³ Schwartz, J. (2018, April 11). Here’s what we know so far about Google Chrome’s mobile article recommendations, the next major traffic driver for publishers. *Nieman Lab*. Retrieved from

funding news organizations and training journalists (often attached with improving their understanding of and their visibility on platforms such as YouTube and Google News) through the *Google News Initiative*²¹⁴ and, more recently, the *Google News Showcase*²¹⁵. This latest project is a good example of the company's milder tone in the disputes between big tech and media that were reignited in Australia in late 2020 and early 2021 and burst elsewhere, while Facebook tends to adopt a more confrontational approach that even banned the publication of news on the platform for some days²¹⁶.

Consequently, by early 2018, Google had already regained the position of top external traffic driver to news organizations' sites that had been taken over by Facebook in 2015²¹⁷. This situation obviously led the news publishers from our sample to further naturalize the relationship with the company founded by Larry Page and Sergey Brin, which was frequently described in a more positive tone by some of our interviewees, as stated by Luciana Cardoso, former chief product owner and digital strategy director at *O Estado de S. Paulo*, one of the most important newspapers in Brazil:

"At Google, we see that people who are here in Brazil have more power to act. On Facebook, it's usually only a relationship person (*that we have contact to*). When we talk about products, features, etc. we have a lot more (*proximity*) with Google than with Facebook, although I'm noticing that Facebook has started to change that a bit" (Luciana Cardoso, *O Estado de S. Paulo*, December 2019, the translation is mine).

<https://www.niemanlab.org/2018/04/heres-what-we-know-so-far-about-google-chromes-mobile-article-recommendations-the-next-major-traffic-driver-for-publishers/> on July 15, 2021.

²¹⁴ Wang, S. (2018, March 20). Google announces a \$300M 'Google News Initiative' (though this isn't about giving out grants directly to newsrooms, like it does in Europe). *Nieman Lab*. Retrieved from <https://www.niemanlab.org/2018/03/google-announces-a-300m-google-news-initiative-though-this-isnt-about-giving-out-grants-directly-to-newsrooms-like-it-does-in-europe/> on July 15, 2021.

²¹⁵ Pichai, S. (2020, October 01). Our \$1 billion investment in partnerships with news publishers. *The Keyword*. Retrieved from <https://blog.google/outreach-initiatives/google-news-initiative/google-news-showcase/> on July 15, 2021. Skok, D. (2021, July 12). On big tech and news publishers, Canada must follow Australia's lead. *Nieman Lab*. Retrieved from <https://www.niemanlab.org/2021/07/on-big-tech-and-news-publishers-canada-must-follow-australias-lead/> on July 15, 2021.

²¹⁶ Benton, J. (2021, February 23). Facebook got everything it wanted out of Australia by being willing to do what the other guy wouldn't. *Nieman Lab*. Retrieved from <https://www.niemanlab.org/2021/02/facebook-got-everything-it-wanted-out-of-australia-by-being-willing-to-do-what-the-other-guy-wouldnt/> on July 15, 2021.

²¹⁷ Understanding traffic patterns from the top news topics of 2015 (2015, November 19). *Parse.ly*. Retrieved from <https://www.parse.ly/resources/data-studies/authority-report-9/> on July 15, 2021.

On the other hand, the media's relationship with Facebook has been described, at best, with caution – and mostly by editors and executives from traditional news outlets or fact-checking agencies that already benefit from partnerships with the platform or are clearly interested in benefiting from them in the future. Often, dissatisfaction with the company is clearly manifested. The algorithmic changes that disconnected the media from part of their audiences seem to have played a crucial role in that feeling, as publishers were not officially warned about the impact of the updates and were not prepared for their effects. Eva Moreno, former social media manager at *El Confidencial*, one of the most important online-only news publications in Spain, described those events as a quasi-traumatic experience.

“Well, in 2016 it was terrible. It was one of the most difficult moments because suddenly Facebook said that it would be a platform for friends and family and the media had to be completely ancillary. So, that obviously affected us a lot, our reach on the platform went down to historical lows, the traffic too. It was a complicated phase. (...) They are also not very open when it comes to announcing the changes they make. Out of ten, they announce one change, and you have to figure out the other nine by yourself. Now, once again, it seems that they are making changes, they are once again more focused on entertainment, light subjects, these subjects that do not engage as they used to do before. So, we must see how we can reverse the effects of that algorithm that this time is costing us less, that's true, but it's always giving us a lot of headaches” (Eva Moreno, *El Confidencial*, December 2020, the translation is mine).

A comparison between national scenarios does not present a considerable difference in the negative perception that publishers have of Facebook: I heard the same type of complaints from the media both in developed European countries and in developing Latin American ones. However, intra-national distinctions seem to matter: the less traditional, smaller, and the more digital-focused a medium is, the more difficult it tends to be the relationship with the world's dominant social platform. In effect, this causes a group of online-born outlets (such as *eldiario.es* and *El Confidencial*, in Spain, and *The Intercept* and *Agência Pública*, in Brazil, *Animal Político* in Mexico and *Robot Labot* in

Chile) and often ones with a regional or local focus (especially Brazilians as *Matinal* and *O Município*) to be the most dissatisfied with Facebook. Scarce resources and the impossibility of reaching more expressive and loyal audiences organically on the platform made *Matinal*, for example, practically ignore Mark Zuckerberg's company in its initial distribution strategies. As the company's CEO Filipe Speck explained, the initiative focused on providing information about the metropolitan region of Porto Alegre, in southern Brazil, preferred to bet on newsletters, either sent by email or by WhatsApp:

"In the membership model, you need to build a relationship with your user, you need to know where the user is and to think about the best way to have a direct relationship with him or her. The best way to do that is without intermediation. Facebook and Instagram are intermediaries. (...) We also see these platforms as spaces for content distribution and engagement, but since it's not a direct space, I don't know how they could be useful for us. So, I prefer to have the security of having a direct contact in my hand. With the platform, I'm very dependent on it to make the relationship decision with my reader" (Filipe Speck, *Matinal*, October 2020, the translation is mine).

Those limitations certainly helped the organization's former director of strategy FêCris Vasconcellos to have a razor-sharp opinion about the platform:

"I think no Facebook product is made for the media and the more they can make it harder for us, the better for them. (...) Facebook was once 'the newspaper delivery truck' in digital, now it is no longer. Today it has a slightly better relationship with content producers (than it had when it performed the algorithmic changes), but I don't think anyone really likes it. I have a very bad impression of Facebook as a whole. I think they have no interest in improving the world. And journalism is aimed at improving the world" (FêCris Vasconcellos, *Matinal*, September 2020, the translation is mine).

Against all the factors that have made local newspapers dwindle in the recent years, *O Município* found on the digital landscape a possibility to expand to other cities of Santa Catarina, a state in the Brazilian South. Although it still has a printed version in

Brusque, a city with just over 100,000 inhabitants where it was founded, the organization has lately set up small newsrooms to feed online versions of its daily newspaper in two larger cities in the state: Joinville (around 600,000 inhabitants) and Blumenau (around 350,000 inhabitants). A very difficult barrier to overcome in these new locations has been building audiences at a time when reaching more people organically on Facebook – a highly widespread strategy encouraged by the platform in the early and mid-2010s – has become an almost impossible task. Only 40,000 people liked *O Município Joinville* and 79,000 liked *O Município Blumenau* pages on Facebook as of August 23, 2021. That was a concern for former editor of the Joinville branch, Adriano Assis, who started the job on March 2020:

“A while ago our biggest audience came from Facebook, but the platform has been trying to reduce that kind of reach, the reach of links, of posts that re-direct to other pages. So, this reach has dropped a lot and we must reduce our dependence on Facebook or soon it will reflect on our work. (...) In the first months (of *O Município Joinville*), Facebook was responsible for 90% of our audience. (...) Last month we had 369,000 thousand unique users, 126,000 (34,1%) came through organic search, 119,000 (32,3%) came directly, which are both those who typed our URL on the browser and the ones that came through links on WhatsApp, and 89,600 (24,3%) were the ones that reached us via social media” (Adriano Assis, *O Município*, August 2020, the translation is mine).

Negative views about Facebook were far from occasional among respondents. Curiously, though, they were rarely verbalized when interviewees were directly asked about their overall satisfaction with the return on the investment their companies made on the main social media platform. The answer to this question was usually positive, although it was often accompanied by jokes and relatively cynical comments such as this one by Laís Soares, social media and community editor at *GZH*: “I still have my job, so I think the company is happy with the distribution of content that we do on social media” (October 2020, the translation is mine). The most potent complaints ended up emerging during questions about the importance of platforms in general for news outlets' business models, as well as others in which I was interested in more specific reports of

difficulties with Facebook, such as the increasing impossibility of reaching significant audiences on the platform and the frequent changes in algorithms.

6.1.1. Publishers' dissatisfaction with Facebook's governance spilling over their relationships with WhatsApp and Messenger

In a sense, the editors and executives' negative views about Facebook seem to have spilled over the company's properties on the domain of messaging applications. Contradictorily, WhatsApp was the chat app which most news organizations expressed interest and, at the same time, displeasure with. While seldom editors have explicitly said that the main reason for dissatisfaction was its direct connection to parenting company Facebook, it becomes clear from the responses that the justification for a negative feeling about it was often related to the platform's governance, which is considered to be overly focused on their own business goals and neglective to the devastating effects its policies sometimes may have on the chain of companies and users that make an important part of its ecosystem. Publishers such as *O Globo* from *Editora Globo* (Brazil), *eldiario.es*, *El Confidencial* and members of *Vocento's* newspaper chain in Spain gave up using the chat app more widely after relatively short but intense periods of testing – frequently for a few months before elections, – as explained by Fernando Belzunce, the general editor of the latter:

“On external messaging applications, the user experience depends on third parties, not on us. And the rules are set by those third parties, not us. Those rules may be fine in a moment, but they may be changed later. From our experience, they always end up changing, negatively affecting the news outlet. Platforms take away our autonomy, control, and independence. The use of messaging, oriented to other objectives, is also not compatible with the mobile applications of our outlets” (Fernando Belzunce, Vocento, November 2020, the translation is mine).

Other news organizations such as *Le Monde* (France) and *Deutsche Welle* (German public broadcaster, which has channels focused on Portuguese and Spanish speaking countries, among others) were finally compelled to abandon WhatsApp in December

2019 (see figure 10), when the company announced it would take legal actions against any user or business that employed content automation and mass messaging, as mentioned in chapter 4. According to the platform's announcement, those actions have always been a violation of their terms of service and an abuse of the private nature of the tool that would not be tolerated anymore as the company started facing growing scrutiny over its role on the dissemination of disinformation by users and political groups²¹⁸. Contradictorily, though, most publishers that used content automation and bulk messaging were clients of MessengerPeople, a company accredited by WhatsApp to provide these kinds of services on the platform.

"It was extremely disappointing, the feeling was 'now that we worked all that much and we managed to build this audience... now it's all gone'," summed up Francis França, head of the Brazilian service at *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, which had around 20,000 subscribers on WhatsApp when they were forced to quit it (November 2020). Stéphanie Lechelon, head of audience at *Le Monde*, reported the same kind of feeling: "We were very disappointed because we had 40,000 followers in July 2019. We could have doubled the amount by the end of the year, but we stopped all communication (*promotion of the channel*) because we didn't want to invest on it anymore" (February 2020). Both *Le Monde* and *Deutsche Welle's* professionals said it was out of the question to manually send messages to multiple broadcast lists (the French outlet would need to open around 160 and the German one, half of that) with a maximum of 256 users each through a lengthy copy-pasting process.

"Their reason to finish the service was an old one: they didn't want misinformation and fake news to be spread. But we were not doing this. So, they could at least work in a more differentiated way to allow the serious and reliable media houses to keep doing it whereas blocking the fake accounts, you know. But they didn't do that" (Francis França, *Deutsche Welle*, November 2020).

²¹⁸ Unauthorized use of automated or bulk messaging on WhatsApp (n.d.). *WhatsApp FAQ*. Retrieved from <https://faq.whatsapp.com/general/security-and-privacy/unauthorized-use-of-automated-or-bulk-messaging-on-whatsapp> on June 25, 2021.

Beyond disappointment, the head of audience development at *DW*, Sebastian Katthover, recalled having more intense feelings when his team was told that it would no longer be possible to maintain a newsletter service on WhatsApp: “We were basically angry at Facebook, and a department manager there was apologizing to us on the phone because they knew that this would affect publishers a lot. And to be honest, they didn't come up with something that would help us in a similar way. And they won't” (November 2020). Lechelon told us that *Le Monde* also contacted the platform in a final attempt to change their minds on the subject. “We tried to negotiate with Facebook and WhatsApp, but there was no solution” (February 2020).

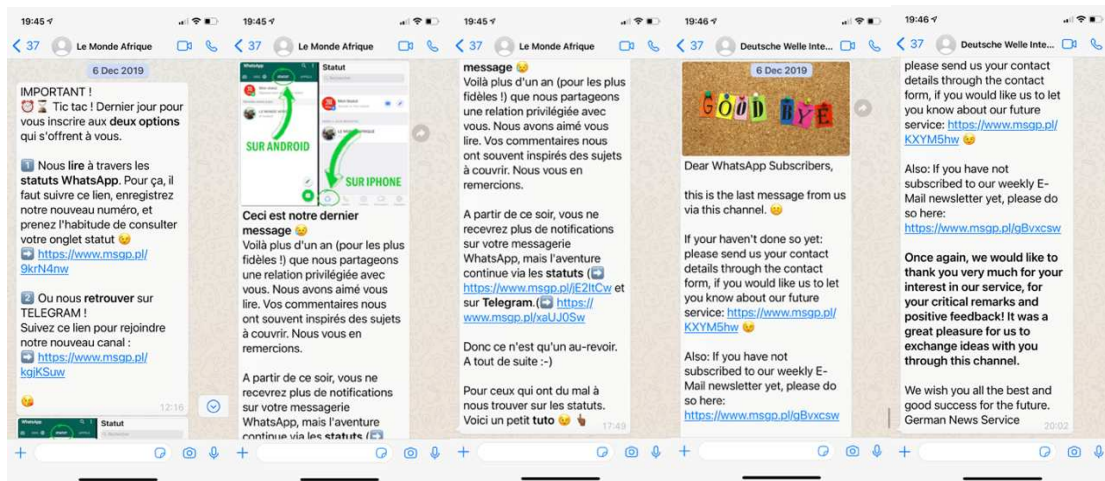


Figure 10. Farewell messages from the channels of *Le Monde Afrique* and *Deutsche Welle International* on WhatsApp on December 6, 2019 (screenshots).

Frustration and anger aside, in practice the disagreement did not necessarily result in a broad disruption on the formal relationships between those news organizations and Facebook. In substitution to WhatsApp, *DW* attempted to develop a channel aimed at Portuguese-speaking audiences on Messenger powered by a chatbot. But França felt as if the traumatic experience with WhatsApp had left its aftereffects for the use of other platforms owned by the big tech giant controlled by Mark Zuckerberg.

“Then you think that maybe what I’m working on right now is going to have the same fate in a year or two, that I’m working really hard to build this audience in the chatbot on Messenger, and then Facebook can decide that media houses cannot send bot messages anymore. So, it’s a bit this feeling of

working for nothing in the end, you know?” (Francis França, Deutsche Welle, November 2020).

Following a suggestion provided by an African subscriber of their newsletters on WhatsApp, *Le Monde* tried to remain with some visibility on the platform by using WhatsApp *statuses* (similar to the *stories* on Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat, the platform that was recognized for popularizing the feature), but the use of this feature never reached the same audience as their daily messages despite efforts to make people subscribe to it by adding *Le Monde*'s new telephone number to the list of contacts of their devices: from the 40,000 followers they had on the service before December 2019, on February 2020 only around 6,000 (or 15% of the total) had migrated to the statuses. The templates for the images and videos used by the French publisher on the feature were initially produced by a team inside the company focused on creating stories for Snapchat, but then the Afrique desk started creating content the other way around: first for WhatsApp statuses and posterior reuse on Instagram and Facebook, explained Lechelon (see figure 11).

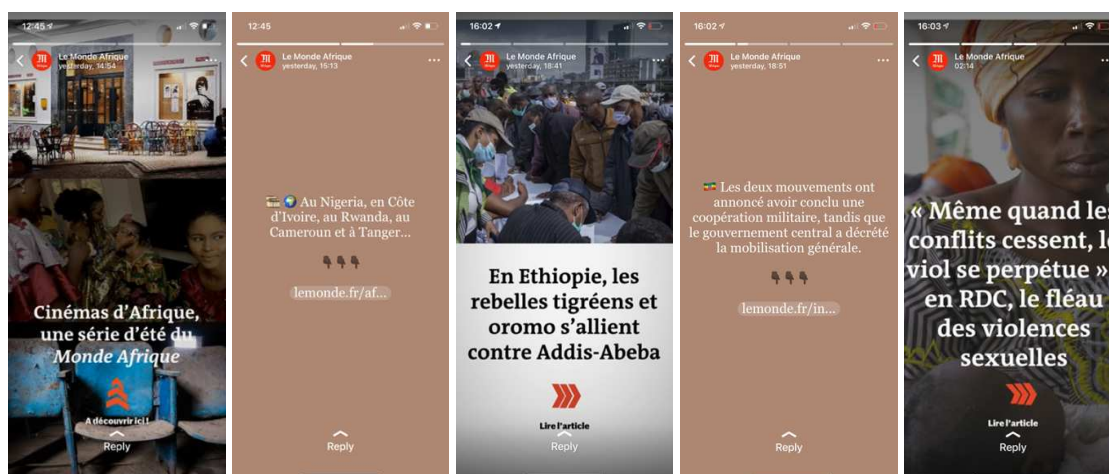


Figure 11. *Le Monde*'s attempt to reach an audience in Africa through WhatsApp *statuses* after the end of its newsletters on the platform (screenshots).

Apart from *Le Monde Afrique*'s initiative on WhatsApp, the French publisher started sending updates on the covid-19 pandemic on the platform on March 2020. The operation of the dedicated channel had to be totally manual contrary to what Lechelon stated the Afrique desk considered to do: WhatsApp users should send a message showing their interest to subscribe and add the publisher's telephone number to the list of

contacts of their devices in order to later receive the newsletters with the specific content related to the global issue. The perception that the pandemic would be a temporary crisis encouraged the newspaper to admit making the effort to maintain the channel as long as it was sustainable. Initially, messages sent by *Le Monde* Coronavirus on WhatsApp were daily. From October 2020 onwards, they were spaced out to two or three times a week. In January 2021, the newspaper started sending covid-19 newsletters only once a week until July 1, when the service was interrupted (see figure 12).

Even news companies that considered they were technically following the rules of WhatsApp feared they could face legal actions or have their accounts blocked after December 2019. Their concerns grew when they could not receive any feedback from WhatsApp even though they attempted to reach the company via their usual contact points on Facebook. The solution found, in general, by outlets that were not automating messages was 'paying to see': that is, keeping services as usual and expecting for the best, as revealed by Leonardo Cruz, executive editor for digital at *O Estado de S. Paulo*.

"WhatsApp was very unclear in the announcement it made and was not willing to clarify any doubts. So, we had a case here (*in Brazil*) where we interpreted the WhatsApp text in one way and colleagues at *UOL*, with whom we talked to, interpreted it in another way. Our understanding was that mass messaging does not necessarily mean automatic sending: we can send messages to a million people as long as we do it manually. This would not mean bulk messaging. So, we chose to continue with the service to see what would really happen" (Leonardo Cruz, *O Estado de S. Paulo*, December 2019, the translation is mine).

News publishers that decided keeping their services on WhatsApp after December 2019, though, were mostly from Brazil. *O Estado de S. Paulo's* channel on the messaging application has not been interrupted nor the news organization has received any official threat of ban for keeping it. However, the executive said that the insecurity generated by WhatsApp's announcement affected the newspaper's commercial negotiations. The department responsible for selling advertisements was advised that the sponsored newsletters that the publisher sent on the chat app could be affected and

eventually not reach users. Thus, the channel has been no longer offered to advertisers in new projects at least until a certain level of certainty was restored.

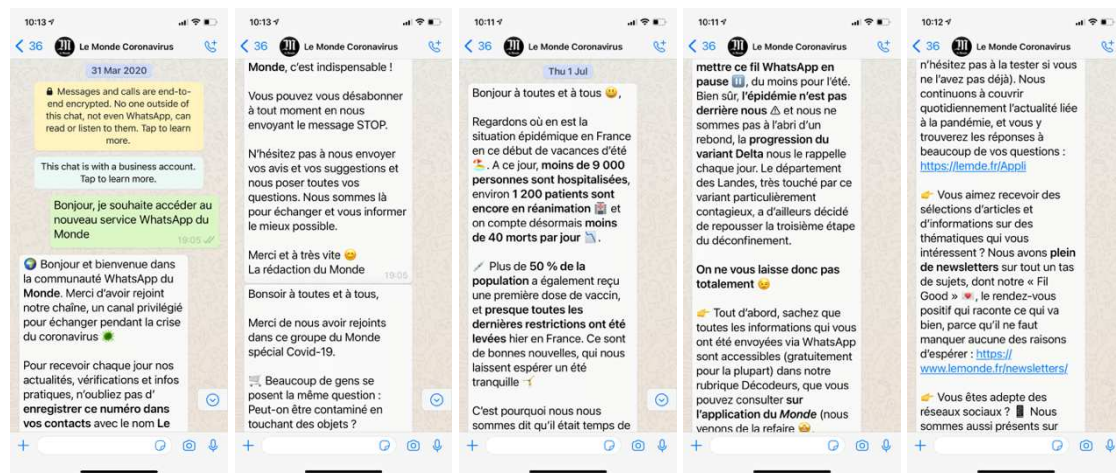


Figure 12. Beginning and end of a news distribution channel on WhatsApp: Le Monde Coronavirus (screenshots).

MessengerPeople, which I briefly mentioned before, had supported *Le Monde*, *Deutsche Welle* and several other news organizations (mostly from Europe and especially German media) on sending newsletters by bulk messages and automatically adding new subscribers to their services until December 2019. One of the pioneers in developing the tools to and providing consultancy on the use of WhatsApp by media and recognized official partners of the platform, the company also suffered with the changes and had to adapt quickly. According to its senior communications manager Katharina Kremming, *MessengerPeople* lost over 50% of its media clients on the period between September 2019 and November 2020 due to the changes made by WhatsApp. Despite their proximity with the platform, there was little they could do to influence the decision to restrict automation and bulk messaging. “That’s the risk we always have because we are in such a close connection to WhatsApp: if they are changing anything we have to handle that anyways. (...) For us, as a business, it was not easy. It was kind of a small crisis,” recalled Kremming (December 2020).

WhatsApp's decision to toughen up with users and groups that employed tools for automatic mass messaging came at a time when the platform was at the point of expanding the recently implemented *WhatsApp Business API*. The commercial solution aimed at medium and large businesses (including media companies) is provided through

the intermediation of various WhatsApp development partners – and one of them is *MessengerPeople*²¹⁹. Kremming explains that WhatsApp Business API is focused on just two use cases: customer service or communication.

“So, the customer is sending you a message, and it opens up a 24-hour window for you to reply, or you have the chance to send a proactive message to the customer if he gives his allowance to that. For this second kind of message, you have to pay for as a company. And there are like just around 10 templates from WhatsApp of how these messages can look like, they’re providing every template you’re sending in. Every company has to send the template in, what they want to send out as a notification, and WhatsApp gives us the allowance or say ‘no approval’. And that’s the one way how they look if there’s no promotion, fake news spreading and that the use case is focused on the service character” (Katharina Kremming, *MessengerPeople*, December 2020).

Fábio Gusmão, editor at *Editora Globo*, is considered to be one of the pioneers in using WhatsApp for news purposes (Fares, 2018). Back in 2013, when he was still the editor of general news at *Extra*, one of the newspapers owned by Brazil’s largest media conglomerate, and the messaging application has not been yet acquired by Facebook, he developed a complete process making the best possible usage of the tool to gather user-generated content and news tips from the audience as well as distributing links in broadcast lists. He knows how the WhatsApp Business API works and said it is not feasible for a news organization to hire the service: “It’s too expensive. It’s 29 cents for every (*proactive*) message sent. When you approach a new user, you need at least three iterations to make with him or her. And the impossibility of bulk messaging persists” (October 2020, the translation is mine).

WhatsApp’s limitations to news publishing leads news editors and executives to constant reflection and reassessment of their relationships with the platform. Several of

²¹⁹ Constine, J. (2018, August 1). WhatsApp finally earns money by charging businesses for slow replies. *TechCrunch*. Retrieved from <https://techcrunch.com/2018/08/01/whatsapp-business-api/> on August 20, 2021. WhatsApp Business API (n.d.). *WhatsApp*. Retrieved from <https://www.whatsapp.com/business/api/?lang=en> on August 20, 2021.

them, no matter which national news market, stated during the interviews that the tool was not designed for journalism. A few editors even claimed that they have heard that assumption from employees of the company or Facebook, although there is no official statement from either of them in this regard. That explains why, in general, most publishers are reluctant or simply feel unable to even start experimenting with it. In this sample, that was the case of *Groupe Centre France*, owner of a chain of local newspapers in France, the Mexican digital news native *Animal Político*, and the small experimental initiatives *Politibot* (Spain) and *Robot Labot* (Chile). A short phase of analysis was enough for them to realize that investing their efforts on the platform would be pointless.

Similar to *Deutsche Welle*, that understanding did not prevent the French group and the Spanish and Chilean startups to keep distance from a chat app owned by Facebook. Unlike the German public broadcaster, though, they have already faced some problems related to the platform's governance on Messenger. Motte discreetly cited privacy issues (Facebook collecting data from the users of their chatbot *Bonjour Marianne*) whereas Skoknic went further: she explained *Robot Labot* was unable to keep their services on the messaging application for a while because Facebook did not recognize the startup as a news medium according to the criteria established by its *News Page Index*, such as focusing primarily on current events and information, cite sources and having a website where news articles are presented to the audience. If an organization is not part of the index, it is not "eligible for products, policies and programs that benefit news publishers", according to the big tech giant²²⁰. Chatbots on Messenger are one of those exclusive products.

"We had issues with Facebook because they have changed the rules for chatbots (on Messenger). You can't send someone a message without them talking to you first, except if you are a media organization. But Facebook considers that we are not a media organization if we do not have a website where we publish news articles. And there is no way we can talk to anyone there; the communication with them is all automated. We have tried to send messages to the people on Facebook, to explain to them that *Labot* is a medium,

²²⁰ Vandor, M. (2020, August 17). Indexing News pages on Facebook. *Facebook Journalism Project*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/journalismproject/indexing-facebook-news-pages-ad-archive> on August 20, 2021.

but we had no response. (...) Facebook is always very demanding in terms of information, but there is no signature on the messages we receive. If your recognition as a media company has been rejected, you can try again only in 30 days and you do not even know with whom you talked to, so you could talk to that person again and avoid the process to re-start from zero. It's ridiculous" (Francisca Skoknic, Robot Labot, May 2020, the translation is mine).

Even though *Groupe Centre France* is a well-established media brand, it faced a similar problem with Messenger because the organization named its chatbot *Bonjour Marianne*, recalled Assen Lekarsky, co-founder of *Newspayper* (now *Kokoshka*), a startup focused in facilitating other companies on the process of building chatbots. Hence, the media conglomerate had no news organization or news page on Facebook with the same name of the chatbot. Lekarsky explained that the solution for the issue was both practical and political. On the one hand, they created news stories with links for subjects that were addressed on the chatbot at the page of *La Montagne*, the main newspaper of the chain. These links were also posted on the Facebook page *Bonjour Marianne*. On the other hand, *La Montagne* benefited of already being part of Facebook's French version of its *Subscription Accelerator Program*²²¹. Obviously, their previous relationship with the platform helped their case: "I mean, there are a couple of people you need to know, in France, so that you can send a request to Facebook headquarters and receive back an 'okay, these guys really have to be in the News Page Index'," said Lekarsky (December 2020).

Bonjour Marianne was largely inspired by another French Messenger-native initiative launched in 2015 called *Jam*, which is focused on establishing automated conversations with youngsters between 15 and 25 years old. Perhaps a stronger feature than their approach of sending information on a single subject every day is the startup's habit of frequently asking its audience several questions on different themes. Both procedures are highly marketable as conversation subjects can be sponsored by companies

²²¹ Grant, D., & Fritsch, M. (2020, December 3). How local French journalists used a Facebook Messenger bot to engage readers on covid-19, elections. *Facebook Journalism Project*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/journalismproject/programs/accelerator/facebook-messenger-chatbot-groupe-centre-france> on August 23, 2021.

and the knowledge gained with their questionnaires can become reports with insights that can interest commercial partners²²². The company's two-way approach to dealing with Facebook's rules also served as a benchmark for *Groupe Centre France* as *Jam* can hardly be considered a usual publisher. “(When Facebook changed the rules for chatbots) *Jam* had their authorization removed from Facebook and got it back because they knew the right people. But, obviously, they're not a media in the traditional sense of what Facebook is trying to promote,” said Lekarsky (December 2020).

For the purpose of this research, I followed *Jam* closely on Messenger between October 2020 and January 2021, interacting with the chatbot on a daily basis: often the conversations, which always started with a question from them, were part of a questionnaire promoted by a brand (see figure 13 for the conversation of November 26, 2020, sponsored by and focused on the interests of the insurance company MAAF). I contacted its CEO and co-founder Marjolaine Grondin, general director Guillaume Lalu, and head of marketing Germain Wasson by email, on LinkedIn and on Twitter in an attempt to make interviews, but unfortunately none of the messages was responded.

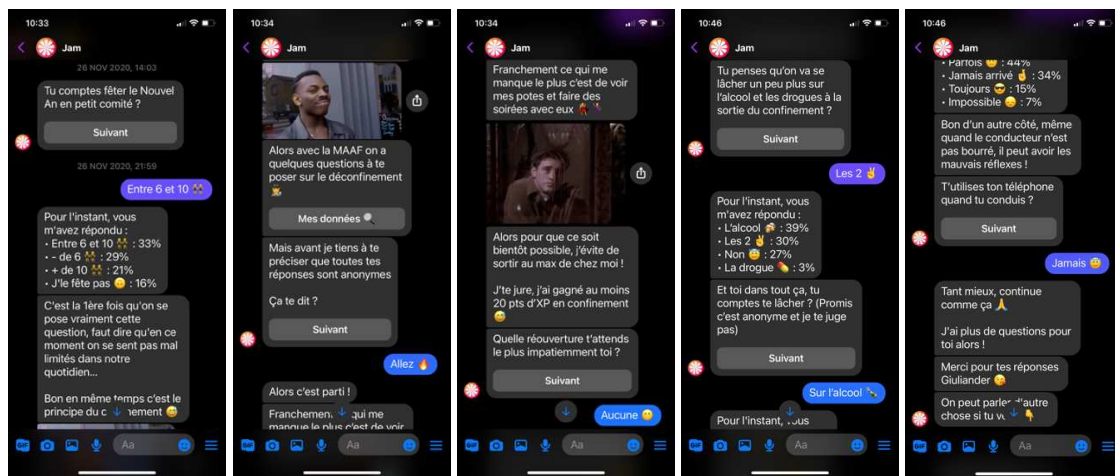


Figure 13. A conversation sent by *Jam*'s chatbot on Messenger on November 26, 2020: an interplay between information and the marketing needs of the insurance company MAAF (screen-shots).

The relative ease met by one of the most important local newspaper chains and a hyped startup²²³ in France to have their brands recognized by Facebook as news

²²² Nous croyons au pouvoir de la conversation (n.d.). *Jam for Brands*. Retrieved from <https://business.hellojam.fr/> on August 23, 2021.

²²³ *Jam* (2018, June 27). On revient de chine – 26 juin 2018. *Medium*. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/hello-jam/on-revient-de-chine-26-juin-2018-fd247d627968> on August 23, 2021.

producers and to be part of the News Page Index contrasts with the difficulty faced by more modest investigative journalism initiatives in Chile and Spain. This difference in treatment provides important evidence on how the big tech strategy of establishing specific partnerships with essential media players previously described by Bell (2018), Bell et al. (2017), Smyrnaio (2012) and Smyrnaio and Rebillard (2009) has been expanded by Facebook to its environment of messaging platforms and how facilitating for the most important actors while neglecting the rest can have dramatic impacts on the latter. While *Labot* successfully managed to get back to functioning after lengthy exchanges with Facebook during a four-month hiatus between April and August 2020, *Politibot* did not have the same resilience. Overwhelmed with other activities from their main jobs, the co-founders of the Spanish initiative were not willing to continue dealing with the demands of the platform and the small news organization silently ceased sending messages to its followers in March 2020.

Facebook's understanding of which news companies are essential for their platforms seems to change from one messaging application to another, though. On the following section, I am going to further describe the company's different approaches to partnerships on Messenger and WhatsApp.

6.1.2. Facebook's differing approaches to essential partnerships on Messenger and WhatsApp

As widely known, Messenger and WhatsApp have different origins: while the former evolved from a feature of Facebook's core social medium and became a standalone mobile app in 2014²²⁴, the latter was independently founded by former Yahoo employees Jan Koum and Brian Acton in 2009 and acquired by Facebook for \$19 billion when it had already become the most popular messaging app in the world (but not in the United

²²⁴ Hamburger, E. (2014, April 9). Facebook will turn off messaging in its mobile app, forcing you to download Messenger. *The Verge*. Retrieved from <https://www.theverge.com/2014/4/9/5598440/facebook-will-turn-off-messaging-in-its-mobile-app-forcing-you-to-download-messenger> on August 24, 2021. Hamburger, E. (2014, November 6). Mark Zuckerberg finally explains why he forced you to download the standalone Messenger app. *The Verge*. Retrieved from <https://www.theverge.com/2014/11/6/7170791/mark-zuckerberg-finally-explains-why-he-forced-you-to-download-the> on August 24, 2021.

States) also in 2014²²⁵. Despite eventually becoming a separated app, Messenger was integrated to its parenting platform since the very beginning, sharing similar business models and data infrastructure, as highlighted by Nieborg & Helmond (2019), who classified it as a 'platform instance': an application that directly serves to their owners' purposes of increasing their participation on the Internet through its software and economic imperatives. Both WhatsApp co-founders remained in the company's front office until December 2017, when Acton first left because Facebook was reportedly questioning the tool's message encryption limits, which would impede a targeted ad model and broader commercial use of messaging²²⁶. A few months later, then CEO Koun followed suit over disagreements regarding privacy as pressure from Facebook increased in the company's quest to finally monetize its most expensive acquisition²²⁷.

Despite Facebook's recent efforts to increasingly integrate all its platforms²²⁸, those different origins seem to have played a role on the development of both messaging applications: WhatsApp remained more independent for longer and there is still a long road to reach complete integration with its owning infrastructure. Only very recently the company found on its Business API a way to monetize its incredible popularity – and it is a business model based in providing firms a tool to keep conversations with their clients differently from Facebook's model, then replicated on Instagram and Messenger, which is mostly focused on the development of several forms of advertising. These differences hint us on why the two top chat apps of the world took differing paths in partnering with key news organizations.

Facebook's partnerships with the media rarely seem to be focused solely on Messenger but extensions of broader programs led by the parenting social platform

²²⁵ Olson, P. (2014, October 6). Facebook closes \$19bn WhatsApp deal. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/parmyolson/2014/10/06/facebook-closes-19-billion-whatsapp-deal/?sh=604024065c66> on August 24, 2021.

²²⁶ Olson, P. (2018, September 26). Exclusive: Whatsapp cofounder Brian Acton gives the inside story on #deletefacebook and why he left \$850 million behind. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/parmyolson/2018/09/26/exclusive-whatsapp-cofounder-brian-acton-gives-the-inside-story-on-deletefacebook-and-why-he-left-850-million-behind/> on August 26, 2021.

²²⁷ Solon, O. (2018, April 30). WhatsApp CEO Jan Koum quits over privacy disagreements with Facebook. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/apr/30/jan-koum-whatsapp-co-founder-quits-facebook> on August 26, 2021.

²²⁸ Isaac, M. (2019, January 25). Zuckerberg plans to integrate WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook Messenger. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/25/technology/facebook-instagram-whatsapp-messenger.html> on August 24, 2021.

within the *Facebook (now Meta) Journalism Project*, which is compounded by an Accelerator Program aimed at training news publishers to build sustainable organizations; a Community Network Grant Program that gives small grants between US\$ 5,000 and US\$ 25,000 to people and organizations interested in building local news initiatives; a broader Grant Program that is committed to giving US\$ 400 million (US\$ 100 million in covid-19-related projects) to news organizations; a fellowship to train local journalists to use Instagram; and finally the Third-Party Fact-Checking Program that supports news organizations to verify content that is being spread on all the big tech company's platforms. All those programs are relatively well documented on Meta Journalism Project's website²²⁹.

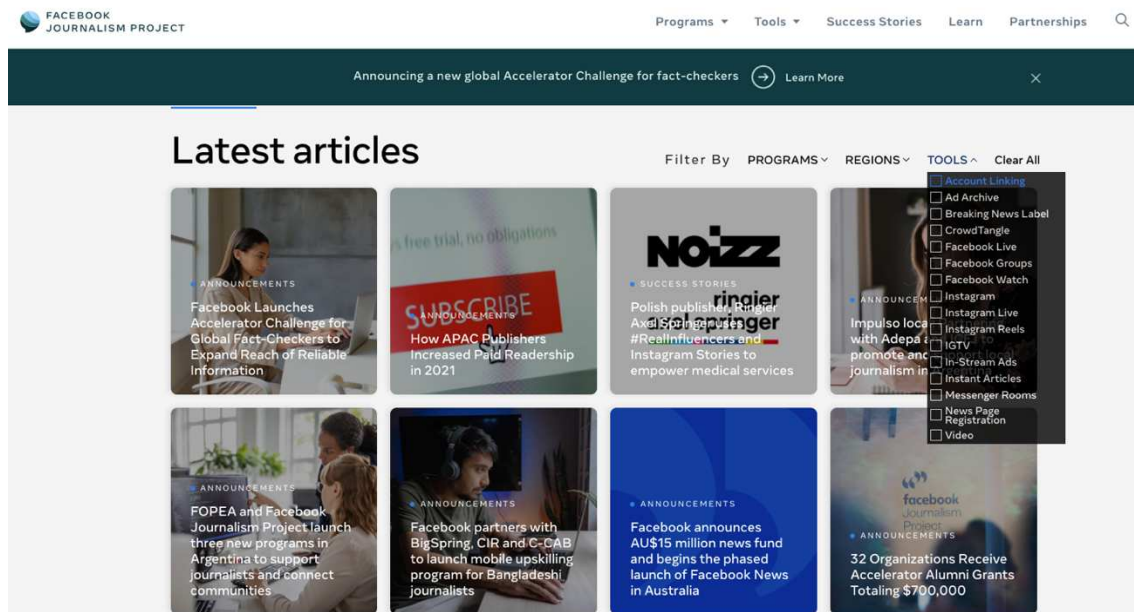


Figure 14. Only one among 16 options of tools highlighted on the Facebook (now Meta) Journalism Project website was directly related to a messaging application in September 2021: Messenger Rooms (screenshot).

A closer look took on September 14, 2021, showed these programs seem to involve the messaging application less often than the other social platforms from the company that provides the media with several different features (Instant Articles, livestreams, stories, etc.). The website highlighted success stories and new opportunities of partnerships between Facebook and media organizations on a section called

²²⁹ Facebook Journalism Project (n.d.). *Facebook for Media*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/journalismproject> on September 14, 2021.

‘latest articles’, where the user could choose the story by tool. Among the 16 options, only one was directly related to Messenger (Messenger Rooms) while several others were focused on features from Facebook and Instagram (see figure 14). Unfortunately, the site was remodeled after the holding company changed its name to Meta. Even so, among the tools made available to journalists, on October 3, 2022, I only noticed features from Facebook and Instagram. Messenger and WhatsApp did not appear on the list (see figure 15).

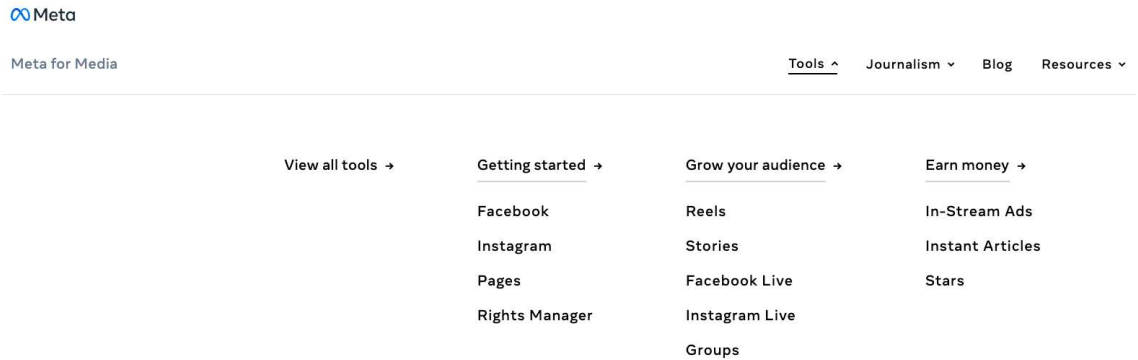


Figure 15. Only features from Facebook and Instagram are promoted by Meta on their updated Journalism Project website in October 2022: messaging applications were left out (screenshot).

News organizations’ interest on the usage of Messenger and partnerships involving it seem to differ from one country to another. In our sample, French media apparently rank high among the ones more leaned to experimenting with the platform than their counterparts in Spain and Latin America as the lead on the messaging market in the European country remains under dispute, whereas WhatsApp has already dominated the scene elsewhere in the sample. Motte and Lekarsky, who participated in the development of *Bonjour Marianne* on Messenger for *Groupe Centre France*, also emphasized that the platform's integration with Facebook favors product development and management through the collection of user data that enables several sorts of segmentation and a broader utilization of Facebook *Business Manager* dashboards to promote campaigns and monitor content and products. As already mentioned, *Groupe Centre France* is a longtime Facebook partner within its Accelerator program, but its chatbot was not created within the scope of the partnership nor received any direct financial support from the platform.

Media's excitement with Messenger in Spain appears to be low. Consequently, partnerships around it in the country are rare. *Maldita.es* has a chatbot to receive content there and eventually send verifications, but the usage is incidental in comparison to other platforms despite their participation in several initiatives of the Meta Journalism Project – notably the Accelerator and the Third-Party Fact-Checking programs. *Politi-bot* used it but did not have a formal or informal partnership with the platform until being discontinued in March 2020. If a user sends a message to *Newtral* on Messenger, receives a response directing him/her to WhatsApp – a situation that sums up well what chat app has been prioritized by fact-checkers in the country.

In Latin America, the founders of *Robot Labot* wanted to be on Messenger because they had already built an audience for the initiative there but, as already hinted in this study, they did not receive any incentives from Facebook to do so. *Aos Fatos* and *DW* use it in Brazil with different goals: the former collects user-generated content that can be fact-checked and the latter distributes links of their news articles – both companies have already participated in official partnerships with Facebook, but the use of Messenger is not an essential part of them even though *Aos Fatos* received a grant from the big tech platform that included the use of the messaging application.

Messenger was the only major messaging application left out of the distribution strategy from *O Estado de S. Paulo*, a frequent Facebook partner as part of their Accelerator program and a pioneer on the usage of Instant Articles in Brazil. Former company's director Luciana Cardoso summarized their stand:

“Through our usual partnerships Facebook has actually tried to encourage us to do something on Messenger, but we never wanted to bet too much on it. We performed a test on the platform – I think it was focused on *E+* (a section of the newspaper that addresses entertainment) – with a chatbot, which is apparently what works best for media. It gave us no return at all. We tested a tool, I think it was a trial tool, and we ended up experimenting with softer content to see if it would work. The return was very low, so we decided that it was not worth investing there” (Luciana Cardoso, *O Estado de S. Paulo*, December 2019, the translation is mine).

On the other hand, partnerships regarding WhatsApp have strictly been an offshoot of the Third-Party Fact-Checking program started by Facebook in the wake of the events that led Donald Trump to victory in the United States presidential election in early November 2016 – therefore, just before the official launch of the *Facebook Journalism Project* a couple months later²³⁰. As widely known, the platform eventually recognized flaws in its system that enabled political actors to collect personal information and user data to foment advertising campaigns in favor of Trump²³¹. On November 19, 2016, CEO Mark Zuckerberg listed for the first time a series of actions that the company was undertaking in an attempt to curb misinformation on the platform²³². Two of the highlights on that list were ‘stronger detection’ and ‘third-party verification’ through recognized fact-checking organizations. On January 15, 2017, Facebook announced it had onboarded the first partners on that front: some German news organizations that signed Poynter’s International Fact-Checking Code of Principles²³³. Poynter Institute is an American think tank funded by the foundations maintained by some of the richest philanthropists in the world as well as technology companies such as Facebook and Google. It aims at leading the thought in the field and providing training to journalists and news organizations. Signatories of its code become members of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), focused on monitoring and promoting best practices and exchanges in this field²³⁴. In February and March of the same year, Facebook added French and Dutch news companies from the network to the program.

²³⁰ Brown, C., & Simo, F. (2017, July 20). Facebook Journalism Project: Six-month update. *Facebook for Media*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/formedia/blog/facebook-journalism-project-six-month-update> on August 27, 2021.

²³¹ Kates, G. (2017, April 28). Facebook, for the first time, acknowledges election manipulation. CBS News. Retrieved from <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/facebook-for-the-first-time-acknowledges-election-manipulation/> on August 27, 2021. Lapowsky, I. (2016, November 15). *Wired*. Retrieved from <https://www.wired.com/2016/11/facebook-won-trump-election-not-just-fake-news/> on August 27, 2021.

²³² Zuckerberg, M. (2016, November 19). Untitled status update. *Facebook*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/10103269806149061> on June 16, 2020. Mosseri, A. (2016, December 15). Addressing hoaxes and fake news. *Meta Newsroom*. Retrieved from <https://about.fb.com/news/2016/12/news-feed-fyi-addressing-hoaxes-and-fake-news/> on June 16, 2020.

²³³ Facebook addresses fake news globally (2017, January 15). *Meta Journalism Project*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/journalismproject/facebook-addresses-fake-news-globally> on June 16, 2020.

²³⁴ What is the International Fact-Checking Network (n.d.). Poynter. Retrieved from <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/> on January 13, 2020.

Eventually, fact-checkers from over 70 countries became part of the partnership supported by the platform, including ones in Brazil and Mexico, the first to spot disinformation campaigns being promoted on WhatsApp during national general elections in 2018²³⁵. Initially, they have opened independent channels on the messaging app to receive the content being spread and attempt to fact-check and debunk it. *Projeto Comprova*, the Brazilian version of *CrossCheck* and a fact-checking collaborative project that reunited 24 news organizations in the country, made 350,567 interactions with the audience, received 78,462 files, and published 146 verifications via WhatsApp during their first sprint (Wardle et al., 2019). Together with a couple of recognized Brazilian researchers in the field, the founder of the Brazilian fact-checking agency *Lupa* and former program director at IFCN Cristina Tardáguila signed an open-ed in *The New York Times* pointing to the unbalance WhatsApp was enabling in the country's elections and asking the platform to adopt some measures to contain it²³⁶.

Almost at the same time, *Verificado 2018* put together the newsrooms of *Animal Político*, *AJ+* and *Newsweek* in Mexico, and also made available an independent WhatsApp number to collect rumors from the audience. They used *Check*, a tool from Meedan, to manage the incoming material but the process, in general, was lengthy: they received thousands of requests for verification and journalists had to catalogue and analyze each one manually on the tool, what resulted in just a few fact-checks in comparison to the whole amount of content received. In August 2019, WhatsApp launched its Business API and, a few months later, Meedan partnered with the platform to connect *Check* to it and automate at least part of the process, as explained by the NGO's CEO and co-founder Ed Bice to *Poynter*:

"Audience members can send links, claims, images and memes to a dedicated WhatsApp number (or Facebook Messenger account, for example). If

²³⁵ Mello, D. (2018, October 25). Spread of fake news in Brazil unprecedented, says OAS. *Agência Brasil*. Retrieved from <https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/en/politica/noticia/2018-10/spread-fake-news-brazil-unprecedented-says-oas> on January 14, 2019. Martínez, M. (2018, May 30). México: los "bots", "trolls" y otros trucos de manipulación en internet que amenazan las próximas elecciones presidenciales. *BBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-44302996> on January 14, 2019.

²³⁶ Tardáguila, C., Benevenuto, F., Ortellado, P. (2018, October 17). Fake News Is Poisoning Brazilian Politics. WhatsApp Can Stop It. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/17/opinion/brazil-election-fake-news-whatsapp.html> on January 14, 2019.

that content has already been checked by fact-checkers using the tool, they'll automatically receive the results of that fact-check, along with some simple information about why the conclusion was reached, and a visual card that is designed to be shareable. If the content is 'new' (if it doesn't exist in the database), then it goes into a queue for fact-checkers, and when they reach a conclusion using *Check*, a notification will automatically go out to the audience member(s) who shared that content with the results of the fact-check"²³⁷ (par. 15-17).

This short historical contextualization shows that the interest of news organizations and, in this specific case, their fact-checking arms and independent agencies, in the use of WhatsApp appeared before Meta structured partnerships around the tool: the initial and main focus of the program. The company's Third-Party Fact-Checking initiative was initially aimed at its main social media. Newsrooms were some of the first civil society actors to realize the importance of WhatsApp for the dissemination of disinformation (and, consequently, for the work they do) during elections in Latin American countries. The formal partnerships with the platform came later, when the management of WhatsApp and Facebook realized that they needed to take measures to mitigate the harmful effects of the misinformation that circulates in the messaging app for democratic processes.

Nevertheless, several fact-checking organizations that partnered with WhatsApp actually did it through Meedan. It means they did not necessarily had a direct connection, contact point or contract with the platform, which still had the final word in any cooperation, as stated by Isabella Barroso, Meedan's program manager for Latin America. Companies were allowed to acquire a license to use *Check* on Facebook Messenger if they wanted, but the process on the most popular messaging application of the world was not as straightforward: "First of all, an organization can only use the product if WhatsApp allows it: the platform selects the participants. In my role, I suggested some names according to specific criteria and they selected the ones I could eventually approach" (Isabella Barroso, Meedan, December 2020, the translation is mine).

²³⁷ Tardáguila, C. (2019, August 9). Here comes a tool, approved by WhatsApp, to automate the distribution of fact-checks. *Poynter*. Retrieved from <https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2019/here-comes-a-tool-approved-by-whatsapp-to-automate-the-distribution-of-fact-checks/> on August 27, 2021.

AFP (in Brazil and India), *Africa Check*, *BOOM* and *India Today* were the first news organizations to be part of the partnership involving Meedan and WhatsApp in October 2019. They were joined in November 2020 by three other Brazilian initiatives: *Estadão Verifica*, a fact-checking arm at *O Estado de S. Paulo*, *Lupa*, and *Fato ou Fake*, which congregates several media companies under the umbrella of *Grupo Globo*²³⁸. Meedan was not the only company that partnered with WhatsApp for this program but was the one that ICFJ recommended its members to use, as Luiza Bodenmüller, former strategy manager at *Aos Fatos* (Brazil) recalled. Her company, which already had more direct collaborations with Facebook and WhatsApp, preferred to follow a different and more independent path though, setting up a team of developers within the organization to create their own tool and holding communication and contracts directly with the platform.

“Not for false modesty or anything, but we managed to streamline and launch it in Brazil, and I think it was the first journalistic chatbot on WhatsApp. (...) All of our projects have a technological side and I think we chose this path in order to have greater autonomy in relation to the platform, to set up an ideal tool for us. So, when you take Meedan, they will offer you a framework that already exists and there's not much you can adapt, change and such. We are building *Fátima* (the name of their bot not only on WhatsApp but also on Twitter and Facebook), and it still needs a million adjustments, but we are building it according to what we realize from our audience's needs and the needs of our newsroom” (Luiza Bodenmüller, *Aos Fatos*, December 2020, the translation is mine).

Maldita.es (Spain), on the other hand, hired the WhatsApp-accredited The Neon Project (now called Wealizer) and adapted their Coloq.io platform to their needs²³⁹. In all modalities, WhatsApp provided financial support for both news organizations and

²³⁸ Barroso, I. (2020, November 24). Three new Brazilian partners join our WhatsApp fact-checking efforts. *Meedan*. Retrieved from <https://meedan.com/blog/meedan-welcomes-3-new-brazilian-partners/> on August 27, 2021.

²³⁹ Calero, M. (2021, June 3). Maldita: “Tools to keep citizens away of disinformation”. *Wealizer*. Retrieved from <https://knowledge.wealizer.digital/en/blog/maldita-a-tool-to-keep-citizens-out-of-trouble> on August 27, 2021.

companies that own the means to connect to its Business API tools, as confirmed by interviewed editors.

On another move, in March 2020, the platform donated US\$ 1 million to an IFCN project called CoronaVirusFacts/DatosCoronaVirus alliance focused on supporting fact-checking organizations all around the world on their effort to verify new hoaxes related to the covid-19 pandemic²⁴⁰. One year later, WhatsApp destined other US\$ 500,000 to the network to fund the Vaccine Grant Program, aimed at addressing rumors related to vaccination against covid-19²⁴¹. The donations consolidated the platform as the main source of funds for the IFCN as a whole. In 2020, the International Fact-Checking Network distributed US\$ 2.7 million in grant programs to 56 signatories of its Code of Principles. Lately, the distribution of these resources has made WhatsApp appear more frequently among the latest stories from the Meta Journalism Project website in texts about the Third-Party Fact-Checking program, but it was still not enough for it to be shown along the company's main tools for journalists in a broader sense (see figures 14 and 15).

Chatbots were not mandatory features from the partnerships between WhatsApp and fact-checking organizations but frequently a result of them. Besides *Aos Fatos*, in this sample also *Estado Verifica* and *Maldita.es* used this type of feature. *Newtral*, despite its membership to the IFCN, preferred to keep it simple and make direct contact with the user without the intermediation of a bot. Chatbots for WhatsApp have much more limited functions than those used in Messenger and even in Telegram: "Right now they are a bit silly", states Clara Jimenez, from *Maldita* (November 2020).

The general feeling among WhatsApp partner organizations is hard to grasp and give a hint about the complexity of the cooperation going through on the domain of this specific messaging application. While editors can show excitement and optimism about its future, they can also convey a bit of dissatisfaction and a perception that the big tech

²⁴⁰ IFCN receives \$1 million from WhatsApp to support fact-checkers on the coronavirus battlefield (2020, March 18). *Poynter*. Retrieved from <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2020/ifcn-receives-1-million-from-whatsapp-to-support-fact-checkers-on-the-coronavirus-battlefront/> on May 17, 2020.

²⁴¹ Fact-checking vaccine hoaxes? Apply now to the Vaccine Grant Program (2021, March 9). *Poynter*. Retrieved from <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2021/fact-checking-vaccine-hoaxes-apply-now-to-the-vaccine-grant-program/?fbclid=IwAR0WZQV0UOiTVFRUlp91FcP9iT2etSIDH2A1GuKnI5g6ucVQ5eiZF6jgYCU> on April 14, 2021.

company could be more flexible and understanding with the news organizations that are on its side. “I think that now WhatsApp has realized that it has been used for infinite more things and that it is already not so private anymore, they are evolving the model and probably at some point they will allow things that today are ultra-prohibited,” expected a hopeful Jimenez (November 2020, the translation is mine). Bodenmüller, from *Aos Fatos*, was less enthusiastic and, at the same time, also seemed resigned with the limitations of the platform (for example, the impossibility to answer a message after the 24-hour window free of charge):

“From the point of view of WhatsApp, I understand why it has this limitation, but at the same time I think it should have some kind of flexibility with the news outlet, something they don't have nowadays. Just as Facebook gives (*news partners*) a lot of coupons for ads and promoting their content, I think WhatsApp should have something similar for a journalistic organization, if they are so concerned about the dissemination of disinformation” (Luiza Bodenmüller, *Aos Fatos*, December 2020, the translation is mine).

Beyond agencies or teams that carry out fact-checking initiatives and unlike what happened on Messenger, the interest in being on WhatsApp, establishing partnerships that lessen the effects of the tool's limitations and that could bring financial return to news organizations seemed to be widespread in the sample, no matter the region. Perhaps the only exception was *Vocento*, whose general editorial editor Fernando Belzunce stated firmly that his company did not perceive much value in establishing a presence in the app. Even editors who clearly expressed a negative view of Facebook, such as the product and strategy manager at *Matinal* FêCris Vasconcellos, manifested their openness to establishing a channel of communication, exchanging ideas and even resources with the big tech company in the short-term. “We haven’t tried yet to speak with them (*Facebook/WhatsApp*), but I think it’s on our roadmap to see if there’s any partnerships we could have,” said Vasconcellos (September 2020, the translation is mine). Those broader partnerships with WhatsApp, though, remained largely unavailable for general media until the end of this research.

In short, the rare partnerships on Messenger seem to be only an extension of existing collaborations with Facebook. National scenarios and publishers' specific goals (for example, launching a chatbot, a function that is now more developed on Messenger than on WhatsApp) influence this situation at least moderately. But few news companies are interested on this kind of cooperation, even though they are technically available for more organizations as part of their already existing agreements and proximity with the company from Silicon Valley. Despite the limited focus on third-party fact-checking organizations and especially ones that are members of the International Fact-Checking Network, partnerships on WhatsApp seem to follow a more independent path as the company frequently uses its brand (and not Facebook's or Meta's) to sponsor programs and provide grants to news companies that perform a work that fits the platform's objective – or at least the intentions of their public relations efforts – to combat disinformation. News companies that have not met the partnership criteria established by WhatsApp have followed the developments of these initiatives carefully and have shown openness to possible agreements, even if they have already expressed discontentment with the policies and limitations imposed by Facebook and its most popular messaging application.

To a certain extent, the results from this research were similar to those of Rashidian et al. (2019), who focused their study mostly on the relationship between news publishers and parenting platforms, such as Google and Facebook, and found that American news organizations were increasingly losing confidence that these big technology companies could provide them the support needed to find alternatives to monetize their content and sustain their business on the long-term: a situation that did not mean, however, that news publishers would not be open to accepting financial support from these platforms.

In the more specific domain of messaging applications, this research noticed a decrease in expectations: in general, news organizations hardly expected these tools to become their main sources of audience or revenue, but rather that they would function as auxiliary platforms within their entire content distribution strategies. The exception was perhaps small- and medium-sized local media in Brazil: as they have conquered an important share of their readers through WhatsApp, they would certainly celebrate if the platform were to expand the already existing collaborations (mainly training and

small grants) of the Meta Journalism Project in their directions. Unfortunately for them, that kind of cooperation still seemed out of sight.

This research also confirmed Rashidian et al. (2019) in noticing that difficulties in establishing and having a stronger role on these partnerships were increasingly encouraging news organizations to shift their focus to reader-based revenue models and to attempt strengthening and privileging their own products. In this sense, in addition to content distribution, publishers have mentioned that they have been employing platforms to promote subscriptions or memberships, as found by Cornia et al. (2018) and Jenkins (2020). Of course, this situation also had an effect on the importance of the messaging applications for the media and their relationships, subject that is going to be addressed in the following section.

6.1.3. News organizations attempt to enhance their own products and the effects for news distribution on social media and messaging applications

There was a relative consensus among respondents that reducing platform dependency was a necessity for publishers. According to previous studies (Bell, 2017; Cornia et al., 2018; Jenkins, 2020), news organizations with established brands and the ability to increase reader revenue through online subscriptions, memberships and other formats such as events and donations would be better prepared for that shift than others. Thus, these initiatives could use digital platforms more strategically to reach more readers, eventually convert part of them into subscribers/members and turn some of them into ambassadors (Carpes & Gruszynski Sanseverino, 2020; Cornia et al., 2018; Jenkins, 2020). When possible, most of the editors interviewed in this research have manifested their intentions to increasingly shift the business models of their companies to reader-based revenues or enhance them when they were already their main focus.

As outlined in table 4, though, 10 (38,5%) of the 26 fully functional commercial news outlets (*Politibot* and *Nómada* were closed during research, while *Deutsche Welle* is public funded by taxes paid by the German population) analyzed in this study already had the readers as their main source of revenues. Media houses in France and digital news natives with well-known brands in Spain appeared to be slightly more advanced in the process of shifting to reader revenues than their counterparts in Latin America.

However, advertising remained the most significant stream of income for news organizations in the sample (12 or 46,1%), despite the fact that subscriptions and memberships have gained importance lately.

In that scenario, the media tended to adopt a dual strategy in an attempt to minimize losses in the advertising front whereas substantially increasing their bases of paying subscribers. *O Estado de S. Paulo* served as an interesting example of that trend. A century-and-a-half-old institution and one of the most traditional newspapers in Brazil, it created a digital strategies department in 2017 in order to better understand the consumption habits of online readers, who had become the newspaper's main consumers but still had not played such a significant role in the company's revenues – a typical dynamic of a two-sided market before the emergence of digital infrastructures, as pointed by Rochet and Tirole (2003, 2006). The department had four pillars: *business intelligence*, focused in understanding the metrics around the user journey; *product*, which was a team that performed benchmarking, test design, user navigation, etc; *technology*, which was formed by the developers who focused exclusively on digital; and *marketing*, related to approaching online users and increasing subscription sales.

“We analyzed foreign initiatives and realized that revenue from readers will eventually become our main source of funding. Therefore, the number one focus of this digital strategies department is to better understand the reader in order to offer a more interesting subscription for them. (...) We still believe that advertising will continue to be an important source of revenue, especially regarding events, branded content, etc. But we don't believe in digital banner advertising anymore, it's only losing value” (Luciana Cardoso, *O Estado de S. Paulo*, December 2019, the translation is mine).

Several other news organizations addressed in this research have gone through similar situations, recently creating departments of digital strategy and assigning professionals to it with the objective to increase their understanding of the readers' needs and interests and how to best approach them.

News outlet	Type (reach)	Main revenue sources	Main business focus in the medium term
O Estado de S. Paulo	Print & online newspaper (national)	Advertising; subscriptions	Increasing digital subscriptions revenue
Editora Globo	Print & online newspapers (national)	Advertising; subscriptions	Increasing digital subscriptions revenue
Gazeta do Povo	Print & online newspaper (national)	Subscriptions; advertising	Increasing digital subscriptions revenue
UOL	Digital news native (national)	Advertising; subscriptions	Increasing advertising revenue
The Intercept Brasil	Digital news native (national)	Memberships; grants	Increasing membership revenue
Agência Pública	Digital news native (national)	Grants; memberships	Increasing membership revenue
Aos Fatos	Fact-checking (national)	Grants; on-demand content; memberships	Increasing membership revenue
Correio Sabiá	Messaging-application-based	Memberships; grants	Increasing membership revenue
Panorama	Messaging-application-based	Memberships; grants	Increasing membership revenue
GZH	Online newspaper (regional)	Subscriptions; advertising	Increasing digital subscriptions revenue
Diário Gaúcho	Print newspaper (local)	Advertising; sale at newsstands	Increasing advertising revenue
Matinal	Digital news native (local)	Subscriptions; grants; advertising	Increasing membership revenue
O Município	Print & online newspaper (local)	Advertising; print subscriptions	Increasing advertising revenue
O Mirante	Digital news native (local)	Advertising; memberships	Increasing membership revenue
Tribuna do Paraná	Print & online newspaper (local)	Advertising; memberships	Increasing membership revenue
Nómada (Guatemala)	Digital news native (national)	Advertising; memberships	Not applicable (closed in Oct 2020)
LaBot (Chile)	Messaging-application-based	Grants; donations	Increasing revenue from grants and donations
Animal Político (Mexico)	Digital news native (national)	Advertising; consulting; donations; memberships	Increasing membership revenue
Le Monde	Print & online newspaper (national)	Subscriptions; advertising	Increasing digital subscriptions revenue
Groupe Centre France	Print & online newspapers (local)	Subscriptions; sale at newsstands, advertising; e-commerce	Increasing digital subscriptions revenue
Journal des Entreprises	Digital news native (specialized, national)	Advertising; subscriptions	Increasing digital subscriptions revenue
Grupo Vocento	Print + online newspapers (national, local)	Advertising; subscriptions; sale at newsstands	Increasing digital subscriptions revenue
El Confidencial	Digital news native (national)	Subscriptions; advertising	Increasing digital subscriptions revenue
eldiario.es	Digital news native (national)	Subscriptions; advertising	Increasing digital subscriptions revenue
Newtral	Fact-checking (national)	On-demand content; grants; memberships	Increasing digital subscriptions revenue
Maldita.es	Fact-checking (national)	Grants; on-demand content; Memberships	Increasing digital subscriptions revenue
Politibot	Messaging-application-based	Memberships; grants; access to platform (B2B)	Not applicable (closed in Mar 2020)
Deutsche Welle	Public broadcasting (international)	Public funded	Reaching larger audiences online

Table 4. All news organizations of the sample by their types, main revenue sources and business focus (Source: interviews and business reports).

It was no coincidence that, within the scope of their large media partnership programs, Google and Facebook have developed solutions that supposedly made it easier for users to subscribe to digital editorial products using their login information on the platforms. Perhaps a subtle change in the eyes of those outside the news organizations, but significant in relation to the return outlets have been seeking from the relationships with platforms, was the integration of subscription and membership promotion strategies to the pure and simple content distribution they are already used to make in these channels. These strategies have materialized in actions such as subscription offers with generous discounts or free trials on links redirected from social media that hit paywalls, calls for readers to become members after consuming content with potential positive impact, wide dissemination of posts that transparently addressed what the news organization has been able to achieve with the revenue from readers and the business challenges they were or foresaw facing (see figure 16). Something unthinkable in the past, it has been also increasingly common to see journalists asking their readers to subscribe or become members of the outlet they work for: “What we call ‘separation of church and state’ in journalism makes a lot of sense when the business model is heavily based on advertising. But as the business model gradually migrates to the subscription market, journalists start to promote their own content. So, it's more natural to have the journalists in the house promoting these subscriptions,” explained Leonardo Cruz, digital editor at *O Estado de S. Paulo* (December 2019, the translation is mine).

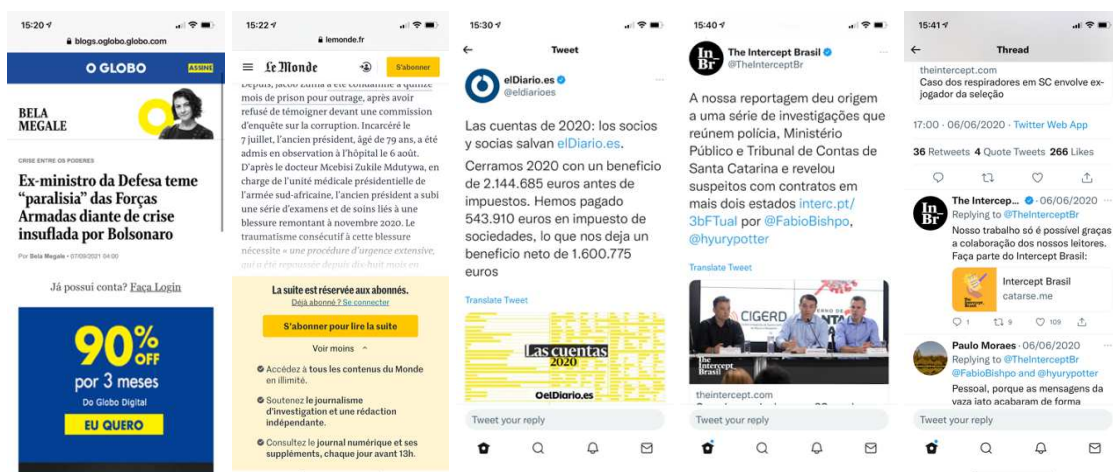


Figure 16. Different strategies used by O Globo, Le Monde, eldiario.es and The Intercept Brasil on Twitter as an attempt to convert readers into subscribers/members (screenshots).

Legacy news organizations and digital news natives with well-known brands included in this sample have often adopted metered paywalls in search of consolidating their online revenues. The number of free articles made available to readers varied by outlet. Interestingly, at *Groupe Centre France* it depended on several variables, such as the online newspaper the users were accessing, the social platform they employed to reach the content, and specific data collected about their personal usage of the website. “We have eight websites, and we test different numbers of free articles: we’re looking for the best conversion rate for each one,” explained Cédric Motte, director of digital products at the company, which is also analyzing the possibility of charging for access to premium content. “We are currently working on another paywall in which an article is put behind it by an editorial decision. We are trying to explain to the reader that he or she can help us in the mission of providing the service. But I’m not sure if our content already has enough quality” (November 2020).

The emphasis put by news editors and executives in the effort to explain how their business strategies were integrated to content production and distribution on platforms showed they were attempting – and perhaps eventually managing – to reduce their dependence on platforms. When asked about the importance of these infrastructures for their companies, editors frequently sought to emphasize that the main source of traffic to their websites at the time was direct access to their home pages and mobile applications and not the traffic redirected from Google, Facebook or Twitter. “We are not seeking traffic on social media anymore. We are using social media more as a way to interact with our audience,” reinforced Motte (Centre France, November 2020). “Obviously, as long as the platforms exist and they're bringing us some advantage, we'll be there, we'll be taking the last juice we can get from them. But we are increasingly reducing the relevance of these channels to our most important audience,” summed up Déborah Pradella, manager of digital product at *GZH* (October 2020, the translation is mine).

In that sense, according to experts interviewed, the distribution of news content on platforms has increasingly followed a ‘product dynamic’, in which each channel (website, app, newsletters, podcasts, social media) has been seen as a separate output provided to the subscriber/member. The content should undergo format changes, repackaging, to adapt to the different platforms on which it circulates, but it is essentially the

result of the same production process. The idea behind this trend was that news organizations could have a larger part in the entire daily journey of the news consumers, who use an increasingly diverse range of platforms and devices to be informed of current matters. The word 'product', by the way, was mentioned to refer to these channels and the content produced by news organizations several times during the interviews. The word also appears in the job description of some of the interviewees, as we could see in the specific cases of Débora Pradella, Luciana Cardoso, and Cedric Motte, executives mentioned in this section.

The distribution of news content on messaging applications seemed embedded in this dynamic mentioned by most editors and executives interviewed for this research: providing a different product to readers with, in essence, the same content repackaged for a platform that has been increasingly part of users' daily routine. Hence, most respondents who worked for more established cases that were still present on chat apps said they have not opened their channels to increase their audience numbers, gain more page views – which was, in fact, a reason for the frustration faced by some news organizations' that quit them, as already mentioned, – but to offer a different product that could better adapt to the wishes and needs of their readers. Thus, the formats chosen by these news companies varied widely according to the rationale of each one and will be better described in section 6.3. Beforehand, it is already possible to mention that newsletters similar to those sent by email, for example, were a very popular format. In any case, they rarely reached more than 40,000 subscribers due to the operating limitations imposed by these platforms, which coerced a large part of the analyzed means of communication to sort of hide this type of product in order not to make the total operation unfeasible.

“What happens is that when a big news outlet promotes its channel on WhatsApp, a very large number of people can respond, and the company's telephone number can end up being blocked by the platform. If that doesn't happen, there could still be a very long queue of people to be registered in the contacts. I understand that for some news organizations this process is very difficult, the only alternative would be to automate it, but it's not

allowed” (Fábio Gusmão, Editora Globo, October 2020, the translation is mine).

In practice, the product orientation pursued by more established news organizations and their low audience reach in messaging applications seemed to contribute to a scenario of perceived greater autonomy from publishers in relation to these platforms. In other words, despite the frustration that could be generated on editors and readers by an eventual interruption of the operation of such a channel, effectively there would not be significant disruption in their work and total audience numbers. Consequently, there would not be serious loss of revenue, since the bulk of the advertising investment has not been deposited on messaging channels and their importance for the conversion of subscribers has remained, in general, also restricted.

If traditional media with strong brands appeared to be well equipped to challenge platform dependence in the realm of messaging applications, I cannot state the same about recently founded news initiatives and small and medium local publishers. The almost complete infeasibility of reaching a significant audience organically on Facebook after the algorithmic changes that limited the distribution of news content made those kinds of news organizations experiment with dissemination strategies that relied almost uniquely on messaging applications. In this research sample, Latin American initiatives have been more willing to take this risk: *Correio Sabiá*, *Panorama*, branches of *O Município*, *O Mirante* (Brazil) and *Labot* (Chile) are examples of this trend. I have already mentioned that for the Chilean chatbot this strategic approach meant a long interruption of service that generated stressful attempts of communication with Facebook Messenger. The Brazilian initiatives have reported more joy than sadness from their exploitation of WhatsApp so far: editors of the first three cases said they have managed to maintain a moderate but constant growth in audience by sending news in the tool. “We understand that WhatsApp is an efficient way to distribute the content we produce and earn revenue, both driving traffic to our websites and generating advertising within the groups. It is a more direct channel than social media like Facebook and Instagram, where we become hostages to algorithms that change frequently,” stated Andrei Paloschi, journalism director at *O Município* (October 2020, the translation is mine).

The pressure for rapid growth outside Facebook's core ecosystem – made up of its main social medium, Messenger and Instagram, which are increasingly integrated and provide a resourceful environment for marketers – has led some entrepreneurial editors to take perhaps too risky paths. Fernando Rotta, co-founder and editor of *Panorama*, a daily morning newsletter with the curation of the main news articles published in the Brazilian media, confessed that his company used an unauthorized tool to send bulk messages to users on WhatsApp. It also freed the service's subscribers from having to add *Panorama*'s phone number to their address book to continue receiving content.

As noticed, dependence was a concern and 'hostage' was a frequently used word to express how these news players felt in the relationships with platforms – mostly regarding algorithm-powered social media, but also their related messaging applications. Hence, editors said they have been constantly thinking about measures to limit the effects of possible changes that could affect their businesses. "For me it's very important to grow fast, expand to other platforms and avoid becoming a hostage of WhatsApp," said Maurício Ferro, founder and editor of *Correio Sabiá* (March 2020, the translation is mine). Lately, the growth in the number of members has allowed the initiative to open pages on LinkedIn and Instagram, collect users' emails to send newsletters, repackage the content in other formats (e.g., quizzes) and add extra bits of information to attract readers to these other channels. Another experiment was also sharing the daily newsletter on Telegram, but it was stalled because the editor realized its audience was not increasing but simply being divided between the two messaging applications. The ideal solution, Ferro reflected, would be for *Correio Sabiá* to have its own mobile application like most of the established media. However, this was still a distant possibility because of production and dissemination costs.

Also inspired by larger publishers, *Labot* was focusing on product diversification allowed by grants that it recently received: on the one hand, it developed their own platform that can be connected to all social media, messaging applications and websites that support independent chatbots; on the other, the small startup has taken advantage of its co-founders' investigative skills to produce in-depth exclusive content that could even be licensed by other news outlets. "At heart we already have a brand, we are a credible medium and we want to use it as flexibly as possible," stated its founder Francisca Skoknic (May 2020, the translation is mine).

The constant changes carried out by Facebook and WhatsApp in terms of algorithmic criteria and the governance of their networks have caused scares, stress and frustration in news organizations in recent years. As a result, news editors and executives have increasingly realized the need to reduce the degree of dependence that their companies have on platforms in terms of content distribution and revenue sources. To that end, traditional media brands and already established digital news natives seemed to be seeking to strengthen channels they have more control of, such as their own websites, mobile apps and email newsletters. This trend has caused these top publishers to usually report that more than half of their audiences today reached them directly by Internet users that simply typed their URLs on the browser. This scenario obviously affects the relationship of these outlets with messaging apps that in general still limit their possibilities of work, even though the importance of these tools for news consumption has increased significantly in recent years. If not many large news players were convinced of the need to establish a presence in popular applications such as WhatsApp and Messenger, those who were have been trying to avoid as much as possible making the same mistakes that resulted in a relationship of extreme dependency built with platforms such as Google and Facebook during most of the last decade. In this sense, its channels within these tools worked as a kind of alternative product for users who, in general, were already part of their audience, but who might be interested in consuming their content in a different support and who were already used to employing it in their daily routines.

On the other hand, almost completely unable to find a significant audience on social media like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter these days, smaller local and recently founded digital native initiatives ended up finding on messaging apps an alternative to grow and become notable faster. Obviously, this strategy carried the risk of causing an over-reliance on the distribution of a single platform that could eventually even threaten the sustainability of these companies, should platforms decide making some more drastic changes in their terms of service.

The exception to both trends seemed to be fact-checking agencies, which receive differentiated treatment from a messaging app such as WhatsApp because of the nature of their services, considered essential by the platform either in terms of containing the spread of disinformation or even adding up to their public image before users and

political figures. These young news organizations have taken advantage of partnerships with Facebook and WhatsApp that not only guarantee a more favorable treatment from algorithms to their content on the social medium, but also tools that facilitate their employment of the messaging application and financial incentives from both to grow and establish themselves in a challenging scenario for media companies – demands made by larger and even more established publishers that have not been met by the platform.

In addition to the differences between news organizations, the popularity of a messaging application within specific markets also seemed to play an important role in making partnerships available and raising interest from media players. While Spanish and Latin American media showed more interest in WhatsApp, the leading messaging app in their countries, and Telegram, a competitor with growing popularity, the French still considered Messenger in the mix. In the next section, I will delve deeper into the description and discussion of the reasons that led the media to prefer and effectively adopt some messaging applications over others.

6.2. Effectively adopting messaging applications for news distribution

The complex and fragmented relationships between media and platforms work as a backdrop against which news outlets effectively must make a decision into adopting or not messaging applications for news distribution. Given the growing popularity of chat apps and their increasing importance for news consumption on the global stage in recent years (Newman et al., 2021), at first glance, it can be curious to notice that most publishers remain reluctant to have a role in this ecosystem, especially if we take into consideration that basically every news organization nowadays bet on social media such as Twitter, which, despite being an already established player in the networked environment, is generally responsible for redirecting only a small part of the traffic for news sites. The purpose of this section, therefore, is to move towards answering *RQ2* and related sub-research questions by showing which are the most interesting messaging applications for news editors and executives from our sample (sub-*RQ2.1*) and hopefully further describing the reasons that explain this (lack of) interest and effective adoption (or not) beyond what was already touched upon on the previous section (sub-*RQ2.2*).

As briefly discussed in section 6.1, this study found that WhatsApp is the messaging app that has drawn more attention from editors and executives interviewed in this research. Among the 28 media cases in the full sample, 14 (50%) were actively distributing content through the tool on September 14, 2021, while another nine news organizations (32.1%) had at least tested the tool in the past before making a decision of no longer using it – meaning that more than 82% of all cases selected in this research use or have already used this specific chat app for news dissemination by that date (see table 5). Unsurprisingly, publishers from Brazil, where the mobile application enjoys tremendous popularity and has already established itself as a news source, showed an above-average interest in the tool: all 15 cases from the South American country and *Deutsche Welle*, which has a service focused on that population, have already experimented with WhatsApp, and 11 continued to use it actively the last time I monitored. The most popular chat application also seemed to attract Spanish outlets: among five companies, only *Politibot* was outside the group that at least already experimented it in the Southern European nation – as of September 14, 2021, though, only *Maldita* still used it regularly for content distribution purposes. Two of three French cases and one in three Hispanic Latin American cases have at least experimented with WhatsApp too. I found the low use of WhatsApp for news distribution among Hispanic Latin American cases surprising. Of course, the sample is small, but the reality is that I have monitored the main news publishers in the region, and the vast majority have not even experimented with the most popular messaging platform. The fact that the sample from the region is small reflects this low adoption.

Only seven (25%) of the 28 media companies analyzed in this survey have tried the other messaging application from Facebook to distribute content. And just three of them (10.7% of the total sample) remained minimally active on Messenger with this purpose on our last monitoring date. One of them was *Deutsche Welle*, the only publisher in the sample that left WhatsApp to open a channel on its sister platform. Besides *DW*, just another case maintained a frequent proactive distribution channel in the tool: *Labot*, a chatbot that was still impossible to be technically replicated on WhatsApp by September 14, 2021. Within its partnership with Facebook, *Maldita.es* kept active a responsive chatbot that also sent links for news articles on Messenger, but only once per user request, which meant that this function ended up being limited because users, in

general, are not used to frequently sending a message asking for information, as its founder and director Clara Jiménez explained. *O Estado de S. Paulo*, *Gazeta do Povo*, and *Groupe Centre France* did not continue to use the platform after initial tests, while *Politi-bot* was completely discontinued from every messaging app it previously adopted. Brazilian fact-checking agency *Aos Fatos* had a channel on Messenger only for receiving user generated content from users.

Telegram, on the other hand, attracted reasonable interest from the news organizations in this sample: 17 (60.7% of the total sample) have at least tested the platform, while a group of 12 (42.8% of the total) remained active with channels and chat-bots on the messaging application by September 14, 2021. A considerable part of those cases was from Spain, where *elDiario.es*, *Maldita* and *Newtral* actively employed it for news distribution. *El Confidencial* decided to quit its usage after a while and *Politibot* had it as their main channel until the moment its founders decided to discontinue it. In our sample of cases from the country, only *Vocento* had never tested it. Brazilian news outlets seemed to be increasingly directing their attention to the platform as *O Globo* and *The Intercept Brasil* recently started their operations there joining other companies such as *O Estado de S. Paulo*, *Gazeta do Povo*, *Agência Pública* and *O Município*. *GZH* and *Correio Sabiá* were the only cases in our sample that tested Telegram in Brazil but decided not to keep distributing content on the chat app. *Robot Labot* and *Animal Político* were the Hispanic Latin American active cases on the platform, while all our French cases did not keep a channel there after *Le Monde* quit using it for distributing content to Africa on February 2, 2021.

Of course, these simple quantifications have no significant statistical value and are not meant for outright generalizations, but when connected to theory and data already presented in the previous chapters of this research, this overview can give us hints of the main motivations of use that could be further confirmed with the interviews. The next section brings a better organization and description of these motivations towards answering *RQ2*, at the same time it presents which of them ended up effectively becoming translated into affordances for news organizations aiming at distributing content on specific messaging apps (*sub-RQ2.2.*).

News outlet/App	WhatsApp	Telegram	Messenger
O Estado de S. Paulo	Distribution (lists)	Distribution (channel)	~~Distribution (chatbot)~~
Editora Globo	~~Distribution (lists)~~ , reception of UGC	Distribution (channel)	-
Gazeta do Povo	Distribution (groups)	Distribution (channel open for comments)	~~Distribution (chatbot)~~
UOL	Distribution (groups)	-	-
The Intercept Brasil	~~Distribution (lists)~~	Distribution (channel open for comments), engagement (group for members)	-
Agência Pública	Distribution (lists)	Distribution (channel)	-
Aos Fatos	Distribution (lists, status), reception of UGC (responsive chatbot)	-	Reception of UGC (responsive chatbot)
Correio Sabiá	Distribution (groups)	~~Distribution (channel)~~	-
Panorama	Distribution (lists)	-	-
Tribuna do Paraná	Distribution (groups)	-	-
O Município	Distribution (groups)	Distribution (channel)	-
Diário Gaúcho	Reception of UGC, ~~distribution (lists)~~	-	-
GZH	Distribution (lists)	~~Distribution (channel)~~	-
Matinal	Distribution (lists)	-	-
O Mirante	~~Distribution (groups)~~	-	-
Deutsche Welle	~~Distribution (lists)*~~	Distribution (channel in Spanish), feedback (chatbot)	Distribution (chatbot in Portuguese)
Nómada (Guatemala)	~~Distribution (lists)~~	-	-
LaBot (Chile)	-	Distribution (chatbot)	Distribution (chatbot)
Animal Político (Mexico)	-	Distribution (channel)	-
Le Monde	Distribution (lists*, status)	~~Distribution channel~~	-
Groupe Centre France	-	-	~~Distribution (chatbot)~~
Journal des Entreprises	Distribution (lists)	-	-
Grupo Vocento	~~Distribution (lists)~~	-	-
El Confidencial	~~Distribution (lists)~~	~~Distribution (channel)~~	-
elDiario.es	~~Distribution (lists)~~	Distribution (channel)	-
Newtral.es	Reception of UGC	Distribution (channel)	-
Maldita.es	Distribution & reception of UGC (responsive chatbot)	Distribution (channel)	Distribution & reception of UGC (responsive chatbot)
Politibot	-	~~Distribution (chatbot)~~	~~Distribution (chatbot)~~

Table 5. Adoption of messaging applications by news organizations on September 14, 2021 (cases highlighted in gray were discontinued, ones stroked through quit using a platform feature for distribution, and ones marked with * quit WhatsApp because of its threat to take legal action against automation and bulk messaging from December 2019).

6.2.1. Motivations to adopt a messaging application for content distribution and these tools' related affordances for news organizations

News editors and executives approached in this research provided mainly two closely connected motivations to adopt messaging applications for news distribution: *accessing audiences* and *efficiency*. Reaching unprecedented audiences was the holy grail that lured media to give up control over the news value chain to digital platforms during the past decade (Anderson et al., 2012; Bell et al., 2017). This scenario could not be surprising to the ones acquainted to the theory around multi-sided markets developed by Rochet and Tirole (2003, 2006) and all the researchers that followed them, which predicted that a platform that was able to attract one important side of the market (in this case, end-users) would eventually bring other sides aboard, such as advertisers and other related businesses. In this sense, news organizations have widely relied on social media as efficient means of distributing content and increasing their reach, hence the reference to a so-called *platform press* (Bell et al., 2017; Rashidian et al., 2018). As already stated in this research, the over-dependence on digital intermediaries proved to be harmful to the news organizations during the algorithmic changes carried out by Facebook between late 2016 and early 2018 (Cornia et al., 2018; Rashidian et al., 2019; Smyrnaio & Rebillard, 2019; Van Dijck, 2020). Thus, at first glance, it might seem contradictory that, on the domain of messaging applications, news publishers would continue to seek for similar logics to the ones that led them to lose control over their content distribution and revenue sources. However, these motivations need to be better explained as different kinds of publishers present distinct objectives and the purpose of efficiently reaching audiences gain several different layers of understanding that can become affordances or not depending on specific conditions.

Accessing audiences. As previously shown, WhatsApp is the most popular messaging application in the world and the most employed one for news consumption by end-users in all national scenarios addressed in this research: this situation plays an important part on news organizations' particular interest in this platform. This finding seems specifically significant among cases of Latin America and Spain, where around 80% of the population use WhatsApp for general purposes, but it can even be perceived in

France, where more people have been downloading and integrating the tool into their routines recently: 38% of the population, a 6% increase from the previous year, according to the Reuters Institute (Newman et al., 2021). After amassing more than 2 billion monthly active users worldwide and dominating the markets in Latin America and Western Europe²⁴², WhatsApp seems to be the messaging application that best managed to solve the *chicken and egg problem* addressed by Rochet and Tirole (2003, 2006) and their followers on multisided platform theory. Even professionals from news organizations that have actually never used WhatsApp for content distribution, such as the ones that invested in developing chatbots like *Robot Labot*, *Politibot* and *Centre France*, as well as ones that renounced using the tool after analyzing its functions and possibilities, such as *Animal Político*, mentioned the application during the interviews in a tone that regretted the impossibility of establishing a presence on the platform that reached an unparalleled level of ubiquity in comparison to its competitors: ‘being where the readers are’ has become a mantra constantly used by editors and executives to explain their interest on WhatsApp. It seems clear that the discourse of platforms focused on guaranteeing publishers access to audiences previously unimaginable for more than a decade has a significant bearing on the insistence of publishers and executives on seeing these platforms, essentially, as channels with this kind of utility. It is hard for publishers to get rid of an idea that has become so embedded in the platform imaginary. Perhaps that is the source of their frustration when realizing that the logic of a tool like WhatsApp rarely confirms the initial expectations of reaching a much larger audience.

Telegram appears to be gaining momentum in terms of popularity and usage for news consumption, especially in Spain, where 23% of the population already use it and 8% look for news on it every day, according to Newman et al. (2021). Although these numbers may seem modest given the representativeness of mainstream social media and WhatsApp for news consumption, they reflect a broader meaning that ‘accessing audiences’ can gain on messaging applications, which can be translated to different kinds of affordances provided by these tools to news organizations. These affordances include not only their obvious ability of (i) *increasing their base of readers*, but also the opportunity of (ii) *directly accessing readers* in a moment online news consumption is still

²⁴² WhatsApp – Statistics & facts (2021, July 7). *Statista*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/top-ics/2018/whatsapp/> on September 15, 2021.

highly intermediated by algorithms and even the possibility of (iii) *improving engagement* with the news consumer.

Increasing the base of readers. Despite the massive adoption of messaging applications for news consumption, increasing the base of readers is hardly one of their affordances for news organizations – and, so far, WhatsApp seems to be the one that presents the best possibilities on that front. As previously mentioned, only a few small and recently funded digital news natives in Brazil were able to employ the platform with the role of expanding their audiences. With 55,000 members on its WhatsApp groups, *O Município* was perhaps the most remarkable case of our sample on that front. According to estimates by its editors, these members account for at least a third of the company's pageviews. “We can see almost automatically in Google Analytics the increase in access to our website as soon as we post a link to our groups on WhatsApp,” stated the former editor of the Joinville branch, Adriano Assis (August 2020). Its competitor *O Mirante*, other local initiatives such as *Tribuna do Paraná* and *Matinal*, and WhatsApp-focused *Correio Sabiá* and *Panorama* have a similar approach: they realized that it had become too late to rely on organic growth on Facebook to build their audiences after the algorithmic changes the tech company made between 2016 and 2018, and they bet on WhatsApp to fill that gap. Niche-oriented or locally focused, these initiatives seem to have a potential limited number of readers, but the strategy is working for reaching it, as Rafael Maia, head of digital operations at *Tribuna do Paraná*, explained:

“*Tribuna do Paraná* joined social media a little late. The newspaper's previous management, the previous digital management, was much more focused on the website itself and not so much on the distribution of content through other digital channels. Because of that, we couldn't take advantage of that early boom (*of publishers on social media*), when we saw some news pages hit over a million likes and such. Our fanpage on Facebook is small, it has just over 230,000 people. And like other news websites, we've been noticing a very big drop in organic access to this social medium for a year and a half, two years, since that very drastic change on Facebook regarding the prioritization of content in the newsfeed” (Rafael Maia, *Tribuna do Paraná*, October 2020, the translation is mine).

Due to WhatsApp's technical restrictions to massive content distribution, though, reaching impressive bases of readers on the platform still seems an unlikely feat. Building million-of-user bases as many media houses have had for years on their open social media channels sounds like an impossible task. As well-established national news brands aim at larger audiences sustain their large structures, WhatsApp has hardly become a significant channel for adding a considerable number of new readers to their whole base. The cases that remained on the platform after December 2019 had to cope with a limitation of having only 256 users in each broadcast list or group, meaning that they needed to open several channels on the chat app if they intended to send messages to larger numbers of readers. In late 2018, though, WhatsApp started testing a limitation in the number of messages that could be forwarded simultaneously to groups: 20 all over the world, except India, where this number was limited to only five due to concerns that content being spread on the tool was responsible for triggering violence and mob killings²⁴³. Six months later, the rule applied to the Indian market was updated and adopted everywhere else: now when a message is sent over five chats, users that receive it can also see the label 'forwarded many times' and it can be then forwarded only once per user²⁴⁴.

Moreover, maintaining a channel on WhatsApp, whether a group or a broadcast list, means associating it with at least one mobile number and a smartphone linked to that line. Until a recent platform update in late 2021, this meant that, in order to use the platform's web or desktop version, one was obliged to have a mobile device next to a computer. Not to mention that, according to respondents in this research, these non-mobile versions of WhatsApp are not as reliable as the app, which is already troublesome. Heavy users are often faced with bugs and errors that cause inconvenience to the ones that need them to work. "WhatsApp bugs a lot and many people end up not receiving our messages. We never found out why, but there's an error the person stays there with the message loading forever and it never completely loads," said Luiza

²⁴³ India lynchings: WhatsApp sets new rules after mob killings (2018, July 20). BBC News. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-44897714> on September 14, 2021.

²⁴⁴ More changes to forwarding (2019, January 21). WhatsApp blog. Retrieved from <https://blog.whatsapp.com/more-changes-to-forwarding/?lang=en> on September 14, 2021.

Bodenmüller, from *Aos Fatos* (December 2020, the translation is mine). Leonardo Cruz, executive editor at *O Estado de S. Paulo*, provided further explanation on the issues:

“We are careful about sending content on WhatsApp because the message may break. For example, we don't include an image, a photo of the links of the posts we send, because we've already had feedback that in some cases this ends up breaking the message sent. We only use emojis that we know they won't break the message. We don't use GIFs, for example. We are very careful with this so as not to send content that has any chance of giving the cell phone user a bug. So, I think we just can't make better use of it because we can't explore the potential of these platforms due to a lack of partnership with companies” (Leonardo Cruz, *O Estado de S. Paulo*, December 2019, the translation is mine).

Those restrictions and limitations have greatly increased the manual workload required to manage the operation of a news outlet on WhatsApp. Juliana Gonçalves, former director of social media at *The Intercept Brasil*, told us that they had to pause sending messages on the platform after the outlet published a series of big scoops showing that judges and prosecutors involved in operation Car Wash were jointly planning the operation's actions with the objective of achieving the best possible projection of the arrests of Brazilian political figures²⁴⁵. She was in possession of the organization's mobile phone the night the reports began to be published. “The next day, we had 5,000 messages from readers who wanted to subscribe to our WhatsApp newsletter. The phone started to tilt. We had to stop and organize everything,” she recalled (December 2019, the translation is mine).

A publisher such as *Tribuna do Paraná*, which had several groups on the platform with different subjects of interests and depending on the region of the user (a sophisticated content distribution strategy that is further detailed on the section 6.3 of this study), had to set a dedicated professional that work more than eight hours a day only on the management of content and user contact on the platform. “Nowadays I simply

²⁴⁵ Leia todas as reportagens que o Intercept e parceiros produziram para a Vaza Jato [Read all the News pieces The Intercept and partners produced to Car Wash Leaks] (2020, January 20). *The Intercept Brasil*. Retrieved from <https://theintercept.com/2020/01/20/linha-do-tempo-vaza-jato/> on January 17, 2022.

can't live without him. He once left on holidays and I got crazy (*with the amount of work WhatsApp gave to the team*)," said its executive Rafael Maia (October 2020, the translation is mine). "Our groups are relatively easy to handle, but answering people who make contact takes a lot of time. If you miss one day, there will be around 500 messages to respond in the next," explained Rodrigo Guilherme Cunha, the person in charge of WhatsApp at the newspaper (October 2020, the translation is mine).

Faced with these limitations, larger news brands had basically two options on the most popular messaging application of the world: simply quitting its usage or accepting that the platform will not become a major driver of audience such as Facebook or Google, and they need to develop new dynamics with this limited base of readers. Spanish outlets such as *El Confidencial*, *eldiario.es* and all *Vocento's* newspapers and magazines as well as Brazilians *Extra*, *O Globo (Infoglobo)* and *Diário Gaúcho* took the first alternative during or even before the complete implementation of those changes. *The Intercept Brasil* left WhatsApp just recently, around the middle of 2021. Former audience director at the *news outlet*, Gabriel Matos expressed its dissatisfaction with the effort needed to send messages to around 40,000 subscribers of the service on the messaging application months before actually quitting:

"My biggest issue with WhatsApp is how much energy we invest in it – energy hour/man, let's say. I don't think it's wasted, but I think it's a lot of investment for what it returns to us. If we reduced a little the energy we spend on WhatsApp but had the same result as of today, I would be a little more relaxed about it" (Gabriel Matos, *The Intercept Brasil*, October 2020, the translation is mine).

Substituting WhatsApp by Telegram or Messenger with the focus on simply increasing the base of readers seems to be pointless. *Gazeta do Povo* was the only company of the sample that decided to employ all three messaging applications in the Brazilian market for news distribution when Facebook announced the major changes on their algorithms between the end of 2016 and the beginning of 2018. "We had a team performing meetings during a whole week to discuss projects and ideas, and then our objective with these channels was creating communities outside Facebook," recalled

Gladson Angeli, social media manager at the newspaper (October 2020, the translation is mine). Eventually, the only messaging platform the outlet quit using was Messenger – their last links for news articles there were sent in January 31, 2021. “Messenger is much weaker than it used to be, we see very little interaction there,” Angeli said (October 2020, the translation is mine). Its number of subscribers on Telegram is still just half of its WhatsApp’s base of readers – the publisher with the largest base of subscribers on the platform in our sample is *elDiario.es* with a little over 45,000, a hardly impressive number for a news organization with nearly 900,000 followers on Facebook, 1.3 million on Twitter, and over 60,000 paying members (see table 6).

News outlet	Number of subscribers on Telegram
O Estado de S. Paulo	8,125
Editora Globo (O Globo)	6,842
Gazeta do Povo	9,862
The Intercept Brasil	7,825
Agência Pública	1,249
Correio Sabiá	~~143~~
GZH	~~140~~
O Município	2,696 (three different channels for each branch)
LaBot (Chile)	Not disclosed
Animal Político (Mexico)	7667
Le Monde	~~2914~~
El Confidencial	~~264~~
elDiario.es	46,405
Newtral.es	10,596
Maldita.es	4,060
Politibot	Not applicable
Deutsche Welle (Spanish)	2,060

Table 6. Number of subscribers on news organizations’ channels on Telegram as of September 14, 2021.

The small *Labot* was the only active news company from our sample to be able to build its (also very limited) audience solely on Telegram and Facebook Messenger as it is still impossible for it to create a chatbot on WhatsApp. “Being on Facebook was a decision related to our desire to be where the people are, let's say. That is why we have always wanted to be on WhatsApp, which is the most popular platform in Chile,” stated the initiative’s co-founder and editor Francisca Skoknic (May 2020, the translation is mine). While mostly only small news players could effectively use it for building a larger audience, as shown here, all of them can benefit from a differentiating affordance of

these tools related to its possibility of avoiding content distribution intermediated by social media algorithms.

Direct access to readers. News organizations only recently realized that when they gave up maintaining control of the distribution of their content in exchange of previously unimaginable audiences, they opened room for platforms such as Google and Facebook to dictate the norms by which news would be consumed (Bell et al., 2017; Rashidian et al., 2018). Eventually, this strategy led digital intermediaries to control the main source of revenue for traditional journalism. The realization of this dynamic probably came too late to be reversed (Rashidian et al., 2019). At least in discourse, though, as we have seen in the previous section of this study, interviewees stated that news organizations have been making considerable effort to lessen their dependence on platforms and have been looking for alternatives to reach their readers with less or even no intermediation. Hence, messaging applications could have an importance for publishers, as these tools privilege interpersonal, supposedly private, and not algorithmically mediated communication (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018).

Direct accessibility to readers was an affordance of chat apps for news organizations constantly mentioned by professionals interviewed in this research – not only by the ones that worked for local initiatives which have traditionally been called ‘proximity media’ by the literature (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018, 2020; Negreira-Rey et al., 2017) but also ones at established news brands from all the national scenarios researched. “We get rid of the algorithm. We reach a hundred percent of the base of people who are following us. On Facebook, it’s 3% of the fan base, for instance. So, that’s really a benefit,” pointed out Stéphanie Lechelon, head of audience engagement at *Le Monde* (February 2020). “Our stories will always appear to those within the group, regardless of the stories’ engagement on social media, so it’s a place where we end up reaching fewer people, but stories have a higher click rate than in other places like Facebook, for example,” explained Fernando Costa, former editor at *O Mirante Joinville* (October 2020, the translation is mine). “On WhatsApp we can send a message without a pre-conception of relevance. It will arrive on your mobile phone and you alone will find it more or less relevant for you. For me, that’s the biggest difference from messaging apps to other platforms,” stated Luiza Bodenmüller, former head of strategy at *Aos Fatos* (December 2020, the translation is mine).

Closely related to ‘direct access to users’ is the privacy provided by messaging applications, an affordance highly valued by users of these tools according to previous research (Masip et al., 2021) and a condition that is often mentioned by publishers interviewed in this study as something they take into consideration when establishing a channel of private communication. In theory, readers are free to decide which news chats they will have on their messaging applications and which messages on these chats they will effectively read. No platform or other personal or commercial user has any kind of access to the individual choices of each user due to end-to-end encryption, a very specific feature of such tools.

The scope of WhatsApp’s encryption, however, is questionable and has caused controversy. In early 2021, for example, the platform updated its terms of service with the aim of obliging all users to share data such as phone number and location with the owner Meta/Facebook. The move has prompted widespread distrust and criticism, opening a loophole for competing messaging apps eager to exploit instabilities of the market leader. Telegram was one of the main beneficiaries of the controversy: the platform reported 25 million new users in just three days²⁴⁶ and 100 million in a month²⁴⁷, a move that certainly helped it to become one of the five most downloaded apps of the year in 2021, right behind WhatsApp²⁴⁸. Telegram founder and CEO Pavel Durov has already tried to destabilize competition before by criticizing WhatsApp's security levels²⁴⁹.

Perhaps surprising, WhatsApp contested privacy standards did not translate into a perception between news editors and executives interviewed in this study that the affordance of directly accessing users is higher on Telegram than on the messaging applications owned by Facebook/Meta. In fact, it seems that exactly the opposite happened. Maybe because of the form of communication between news organizations and Telegram users are channels, which have a hybrid essence between a social medium and

²⁴⁶ Telegram chief Pavel Durov reports 25 million new users in three days following WhatsApp privacy policy change (2021, January 13). Gadgets 360. Retrieved from <https://gadgets.ndtv.com/apps/news/telegram-download-25-million-new-users-chief-pavel-durov-whatsapp-privacy-policy-update-change-facebook-data-sharing-privacy-2351659> on February 23, 2021.

²⁴⁷ Moving chat history from other apps (2021, January 28). Telegram Blog. Retrieved from <https://telegram.org/blog/move-history> on February 23, 2021.

²⁴⁸ Blacker, A. (2021, December 27). Worldwide and US leaders 2021. Apptopia. Retrieved from <https://blog.apptopia.com/worldwide-and-us-download-leaders-2021> on January 3, 2022.

²⁴⁹ Durov, P. (2019, May 15). Why WhatsApp will never be secure. Telegraph. Retrieved from <https://telegra.ph/Why-WhatsApp-Will-Never-Be-Secure-05-15> on February 23, 2021.

a chat app, respondents frequently considered WhatsApp as a more valuable tool in terms of direct communication with the reader than the emerging platform. But privacy is, indeed, an essential feature for developing closer relationships to readers, something that matches the widespread trend among publishers of reinforcing the added value of their own proprietary channels in order to generate direct revenue from readers.

Improving engagement. If explored in more depth, according to interviewed professionals, lower intermediation and increased privacy can afford news publishers to develop more proximity and even intimacy with the user, conditions almost unattainable on open social media, such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, where basically all users can have access to all comments and all conversations that are initiated – except if they were previously blocked by parties for bad behavior, for example. “On Facebook and Twitter there's a lot of negative reactions, a lot, 80%. On WhatsApp, never. It's really 99% positive reactions. (...) It's more intimate,” stated Stéphanie Lechelon, head of audience at *Le Monde* (February 2020). José Davila, former community manager at the discontinued *Nómada*, from Guatemala, had a more detailed explanation on the benefit of messaging applications for news organizations that took into consideration the idea that troll behavior is actually stimulated by open social media as negative and controversial comments tend to surface more than neutral or positive ones:

“When the communication happens on a closed space – because it is not going to be an answer that everyone can see, an answer to a post on Facebook that everyone can see, – people are going to be much more sincere. They are going to be honest and won't feel intimidated to ask us for something else or to offer us something else too. So, a benefit of WhatsApp is that we can have much more sincere answers and the feedback will be much more beneficial for our work” (José Davila, *Nómada*, April 2020, the translation is mine).

As one might suspect after reading the previous sections of this study, developing a more direct and close relationship with readers and the consequent building of communities in messaging applications is a process that takes time and demands considerable effort from news organizations. It also requires editors to have a different mindset about the traditional role of the media and the journalists as the institutions and

professionals that hold a privileged position over the production and distribution of relevant news content, as explicated by Rafael Maia, from *Tribuna do Paraná*:

“WhatsApp becomes not only a source of news. People end up getting in touch with us or with the administrator who is posting there in the group to talk, to exchange an idea. In all our groups we have an official account for conversation. (...) From a journalistic side, we benefit from the increased contact with the readers to get feedback from them” (Rafael Maia, *Tribuna do Paraná*, October 2020, the translation is mine).

The perception that media companies can benefit from a closer contact with the audience and that the effort necessary to it pays off is, obviously, not common sense among news professionals. If most news organizations remain refractory to open and maintain channels in messaging applications, the majority of those that are present on these platforms use them mostly for simple unilateral content distribution, as we will see in more detail in the next section. On the other hand, even a well-established digital news native like *UOL*, one of the most important news sites in Brazil and the only one capable of threatening the domain of *Grupo Globo's G1* on the digital front, can reap the rewards of having a small group of readers in a tool like WhatsApp. “It’s been a while now that we know that our readers from WhatsApp spend more time on our content than the others,” declared Gabriel Francisco Ribeiro, assistant editor at *UOL Tilt*, the company’s vertical focused on technology content. “Our average click rate on a news piece of content at *UOL* is around 100,000 to 200,000. Of course, we are not getting that from WhatsApp, but there we have 20,000 people that are continuously consuming our content every day. It’s a more loyal reader,” explained Lilian Ferreira, general manager of BI, metrics and strategy (November 2020, the translation is mine).

Eldiario.es has experienced a similar situation on Telegram. As shown in the previous section, with a bit more than 45,000 subscribers, the Spanish digital news native managed to build the largest community of readers on a messaging app in our sample. According to the publisher’s director of strategy, María Ramírez, around half of them actually open the messages every day: “It’s a small pool of people but we figured out that it’s an engaged pool of people so that’s good, they’re very loyal definitely”

(November, 2019). *Eldiario.es* view of engagement, though, remains limited to notions of audience engagement that take into consideration only the time spent by the reader on its content. Its channel on Telegram does not allow subscribers to interact with the organization's journalists on the messaging platform.

Efficiency. Whether employed with the intention to increase the base of readers, establish a channel with direct access to them, or even develop new ways to engage with news consumers, messaging apps can provide news organizations with efficient content distribution channels. When talking about why they were interested in adopting messaging apps for content distribution, news professionals often talk about potential 'benefits' over other platforms and even their own digital properties. *Efficiency*, therefore, is a motivation for news organizations to adopt (or at least consider adopting) the most popular messaging apps in their markets. As, in practice, WhatsApp and Telegram, mainly, allow publishers to reach an audience that they would not be able to build on social media powered by algorithms and also to develop a two-way communication that is impossible on open platforms dominated by negative and abusive comments, to some extent we can also consider *efficiency* as an affordance of messaging applications for news organizations that are willing to pay the price to maintain a consistent presence in these tools.

The level of efficiency of a messaging application for news distribution improves as news organizations can implement channels with specific goals that largely consider the essential characteristics of these tools. In that sense, *Tribuna do Paraná* was able to build community when it opened a channel to listen to users' demands and created several different channels for specific topics of interest of its audience (football teams, neighborhoods, etc.). *GZH* realized WhatsApp was one of the few digital platforms widely used by their older readers and develop a strategy to make print readers access their online content via the application. *O Município* overcame the barriers created by Facebook's algorithms to the growth of new online news natives through various WhatsApp groups where their local content is distributed. The efficiency of messaging apps for these organizations and others is also tied to 'thinking outside the box', if the reader allows me to use a buzz-phrase widely used in the entrepreneurial tech sector: traditional strategies that claim to benefit from messaging apps popularity among users through pure and simple distribution as happens in mainstream social networks will rarely make sense. In the next section of these findings, however, we will realize that

creativity, while it exists, is not the strongest point in the performance of news companies in the most popular messaging apps in the markets we studied in this research.

6.3. News organizations strategies for distributing content on messaging applications

In this section, I am going to address RQ3 and all its sub-research questions, diving deeper on news organizations' strategies for distributing content on messaging applications – especially WhatsApp and Telegram, the most used ones by the news outlets in our sample. Studies based on Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovations theory showed that newsrooms tend to adapt to the most basic level of technological innovations but they usually neglect practices to address more complex cultural and relational changes related to new technologies (Boczek & Koppers, 2020; Ekdale et al., 2015; Hermida, 2010; Lasorsa et al., 2012). Researchers have noticed some particularities in the consumption of news in messaging applications, such as users' habits of news snacking or news grazing, explained in more detail in chapter 4, which are related to the search for news during short intervals of time several times along the day (Molyneux, 2018). This behavior may be linked to a broader consumption of non-public affairs news subjects, such as entertainment, crime, disasters and sports (Boczek & Koppers, 2020; Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013). At the same time, these platforms are considered tools of interpersonal communication, whose conversations generally remain private only for the few users involved in them (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018). These particularities of messaging applications in relation to public and open social media such as Facebook and Twitter pose a challenge to publishers and their journalists, which, at least in theory, have sought to employ digital platforms in more strategic ways in recent years with the aim of strengthening their own proprietary channels (Cornia et al., 2018; Rashidian et al., 2019). Few studies have evaluated the level of adaptation of newsrooms to these specific logics of chat apps (Boczek & Koppers, 2020), and I am not aware of research that have made any comparison of different national contexts.

Editors and news executives interviewed in this study mentioned and described several technical limitations and an increasingly restrictive environment for news on WhatsApp, especially when compared to Telegram. This scenario was also reflected in

the depth of data I was able to collect from the news organizations' channels in both platforms. While on WhatsApp there was a possibility to extract only the chats in which I could include myself to receive messages – meaning that I generally depended on publishers to add me to groups or broadcast lists, – on Telegram it was possible to access its API, which opened a slightly wider universe of possibilities: on the platform, in addition to searching for news channels, it was possible to access each channel's number of members, as well as understand the percentages of these user bases that effectively read the messages sent on channels, what allowed me to establish view rates for each message and for each day. In practice, these small but significant differences grant publishers (and researchers) a few more data about the effectiveness of these news channels on Telegram, while on WhatsApp this type of data cannot be accurately measured – interviewees usually talked about their 'perceptions' of usage based on indirect measurement made by analytics tools such as Google Analytics, Chartbeat or Parse.ly allowed by UTM parameters attached to hyperlinks or even by eventual feedback they received from readers.

The computational content analysis of over 15,000 messages on both platforms confirms what the interviewees in this study said about the more restrictive policies of WhatsApp: they end up greatly limiting the strategies a news outlet can put in place to reach its audience on the platform. Thus, I could notice, for example, that the number of messages sent by publishers daily on Telegram channels was significantly higher than on WhatsApp in the same period between November 2020 and March 2021, despite the greater importance the latter has for news consumption in the analyzed markets. For instance, I noticed that Brazilian news organizations from our sample sent an average of three more messages a day on Telegram, almost double the average of what they sent on WhatsApp (see figure 17). This difference can only be attributed to the greater easiness to send messages in the emerging chat app, with the possibility of even scheduling shipments, while on WhatsApp the process cannot be automated, and each message must be copied and pasted into the chats of various groups and/or broadcast lists (the exact number depends on a publisher's reader base). Therefore, I believe that any analysis of publishers' strategies on these tools must refrain from imagining ideal scenarios and take into consideration the existence of a large difference between what journalists

would like to do and what is possible for them to do on these platforms in addition to the question of adapting to a platform that can generate a level of dependence.



Figure 17. Average number of messages per day per channel on each messaging application (WhatsApp is on top in green background, Telegram is below in blue background) in the period between November 9, 2020, and March 8, 2021.

The first part of this section is dedicated to understanding to what extent news organizations take into consideration the essential characteristics of messaging applications when putting in practice their distribution strategies on those platforms (sub-RQ3.1). I start by addressing publishers' adaptation to the users' habit of news snacking or news grazing, following with an analysis of the main topics present on their messages. Next, I examine to what extent news organizations are using messaging applications to seek for further engagement with their audiences (sub-RQ3.2) and if they are strategically using messaging applications to promote their business models (sub-RQ3.3) as previous research focused on social media has shown.

6.3.1. The habit of 'news snacking' and its effects on frequencies, formats, and usage of multimedia

As thoroughly addressed on chapter 4, news consumers' habit of 'news snacking' on messaging applications involves a conjunction of several factors: frequencies, text formats, availability of multimedia formats, subjects, etc. Therefore, the first step in analyzing to what extent news organizations are adapting their distribution strategies to the patterns of usage of major messaging apps is to examine how often they send messages to their readers on these platforms. The deeper I delved into the data from publishers' messages extracted using Python, the greater it seemed the impact of widely known technical limitations, greater in WhatsApp than in Telegram: a much larger number of messages was sent on channels from the sample on the first platform during working days than on weekends, when newsrooms normally work on-call and have a smaller number of professionals available to handle the manual process demanded by the platform owned by Facebook for sending messages to groups or broadcast lists.

On Telegram, where channel management is friendlier, the number of messages sent per day remained relatively uniform along the whole week (see figure 18). When I made a more detailed analysis of the data broken down by country or language, I noticed, for instance, that the French publishers in the sample, less receptive to the manual processes required by WhatsApp than their Brazilian counterparts according to the interviews, simply did not send any messages during the weekends on the chat app. Meanwhile, on Telegram, the slightly higher frequency of messages sent on Sundays was driven mostly by Brazilian media (especially *Gazeta do Povo*, which sent even more messages on weekends than on weekdays).

Along an average day, news organizations also sent messages in different frequencies on both messaging applications. While on WhatsApp there was a clear peak time between 6pm and 8pm, on Telegram messages sent by publishers were more evenly distributed throughout the day with two less pronounced peak times between 8am and 10am and 6pm and 8pm (see figure 19). The impossibility of automation also made the gap without messages sent by news outlets on WhatsApp significantly larger than on Telegram. The frequency of shipments dropped sharply from 8pm to practically zero from midnight on the former platform, while it remained relatively constant on the

latter until 1am, when it started to decrease, reaching very low levels only from 3am. The rhythm of message sending by news publishers resumed on both platforms from around 6am. Once again, a period newsrooms had less workforce available tended to be one with less or simply without any distribution of news on WhatsApp.

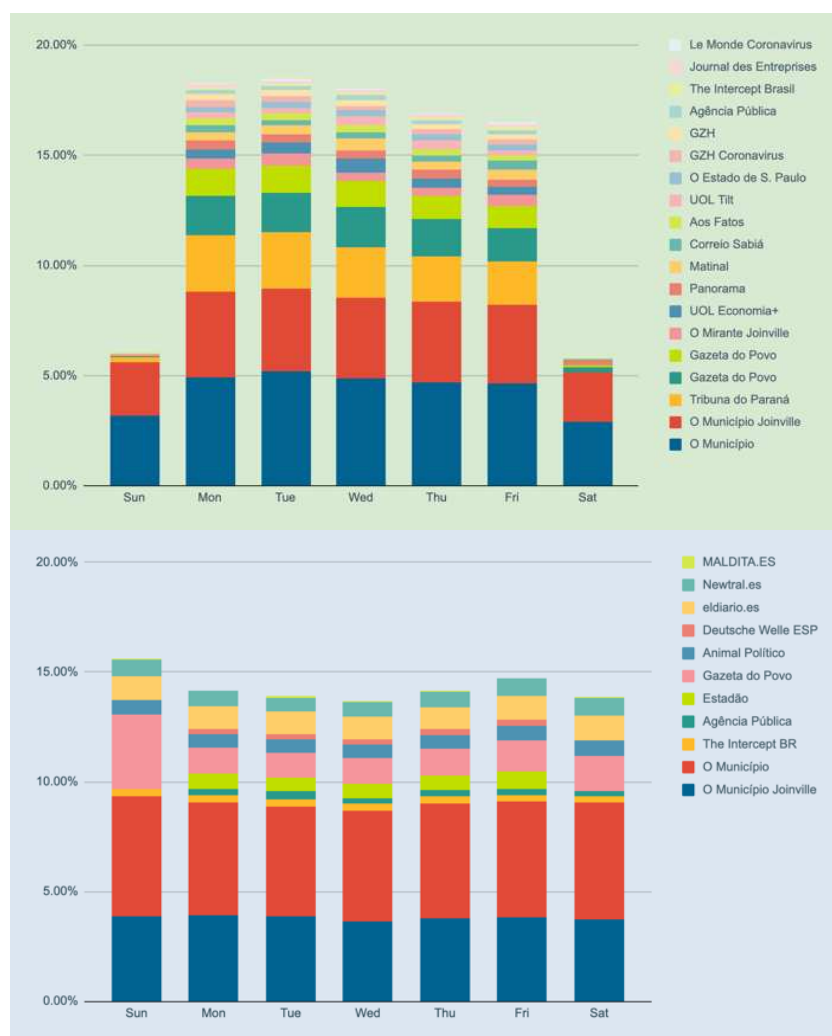


Figure 18. Percentage of total messages sent by news organizations each day of the week (WhatsApp is on top in green background, Telegram is below in blue background) in the period between November 9, 2020, and March 8, 2021.

Along an average day, news organizations also sent messages in different frequencies on both messaging applications. While on WhatsApp there was a clear peak time between 6pm and 8pm, on Telegram messages sent by publishers were more evenly distributed throughout the day with two less pronounced peak times between 8am and 10am and 6pm and 8pm (see figure 19). The impossibility of automation also made the gap without messages sent by news outlets on WhatsApp significantly larger

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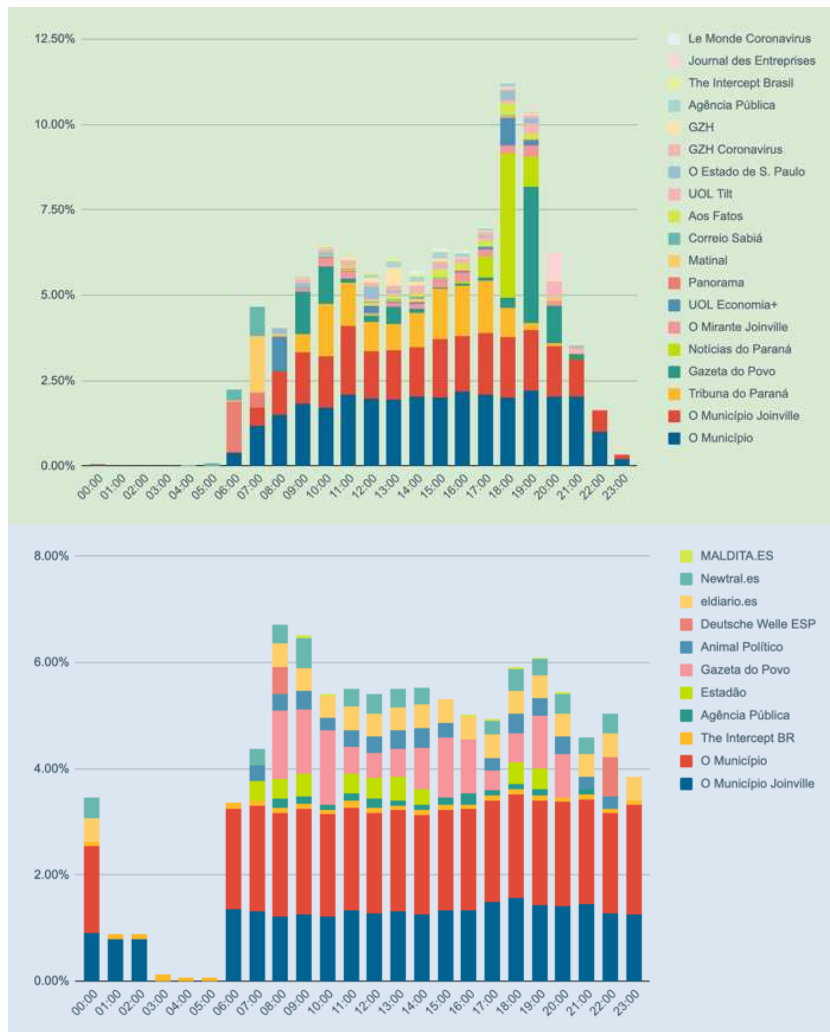


Figure 19. Percentage of total messages sent by news organizations each hour of the day (WhatsApp is on top in green background, Telegram is below in blue background) in the period between November 9, 2020, and March 8, 2021.

Presumably, hence, the news snacking habit of messaging app users creates a demand for ubiquity for publishers that want to keep a relevant presence on these platforms. It means that, at least in theory, news organizations need to send messages with a high frequency along the days and throughout the weeks to adapt to their readers'

habits (Boczek & Koppers, 2020). In general, though, I noticed an adapted interpretation of the concept of ubiquity from publishers in this sample: they tended to consider that there was no need to be active on messaging apps during the 24 hours of a day, as people rest for about a third of that time, usually during the night. Therefore, there would not be an urge to send messages with news during this period. In this sense, the role of app notifications becomes very important, as highlighted by Fernando Montes de Oca, former community manager at *Animal Político*: “A person that has notifications active on Telegram can be updated on the news faster than another that does not” (May 2020, the translation is mine).

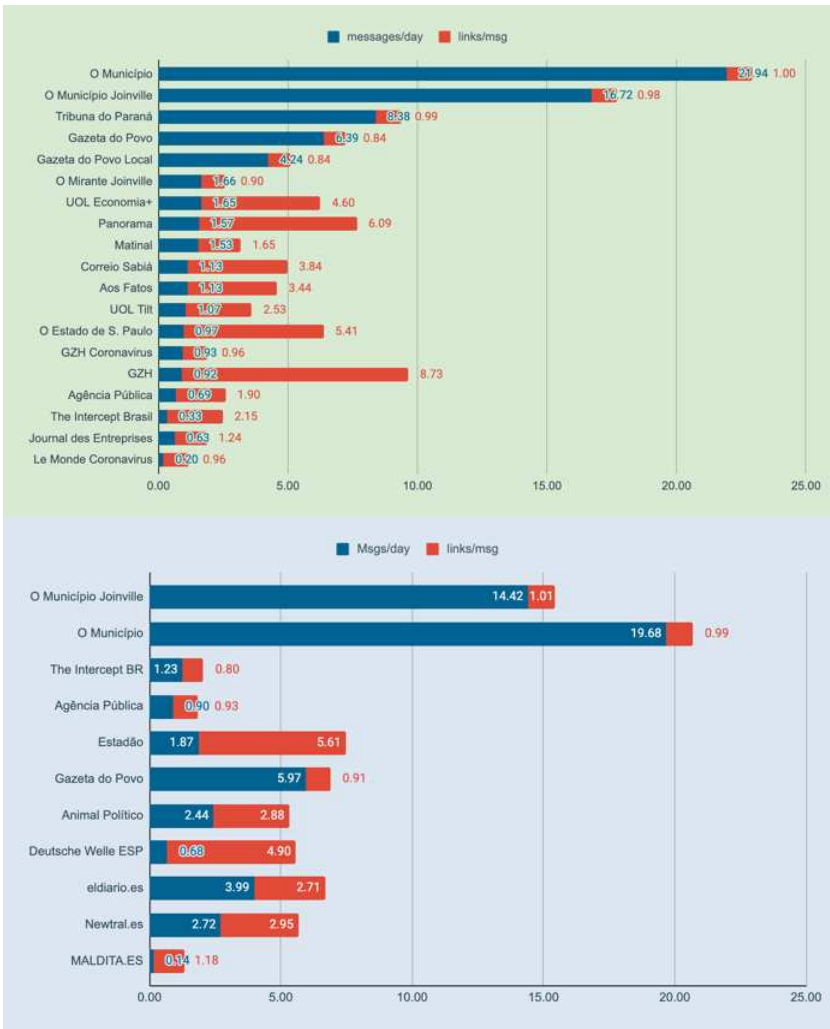


Figure 20. Average number of messages sent by news organizations every day and average number of links sent in each message (WhatsApp is on top in green background, Telegram is below in blue background) in the period between November 9, 2020, and March 8, 2021.

The examination of text formats led me to realize that news organizations from the sample implemented basically three distinct news distribution strategies on WhatsApp and Telegram (see figure 20): 1) sending several messages a day, each with a link aimed at redirecting the reader to an article on the publisher's website; 2) sending a few messages (sometimes just one, but a maximum of three) a day with at least three or four links (sometimes more) intended to summarize the news flow during a specific period of time (morning, afternoon or a whole day), similarly to the strategy used by news organizations and independent journalists to distribute email newsletters; and 3) sending a single message a day with only one or maximum two links redirecting to the news outlet's website.

Those few cases sending frequent messages a day with a single link were Brazilian local news outlets using messaging apps with a clear goal of building a wider audience, such as *Tribuna do Paraná* (on WhatsApp) and *O Município* (on both chat apps). As previously mentioned, these publishers arrived late to social media and were not able to catch the boom in news distribution through Facebook, nor could they benefit from the great organic growth that this dominant platform provided to news pages until around the mid-2010s. Their goal of seeking for audiences elsewhere has been partially accomplished by their investment of time and effort on news distribution on messaging applications. I found that their messages were usually plain and simple, limited to a few characters (the headline and/or a short description and the brief preview of the content of the link provided by the application – see figure 21 for examples).

“We did an A/B test to measure effectiveness. We took a sample of groups for each format, same links in different formats, then we analyzed the number of clicks that each link had. This model we use now skyrocketed in comparison to the other format (*newsletters*). So, we promote some tests like this from time to time. (...) I also prefer it this way because you give the user a better possibility to view one piece of content at a time, and then the decision if that content is relevant to them is easier than when they get a very large block of text. So, when the information arrives shorter and objective, this decision is faster, the users spend less time on something that doesn't make sense to them” (Rafael Maia, *Tribuna do Paraná*, October 2020, the translation is mine).

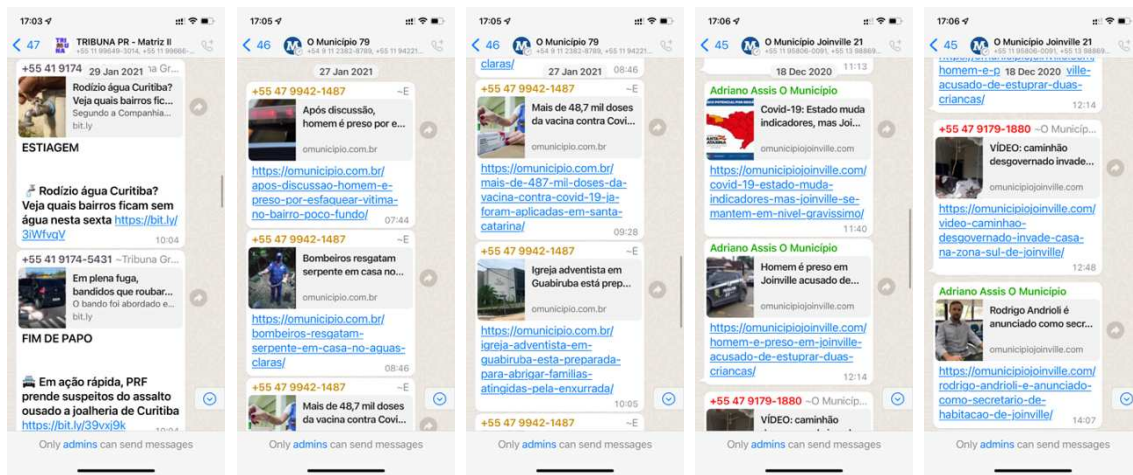


Figure 21. Messages sent by Tribuna do Paraná, O Município and O Município Joinville on their groups on WhatsApp: focus on distributing links and redirecting users to their news websites (screenshots).

An almost opposing perspective to the one mentioned by *Tribuna do Paraná*'s manager was what I called a 'newsletter strategy', which seemed to be the most popular one in the sample for both messaging applications. It was not only implemented by established Brazilian media companies such as *O Estado de S. Paulo*, *UOL*, and *GZH* (on WhatsApp and also on Telegram in the case of *Estadão*), Hispanic Latin American and Spanish digital news natives such as *Animal Politico*, *eldiario.es*, and *Newtral*, and even a public news organization focused on foreign markets such as the German *Deutsche Welle* (all on Telegram), but also by emerging initiatives, whether fact-checking agencies such as *Aos Fatos* or ones focused mostly in curating the news and organizing the flow of relevant information in Brazil such as *Correio Sabiá* and *Panorama* (all on WhatsApp). The rarer messages from these players had more in-depth descriptions of each of the various news articles compiled and their respective links, which in the case of curation initiatives redirected to the websites of content providers other than the one that was sending the message.

Although considerably longer (see figure 22), in the opinion of most editors and news executives consulted, these messages would not fail to fall within the basic precepts of communication through messaging applications, as they still would not require much time from readers. In the case of *Panorama*, for example, editor Fernando Rotta mentioned the concern of not sending texts that took more than five minutes to read and, even so, left readers minimally informed to start the day. "It may seem absurd for a journalist to state that, in five minutes, someone gets well-informed. (...) But we did a

lot of internal analysis about how much we could report in five minutes, and we found that, on average, we give 11 news items and use about eight different sources per bulletin,” stated Rotta (October 2020, the translation is mine).

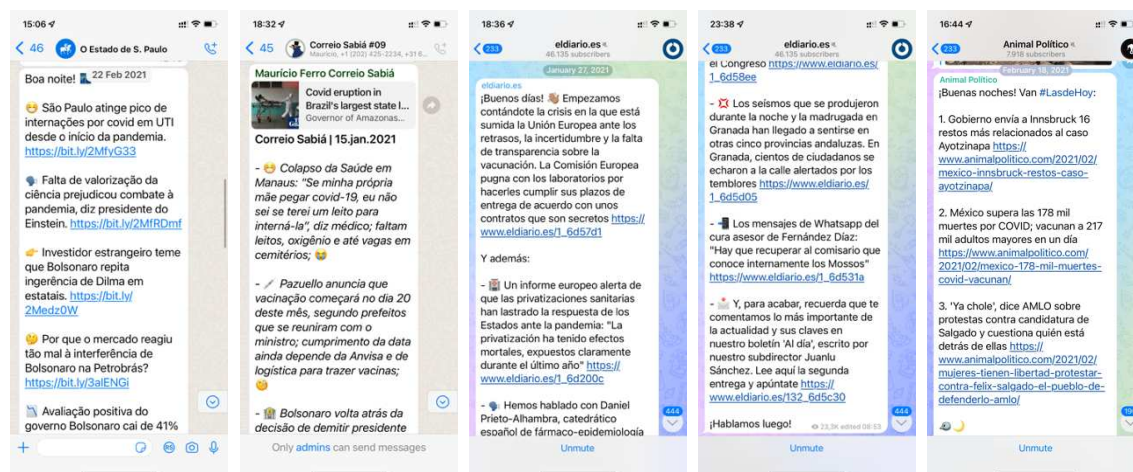


Figure 22. Messages sent by O Estado de S. Paulo, Correio Sabiá (on WhatsApp), eldiario.es and Animal Político (on Telegram): newsletters with a curation of the most important news subjects (screenshots).

In fact, editors interviewed frequently expressed the view that this kind of strategy provided a differentiated service to readers, as these newsletters would smoothly reach them via one of their most used applications and could be consumed at the moment of their preference. “I try to make the information as brief as possible, more informative as well. I give a summary of the news, I give a link, I give the users how long it will take them to read it so they can see if it is worth or not to spend their time opening it,” explained Maurício Ferro, founder of *Correio do Sabiá* (March 2020, the translation is mine).

A few Brazilian investigative news initiatives such as *Agência Pública* and *The Intercept Brasil* (on both chat apps), *GZH* channel focused solely on the subject of covid-19 (only on WhatsApp), and *Maldita.es* (only on Telegram) adopted a third kind of approach, with not more than one message per day and not more than a couple links per message, which can be understood as an attempt to keep a minimal presence in messaging apps without committing too much to the logic of news consumption in these tools (see figure 23). I noticed that their messages were short despite having relatively different sizes: while *Maldita.es* and *GZH Coronavirus* preferred texts around 200 characters, Brazilian investigative initiatives sent texts from around 400 to 800 characters.

Cases from Brazil seemed to focus on single subject messages containing a single link that normally redirected to a single news article, while *Maldita.es*'s channel did not keep a clear pattern in its messages.

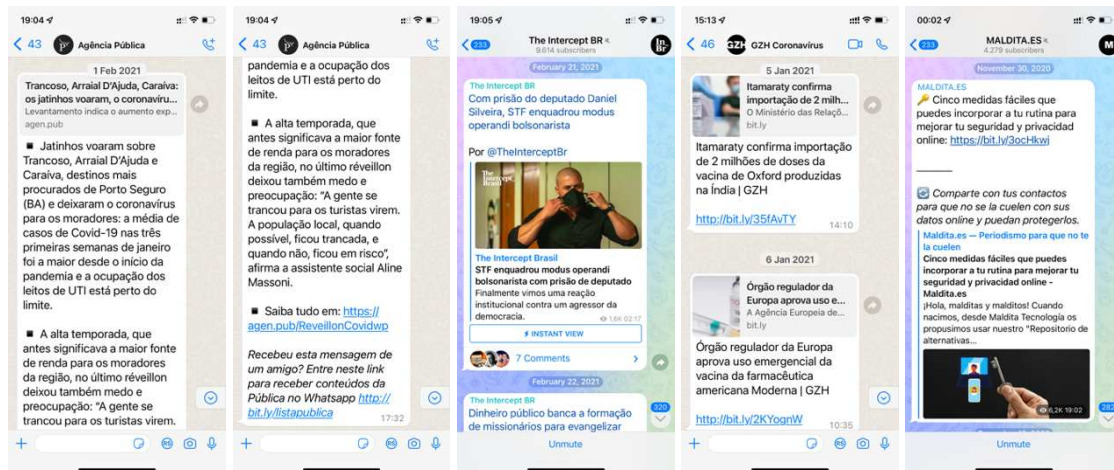


Figure 23. Messages sent by Agência Pública (WhatsApp), The Intercept Brasil (Telegram), GZH Coronavirus (WhatsApp) and Maldita.es (Telegram): less frequent, containing one or two links at most (screenshots).

Nonetheless, the computational content analysis alone failed to provide a perfect notion of the news distribution strategies adopted by some cases in the sample. A glance on the charts of data from WhatsApp and Telegram induced me to believe that Brazilian regional newspaper *Gazeta do Povo* sent several messages a day with only one link each on their two channels on WhatsApp and single channel on Telegram, fitting on the first approach, while the local initiative *Matinal*, the French national newspaper *Le Monde* and the economy-focused *Journal des Entreprises* would all have opted for just having a minimal presence on WhatsApp. But interviews with their editors and executives and a more detailed content analysis of a sample of their messages showed they all actually put in practice the popular newsletter strategy.

The misunderstanding on *Gazeta do Povo* was caused by the publisher's habit of sending all its several daily messages at two specific times: on January 24, 2021, for example, six messages on different subjects with their respective links were sent on their national chat on WhatsApp at 9h11 in the morning, while other five messages were sent between 20h21 and 20h24 – see picture 24. Therefore, in fact, the company attempted to make a curation of the most important news articles of the day whereas it also sought to benefit from a potential shareability of each message, whose possibility was

supposedly increased by their shorter size and faster absorption of the content sent. The misconception about *Matinal's* strategy was explained by a failure of the news organization to send daily messages for some weeks, which statistically decreased its average of messages per day and links per message sent in the analyzed period. In fact, the local news initiative from Porto Alegre attempted mostly to send an early morning daily curation of the main subjects of the day compiled from several sources, a product they called *Zap Matinal*. Eventually they could also send breaking news or special reports produced in-house on messages during the rest of the day. On a different note, the long daily contextual messages sent by *Le Monde* (over 2,200 characters on average) and *Journal des Entreprises* (more than 1,600 characters on average), indeed, contained just a single link: but it usually appeared after several different news subjects were addressed and it redirected the reader to a so-called 'fil de info', which was a page with a long article with several other links referring to the different news articles addressed on the message.

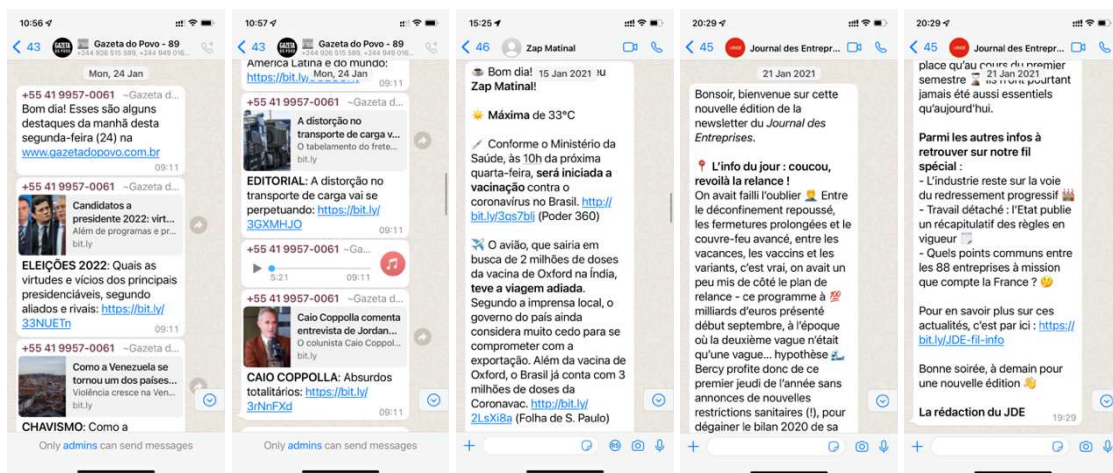


Figure 24. Messages sent by Gazeta do Povo, Matinal and Journal des Entreprises (WhatsApp): newsletters format with a twist hard to grasp only by the computational content analysis (screenshots).

As hinted above, each distribution strategy tended to demand a certain length for messages. The more frequent the messages were sent by a news organization, the briefer they were supposed to be. The average of shorter messages noticed in Brazilian channels was clearly impacted by the cases that used messaging applications in a similar logic as they employed social media in general, that is, as a means of increasing their audience reach with a high frequency of messages containing single links. On the other

hand, I could notice that some members of the Brazilian news media that invested on the newsletter strategy were also responsible for the longest messages collected in the whole sample. On average, *Panorama*'s messages had over 2,600 characters, considerably more than the 2,200 characters of *Correio Sabiá* and *Le Monde* coronavirus bulletin, which came right after it on the list of 'longform messages' adopters (see figure 25).

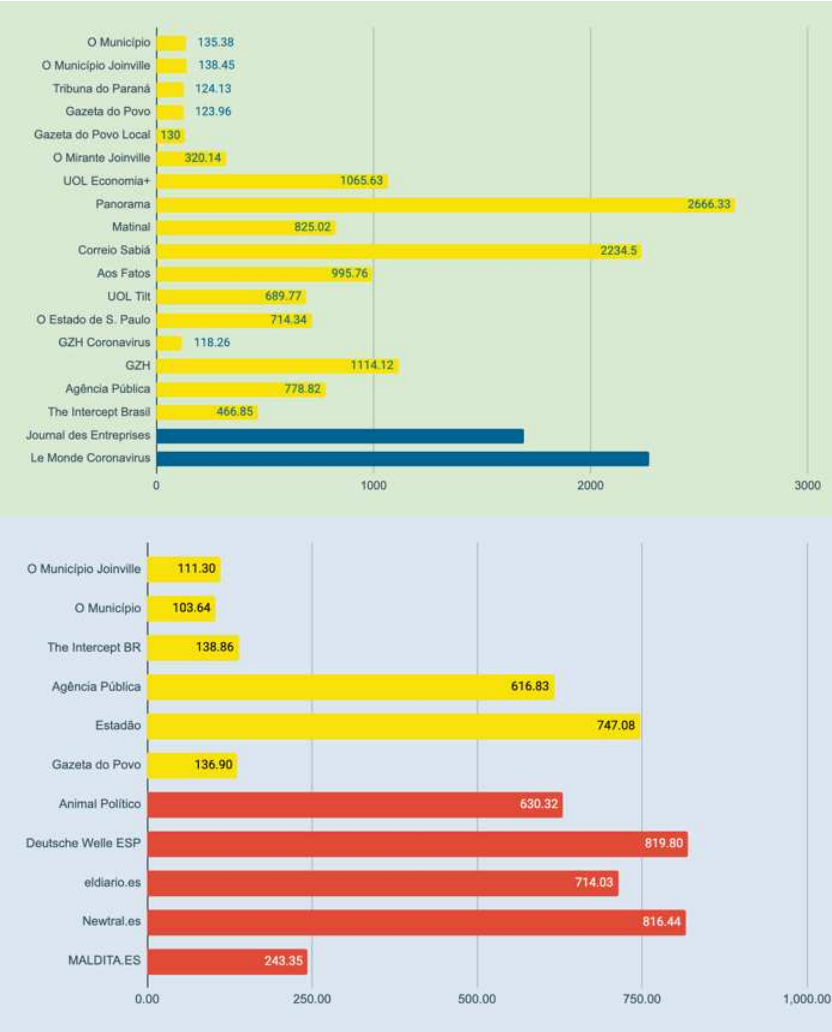


Figure 25. Average number of characters per message sent by news organizations (WhatsApp is on top in green background, Telegram is below in blue background) in the period between November 9, 2020, and March 8, 2021.

At first glance, it seemed that most news organizations' channels in the sample did not fully take into account the news snacking habits of messaging apps' users as they sent only one or a few messages a day in very specific times (beginning of the day, early evening, etc.). However, after reflecting on the functioning of these newsletters and on the responses of editors and executives who implemented this strategy, it was difficult

to be categorical in this regard. Low frequencies cannot be directly translated into low number of accesses, even more so when a message brings compilations of several news pieces and their respective links, which can be accessed one by one over a longer period of time according to the availability of readers. This adapted understanding of ubiquity was only strengthened when a publisher such as *O Estado de S. Paulo*, for instance, sent these newsletters three times a day (early in the morning, at noon and early in the evening), covering basically every period of the day.

Quality surveys with their readers carried out by some of these publishers with a more entrepreneurial mindset such as *Panorama*, *Matinal* and *Correio Sabiá* made me even less comfortable to make a critical statement of this nature. Although these kinds of questionnaires were still not so frequent in the media analyzed, they tended to bring several ideas and point out to development paths for publishers' managers and strategists that might fit better their own products than generical theories presented by researchers based on focus groups or surveys with limitations. These three cases specifically arrived at their definitive formats and frequencies only after receiving feedback from readers and resting assured that they were meeting their expectations and needs: coincidentally, the three digital news natives sent out basically only one message a day, early in the morning, with the main topics of the day curated from a variety of sources – eventually, they might send other messages during the day, but that was not so frequent.

In this sense, it seemed that the only cases that did not make much of an effort to adapt to messaging apps users' news snacking habits in terms of frequencies and formats were the few ones sending only eventual messages with a single link: *O Mirante Joinville*, *GZH Coronavirus* (on WhatsApp), *Maldita.es* (on Telegram), *Agência Pública* and *The Intercept Brasil* (on both platforms), all listed on strategy 3 on table 7. There were, of course, reasons for almost all these channels to send so few messages without much content: *GZH Coronavirus* was only a complimentary channel focused mostly in one specific subject to *GZH*, which had a broader focus; *Agência Pública* and *The Intercept Brasil*, because of their focus on investigative and highly editorialized content, did not have many news pieces daily available to promote contrary to *Maldita.es*, which produced several fact-checking and debunking articles a day, but did not share them on their Telegram channel – in fact, it seemed that this channel was relegated by the

Spanish digital news native as other ones such as their chatbot on WhatsApp and profiles on Twitter received more attention from newsroom staff.

1) Building an audience	2) Newsletters	3) Keeping a limited presence
O Município (W+T) O Município Joinville (W+T) Tribuna do Paraná (W)	Gazeta do Povo (W+T) Gazeta do Povo Local (W) UOL Economia+ (W) UOL Tilt (W) Panorama (W) Matinal (W) Correio Sabiá (W) Aos Fatos O Estado de S. Paulo (W+T) GZH (W) Journal des Entreprises Le Monde Coronavirus Animal Político (T) Deutsche Welle ESP (T) Eldiario.es (T) Newtral (T)	O Mirante Joinville (W) GZH Coronavirus (W) Agência Pública (W+T) The Intercept Brasil (W+T) Maldita.es (T)

Table 7. Distribution of channels according to their strategies of content distribution on WhatsApp (W) and Telegram (T).

Moving forward, previous research considered multimedia content such as images, videos and audios to be elements that enhance the rapid absorption of information and, therefore, align well with the concept of news grazing that permeates the consumption of news in messaging applications (Boczek & Koppers, 2020). Only a minority of the channels in our sample used multimedia content systematically across both platforms – it was not possible to collect data on audio usage from Telegram API, though. The use of images and even videos was higher on Telegram channels than on WhatsApp (see figure 26). *Deutsche Welle*, *eldiario.es* and *Newtral* (all on the emerging messaging application) were the only cases to send images in more than 60% of their messages, while only *UOL Tilt* worked with this format minimally (above 30% of the total messages) in its WhatsApp channel – and mostly because it was used to constantly send cartoons related to technological subjects in order to provide a moment of relaxation to the audience. The same happened with videos. Only *The Intercept Brasil* (a little over 20% of their messages) and *Newtral* (17.18%), both on Telegram, worked with this format with some consistency. Audio has only become an integral part of the strategy for *Matinal*

and *Panorama*, two initiatives that were very focused on WhatsApp. Filipe Speck, CEO at *Matinal*, explained that they intended to make a product where the communication between the narrator and the user was direct and would give a sense of proximity:

“On WhatsApp we have two very relevant things: the audio, which is something that brings a direct connection with the receiver, and this closed bulletin, with beginning, middle and end. So, the audio for WhatsApp solves a series of elements. It has many elements that increase engagement, for example, the news anchor, the person that will lead you to talk about what is most important on that day. I think it has a lot of value” (Filipe Speck, Matinal, October 2020, the translation is mine).

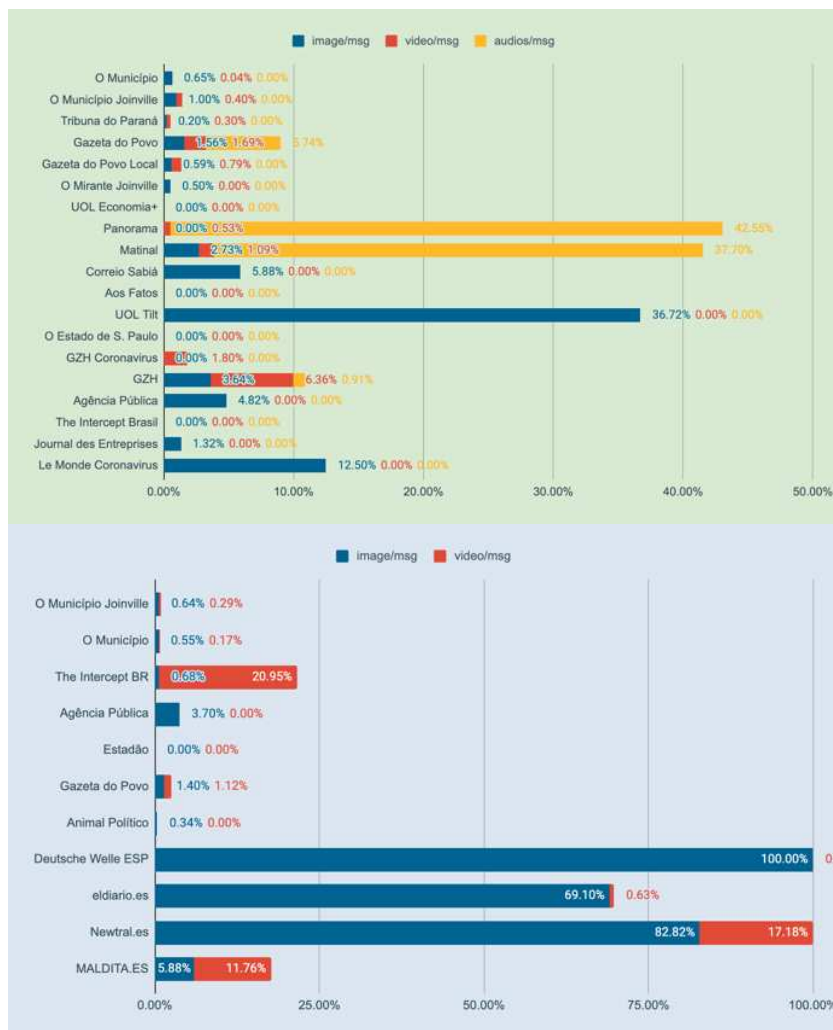


Figure 26. Percentage of messages sent by each news organization that contained images, videos or audios (WhatsApp is left in green background, Telegram is right in blue background) in the period between November 9, 2020, and March 8, 2021.

Once again, the limited use of multimedia formats in WhatsApp could be explained, at least in part, by the editors' fear that these more complex formats could end up breaking the messages and avoiding them to reach recipients, as already reported. Therefore, the use of this platform for news distribution tended to be simpler. On Telegram, the scarcity of multimedia formats could only have to do with the lack of interest of the editors and executives themselves in investing more time and effort in a platform that, despite increasingly important, has not yet reached a status of essential in news organizations' macro strategies of news distribution.

Figures of speech capable of conveying feelings and complementing ideas contained in written texts, emojis have already become an essential part of the language employed by users in messaging applications (Lu et al., 2016). Although most editors and news executives interviewed recognized the importance of emojis for communication on the Internet, on social media and, more specifically, on messaging applications, they seemed divided about the institutional use of these figures in the texts of the messages sent to readers on these platforms. Some news professionals did not see any place for the use of emojis in journalistic texts, others believed that emojis should be used with caution, while another significant part of the experts interviewed in this study was completely in favor of the widespread use of these figures of speech in the informal environment of messaging applications. Former strategy manager at Matinal, FêCris Vasconcellos offered an interesting reflection on the subject that went beyond being simply against or in favor of the usage of emojis:

"I find it quite complex (*to use emojis*). Amazingly, sometimes it seems like you put an emoji there and that's it, but I've studied the use of memes in journalism for a while, I have an article published about it, and for me it's the same case. When you choose an emoji, even because it usually comes before the information, it dictates the tone the person will read that information. And that seems to me to be very delicate, it's almost as if you were choosing the face you're making at the moment you're giving the headlines in Jornal Nacional (*the most popular and traditional news show on Brazilian TV*). I think journalism is increasingly loaded with intention. So, we take great care of this, so that it is more illustrative than specifically about tonality. So, we end up choosing illustrative emojis and not tonality ones. But if we look at other

WhatsApp products, The Intercept Brazil's, for example, has another use for emojis, it has more of a tonality use. We try not to bring bias; although I am not against bias in journalism, but we specifically try not to bring bias to our journalism, it is even more illustrative and also to bring this tone of humor and to draw people's attention" (FêCris Vasconcellos, Matinal, October 2020, the translation is mine).

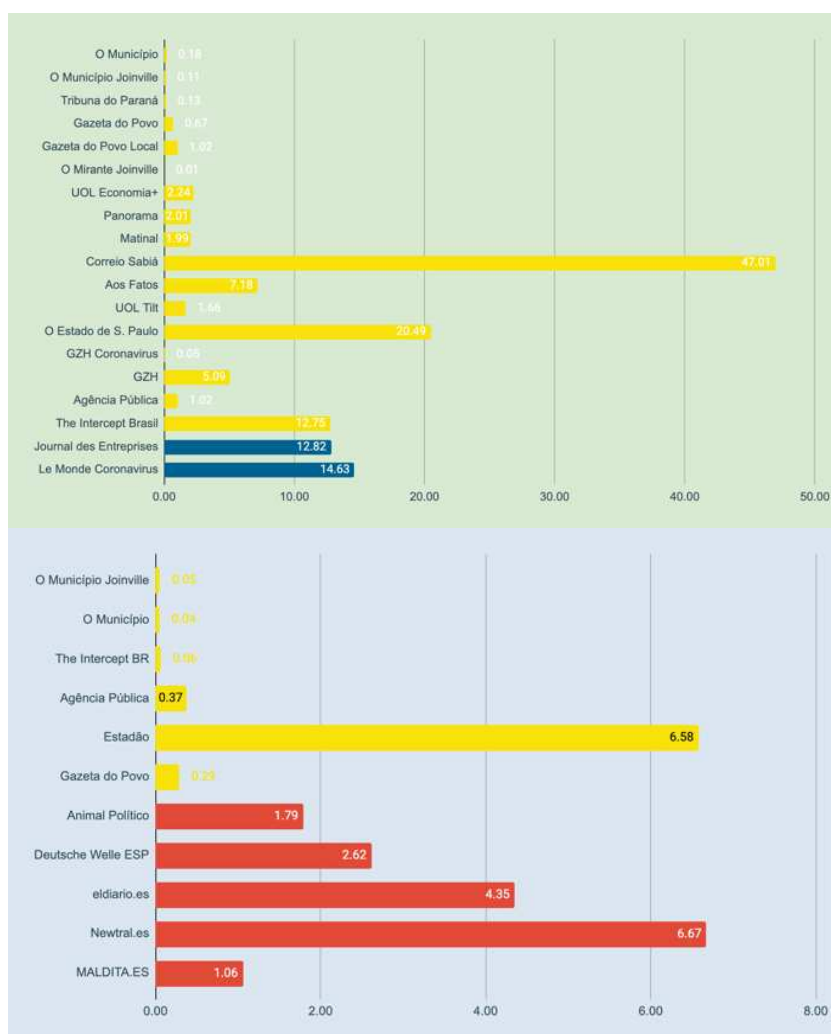


Figure 27. Average number of emojis by message sent by each news organization (WhatsApp is on top in green background, Telegram is below in blue background) in the period between November 9, 2020, and March 8, 2021.

This complexity was reflected in the findings of our computational content analysis on the more than 15,000 messages collected for this research. Nearly a fourth of all 19 WhatsApp channels and half of Telegram channels (all Brazilians) analyzed between November 2020 and March 2021 used, on average, less than one emoji per message (see figure 27). Seven channels on WhatsApp sent a moderate amount of emojis

(between one and two) per message, same number of channels that could be considered frequent emoji users on the platform, with an average of more than five of such figures being sent per message. Three channels sent emojis moderately, while other three were frequent users of these figures on Telegram.



Figure 28. Average number of emojis by message sent by news organization from each country (WhatsApp is on top in green background, Telegram is below in blue background) in the period between November 9, 2020, and March 8, 2021.

Curiously, on WhatsApp, the average number of emojis sent by Brazilian publishers (1.65) was below the average of the sample (1.79) and well under the average number of emojis sent in each message by French news organizations (astounding 13.25) (see figure 28). On Telegram, the comparison between Brazilian and Spanish speaking channels also showed considerable asymmetry. While Spanish news organizations and *Deutsche Welle's* Spanish speaking channel sent an average of 4.19 emojis per message

over the period studied, Brazilian news outlets averaged only 0.36 of these figures per message. Thus, news organizations from Brazil present on Telegram sent even less emojis per message than their counterparts that have a presence on WhatsApp.

Once again, a raw look on numbers and charts could induce us to believe that most of the news organizations have not been trying to adapt their practices to the habit of news snacking from users of messaging applications. We must remember, however, that the technical limitations of the platforms themselves play an important role in defining publishers' news distribution strategies and practices. Fears of falling into new dependence traps already faced on social media could not be ignored either. Above all, this research found media companies increasingly hosting internal debates and conducting surveys with readers to improve their channels in these tools as signs of adaptation. A general and simplistic critical response to sub-RQ 3.1 that only pointed to the obvious limitations in this adaptation journey would fail to show important particularities such as those already highlighted in this study and particularly in this section. Thus, in fact, I consider that most news organizations analyzed in this research have been trying to adapt to the news snacking habits of users of messaging applications – particularly those that adopt strategies 1 (building an audience on chat apps) and, to some extent, 2 (newsletters) and keep a reasonable frequency of messages sent to their readers as well as a solidity in terms of content density, with the daily suggestion of several news pieces and their respective links.

One could argue with a good deal of reason that newsletters are a format imported from email bulletins. A similar argument can be used to judge the strategy of sending short posts with a link several times per day, as already discussed: it is an old and worn-out format coined to open social media such as Twitter and Facebook. Although they are not new forms of communication between publishers and readers based on interpersonal conversations, they have been validated by user satisfaction surveys and met their needs to be constantly looking for updates on their smartphones. On the other hand, it can hardly be argued that the few organizations that adopted strategy 3 and maintained a timid presence in messaging applications are adapting to this specificity of news consumption in these tools.

6.3.2. The 'news gap' between what media reports and what the readers supposedly want to consume

Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2013) demonstrated that there is usually a very significant gap between the type of content that the media deems important to report and the type of content that audiences would prefer to consume: while journalists tend to favor public affairs (political, economic, business, and international news), readers are more interested in non-public affairs (sports, weather, celebrity, or crime news). The authors pointed out, however, that this gap is dynamic: the audience's preferences tend to change according to variations in the context (e.g., political elections, economic crisis, etc.). Likewise, the power of the media to set the agenda of public debate tends to increase in times of crisis and decrease in times of stability. Thus, considering the conveyed role of professional journalism for the democratic process, far from simply conforming to a purported audience predilection for non-public affairs topics, the most feasible solution found by Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2013) would be for the media to develop ways to alternate the offer of content according to the identification of periods of greater social cohesion or greater political activity.

Our human-coded content analysis of almost 1,700 messages sent by the news organizations from our sample on WhatsApp and Telegram between January 11 and 24 showed that news editors and executives, even if only intuitively, seemed to have taken into account the suggestions by Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2013) when delivering content to their audiences through the two most popular messaging applications. In general, I noticed that the most addressed subjects by the cases in my sample in the selected period on both platforms were, indeed, public affairs: 'politics' and 'health' (see figures 30 and 31). At first glance, that could be a sign that the news gap between what journalists from the cases analyzed found important and what audiences deemed relevant remained consistent. However, the prevalence of these two topics is obviously justified by the covid-19 pandemic that has been ravaging the world since March 2020 – certainly not a context of societal stability. The health situation has created a need for firm positions by political authorities, often with controversial and debatable measures, all of which often stirred up political debate and influenced press coverage. Not by

chance, another frequent subject on the sample was ‘economy’, also linked to the concerning situation caused by the pandemic.

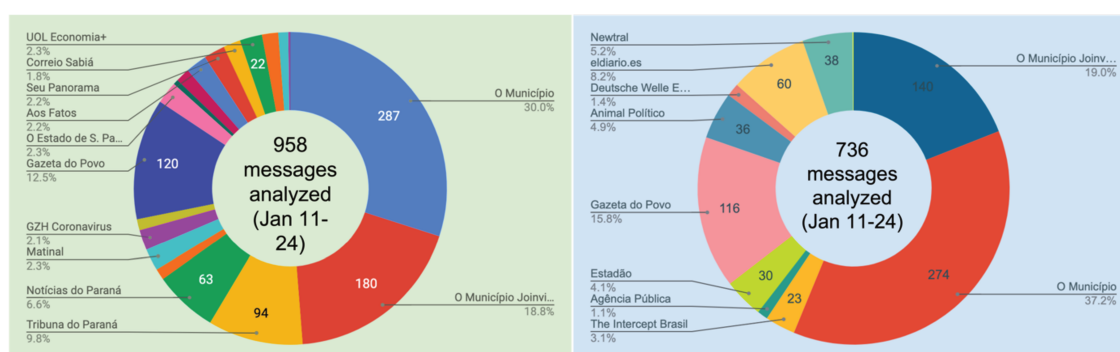


Figure 29. Distribution of messages whose content was analyzed in more depth among the channels in the sample (WhatsApp is left in green background, Telegram is right in blue background) in the period from January 11 to 24, 2021.

It is important to note, however, that two local channels from a single publisher almost monopolized the entire sample (see figure 29): *O Município* and *O Município Joinville* together totaled 467 messages on WhatsApp (48.8% of the total messages analyzed on the platform) and 414 on Telegram (56.2% of the total on the tool). The channels of *Tribuna do Paraná* (on WhatsApp) and *Gazeta do Povo* (on both messaging apps), publishers whose strategy was to send several messages a day despite differences already addressed, also stood out in terms of the number of messages within the sample, which influenced the final numbers of the analysis. Thus, as a clear consequence of the prevalence of messages sent by local Brazilian news outlets in our sample, we also noticed a relatively high frequency of subjects such as ‘crime’ and ‘disasters’ – which comprised not only natural disasters such as floods but also accidents – in the analyzed content. As known from previous studies, local media tend to focus their coverage on these types of subjects as a way to attract curiosity from readers, who may feel that these events have a greater proximity and influence in their everyday lives (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2020).

In an attempt to compensate for this discrepancy, I also performed an analysis according to the focus of each publisher (if local or national in the case of Brazilian outlets) and their geographic positioning (Brazil, Hispanic Latin America, France and Spain). As expected, there was a very significant variation in the types of content privileged by local and national publishers, exception made to ‘health’ that remained a relatively

constant topic of interest for all media in our sample. While local news channels sent a higher number of messages related to non-public affairs (crime and disaster, as mentioned above), national news channels clearly preferred public affairs such as ‘politics’, ‘economy’ and ‘international’ news.

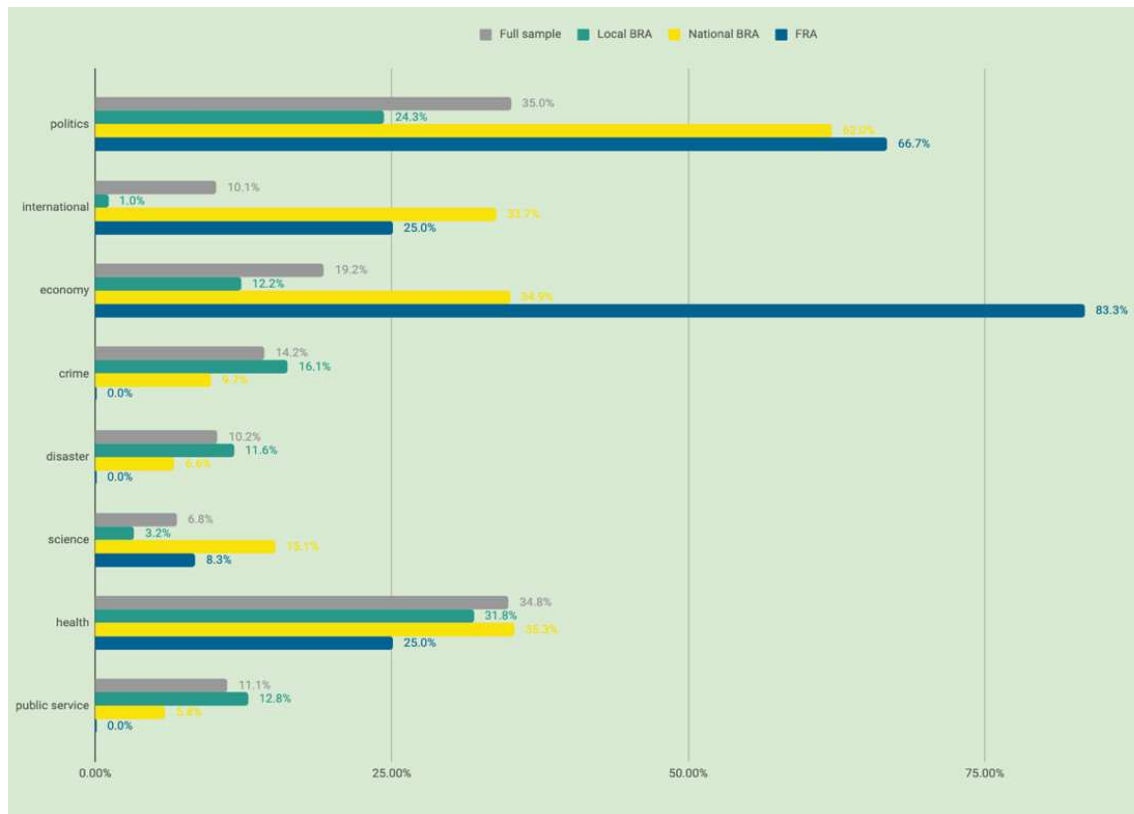


Figure 30. Main topics addressed in messages sent by news organizations on WhatsApp in the period from January 11 to 24, 2021.

As hinted above, in general terms, the analysis showed an adequate understanding of the moment societies in general were experiencing at the beginning of 2021 by the editors and executives of the publishers selected for our research: on the one hand, there was a resurgence of the pandemic with the increase in contamination, hospitalizations and deaths related to the spread of the delta variant; on the other hand, there was the increased hope that countries would be moving towards the solution of the problem with the start of mass vaccination against covid-19, at the same time that the political debate was heated with the threat of adoption of vaccine passports, the discussion on the effectiveness of immunizers, the election of Democrat Joe Biden in the United States and the release of preliminary economic balances on the first year of the pandemic. Disproportionate coverage of topics such as entertainment, unrelated to the

pandemic and political and economic developments during this period of crisis would have demonstrated the media's total disconnection from society's problems and it certainly would have caused audience backlash.

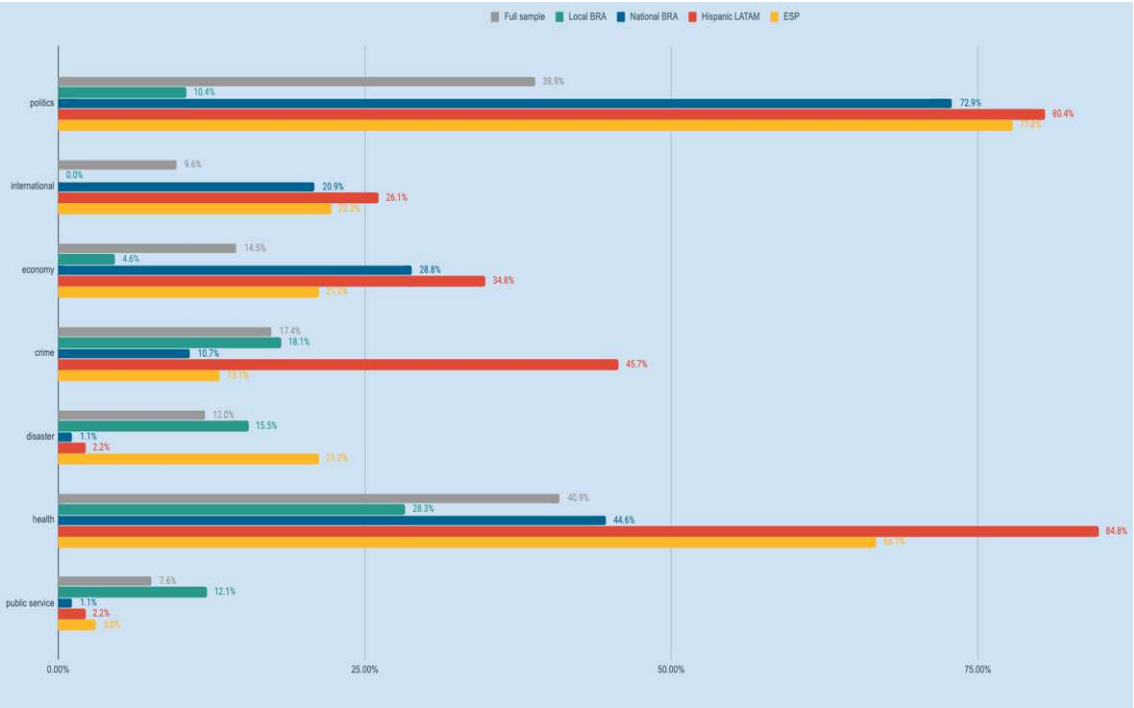


Figure 31. Main topics addressed in messages sent by news organizations on Telegram in the period from January 11 to 24, 2021.

Unfortunately, I did not collect enough data from messages sent by news outlets before the pandemic to be able to compare notions and understand how the editors and executives in our sample behaved in terms of choosing subjects for news coverage and distribution on messaging applications in a period of greater stability. The dilemma of how the media should act in the face of the news gap persists and seems to be even more important during these calmer periods. It tends to be reinforced at a time of fragmentation of the news, when readers are exposed to less complete journalistic products such as the edition of a newspaper or a magazine, and each news article is consumed for its face value to the user of digital platforms such as search engines, aggregators, social media, and messaging applications.

6.3.3. *Adaptation mostly only on a technological level*

An essential characteristic of messaging apps is interpersonal communication, meaning that platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram are mostly employed as means of communication from one person (or, lately, one business) to another or to a group of people (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018). These conversations remain private to its participants and potentially open room for more meaningful discussions than on public social media (Boczek & Koppers, 2020), which value some specific behaviors and interactions according to their own principles, not always in the same ways that news media and their readers would prefer (Bell et al., 2017). In this section, I aim at completing answering sub-RQ3.1 and, at the same time, moving towards addressing sub-RQ 3.2, which is focused on news organizations' employment of chat apps to stimulate engagement with their audiences.

On their interviews, several editors and executives from the cases selected for this study praised the possibility of directly connecting to their readers without the mediation by algorithms (see section 5.2). Usually, however, publishers' WhatsApp groups and broadcast lists and Telegram channels do not open space for interaction from end-users: only company admins are allowed to send messages, showing that, from the media point of view, these channels work mostly for simple news distribution. "It would be chaotic (*to open groups for readers interaction*). Simple like that. It wouldn't be possible to moderate several groups (on WhatsApp). We don't have enough workforce for that, it wouldn't be viable," stated Nyle Ferrari, former social media manager at *Agência Pública*. *The Intercept Brasil's* channel proved that was actually possible, at least on Telegram, where it opened every message for comments from users. The Brazilian news organization was also the only one in our sample to have a group to hold discussions with readers: in fact, a 'secret group' where only paying members could enter by invitation (see figure 32). Very few news outlets had dedicated channels (or telephone numbers in the case of WhatsApp) for receiving contact from readers.

An ideal process to assess whether the media really used messaging apps as channels of conversation with the audience would be having access to the messages they received from readers in these tools and their responses over a period of time. However, this type of analysis is almost impossible: in WhatsApp, for example, the

service should be interrupted during the lengthy collection of material (each chat with each user would have to be exported in a .txt file). Privacy issues would still have to be addressed, as messages exchanged between users should remain private and access to them would certainly depend on authorizations from all parties – which would mean a significant workload.

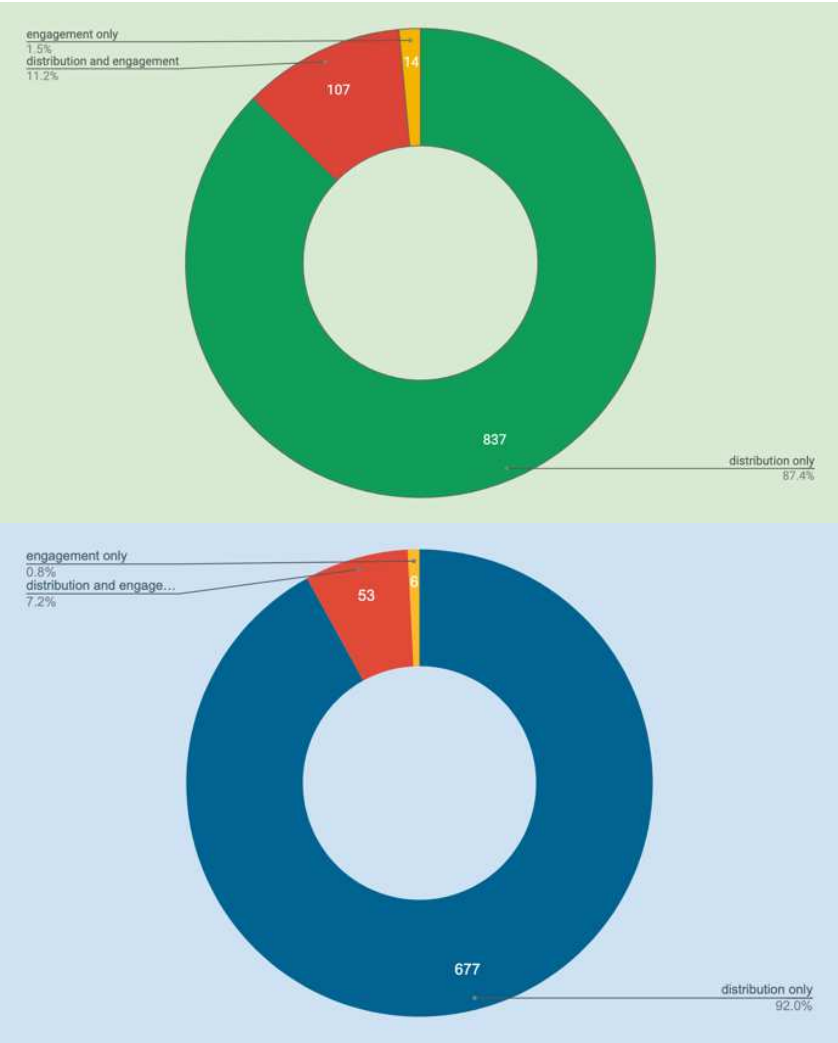


Figure 32. Percentage of messages sent by news organizations on WhatsApp (on top, green background color) and Telegram (below, blue background color) with call to engage (period from January 11 to 24, 2021).

Thus, the feasible way found to assess whether publishers value the interaction with their readers in messaging apps was analyzing the content of the messages they sent in their distribution channels and examining if they included calls for readers to engage in a conversation with the news brand, incentives to interaction: a similar approach used before by Boczek and Koppers (2020). In the analysis carried out over two

weeks in January 2021, I noticed that a low number of messages sent by news outlets had some form of call for reader engagement: only 12.7% (121 messages out of 958) on WhatsApp and 8% (59 messages out of 736) on Telegram (see figure 32). When sent, these calls to engagement usually occupied a less noble position in the message, at the end of a text that contained some news: just 1.5% (or 14 out of 958) of the messages on WhatsApp and 0.8% (or 6 out of 736) on Telegram were solely focused on stimulating forms of engagement with the audience.

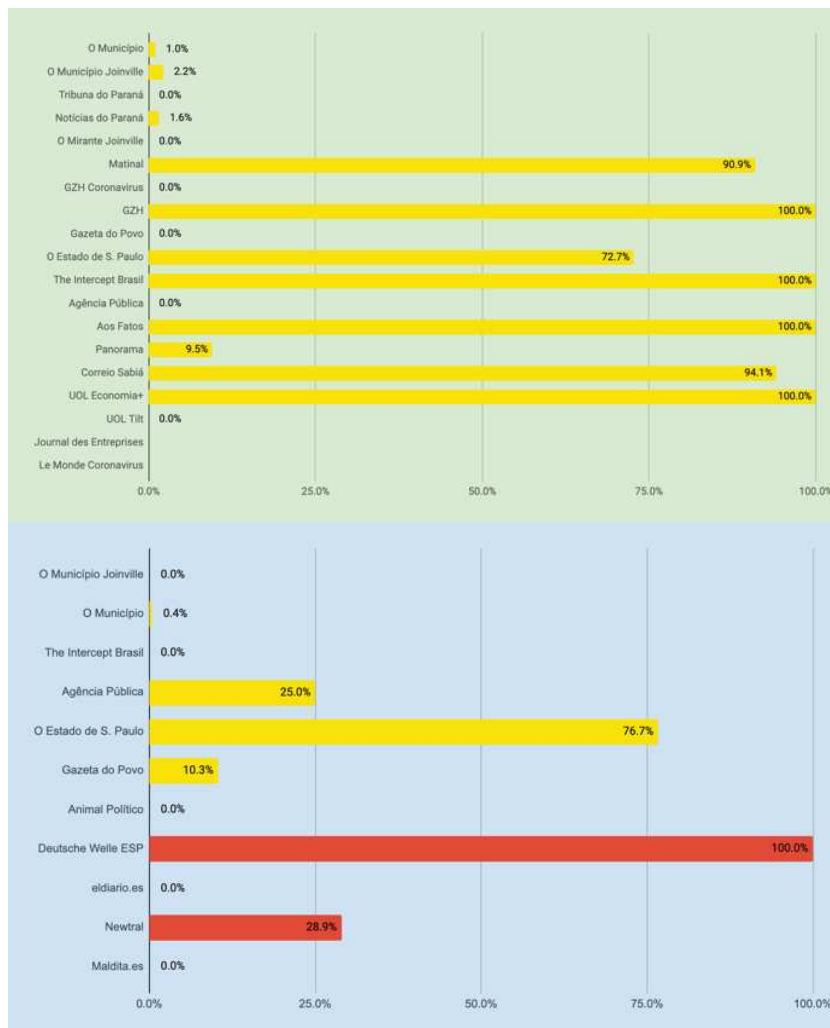


Figure 33. Percentage of messages sent within each WhatsApp (on top, green background color) and Telegram channel (below, blue background color) with a call to engage (period from January 11 to 24, 2021).

I have already learned from the previous analysis of the sample that an uninspiring general scenario usually covers up some exceptions, some cases with at least a little more innovative practices in terms of content distribution in messaging apps. It was not

different in relation to the incentive that publishers provided their readers to further engage with the brands. While the vast majority of the cases, indeed, did not really pay attention to the need to stimulate audience engagement on messaging applications, an interesting minority did the opposite at least in a limited way (see figure 33). Seven of the 19 channels analyzed on WhatsApp (36.8%) and two of the 11 channels on Telegram (18.2%) sent a call to engagement in at least 70% of their messages. *GZH*, *The Intercept Brasil*, *Aos Fatos* and *UOL Economia+* (on WhatsApp) and *Deutsche Welle* Spanish channel on Telegram had those kinds of calls in each of all their messages sent to users. However, these calls to engagement did not seem to bring many variations: usually, it was the same sentence accompanied by a link in every single message, which potentially might end up having a limited effect on the actual stimulus for the reader to interact with the news brand (see figure 34).

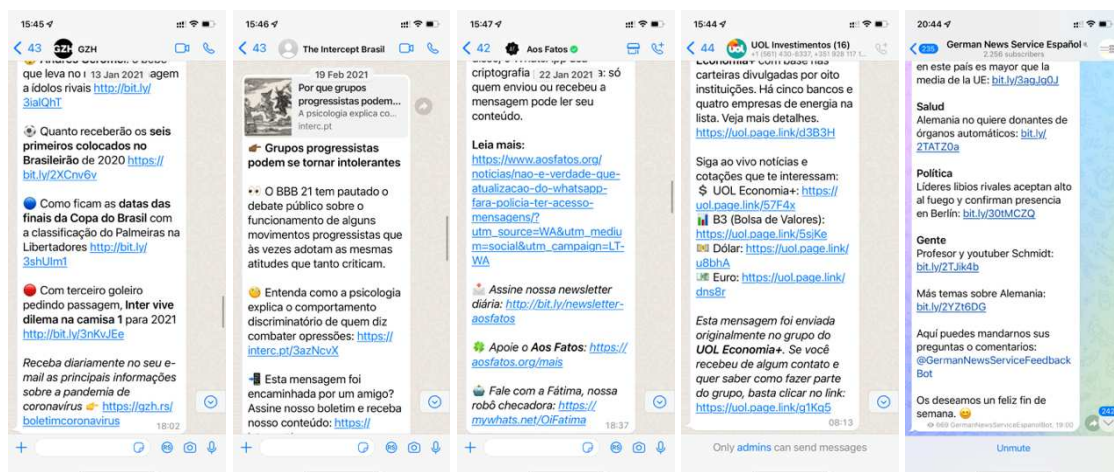


Figure 34. Lack of variation on calls to engagement from GZH, The Intercept Brasil, Aos Fatos, UOL Economia+ (WhatsApp) and Deutsche Welle (Telegram): same sentences at the end of the messages (screenshots).

Surprisingly, *The Intercept Brasil* did not mention its spaces for interaction in the messages sent on its news distribution channels on both platforms and on its website (see figure 35): a contrasting strategy to *Tribuna do Paraná*, one of the few publishers in our sample to have a rich page on its website where it explained all the functioning of its various channels on WhatsApp, including the one focused on reader contact²⁵⁰.

²⁵⁰ Grupos de WhatsApp da Tribuna (n.d.). *Tribuna do Paraná*. Retrieved from <https://tribunapr.uol.com.br/grupos-de-whatsapp-da-tribuna/> on September 14, 2021.

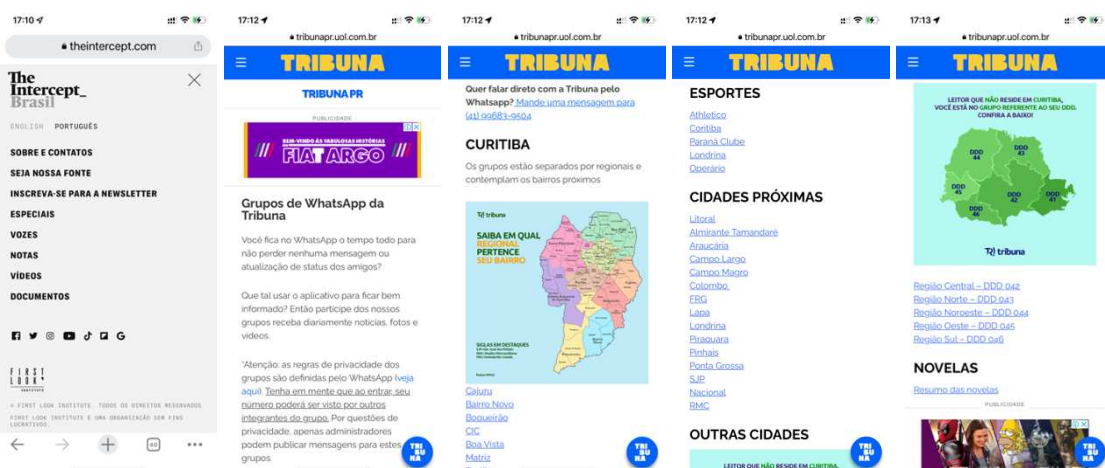


Figure 35. The Intercept Brasil and Tribuna do Paraná: Opposing practices when promoting their messaging channels on their own websites (screenshots).

Although they rarely made it clear in the chats that the phone numbers of their news distribution channels on WhatsApp were also available to receive messages from readers, some news outlets, indeed, placed this information in their contact profiles in the tool – a page, which, however, is rarely accessed by users (see figure 36). That was the case of *GZH*, both channels from *O Município* analyzed in this sample, *Correio Sabiá* and *Journal des Entreprises*. A similar approach was used on Telegram only by *O Município* and *O Município Joinville*.

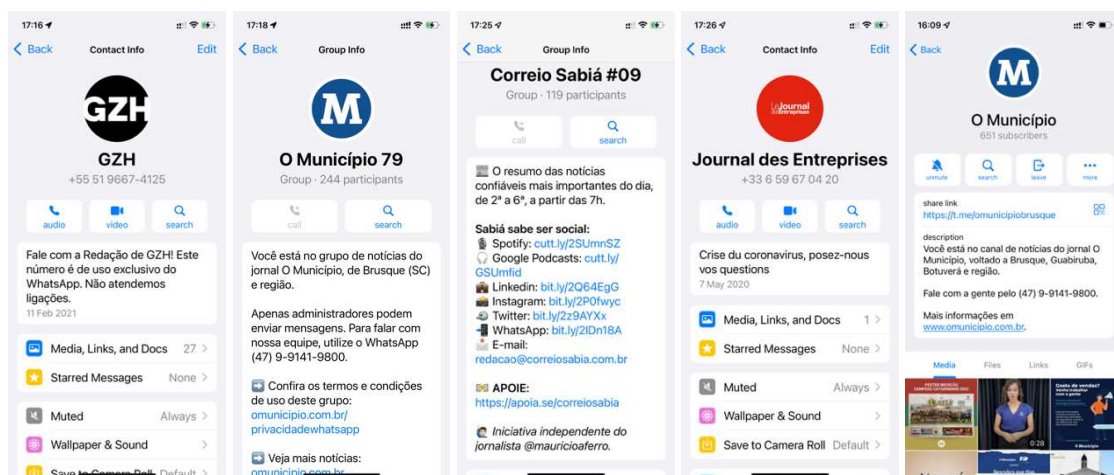


Figure 36. *GZH*, *O Município*, *Correio Sabiá* and *Journal des Entreprises* showing their availability for receiving messages from users on the chat profiles on WhatsApp and Telegram (screenshots).

In this study, I considered seven categories of engagement that publishers could stimulate, following previous literature (Boczek & Koppers, 2020) and adding a couple ones when needed. The most basic ones were 1) *share*, when readers were incentivized to distribute a message with their personal contacts or other groups; 2) *promotion*, when users were called to follow the news brand on another channel (on Instagram or YouTube, for example); and 3) *contact*, when news publishers provided another channel to receiving general messages from users. Note that at least two of these categories disregarded interactions between someone in the media and their audience, since readers were only urged to hand on content and continue following the news produced by that publisher on another platform. *Contact* was the first category to open an opportunity for interaction, but still without a specific focus on bringing any clear benefit to the relationship between news organization and reader, nor a promise that the contact would really become an exchange or would be taken into account by the receptor. Anyway, I assume these categories can already be considered forms of engagement since they demand actual actions from the reader.

More complex forms of engagement could be stimulated, though: 4) *questions*, when the news outlet asked their audience about something that could be useful for both, including for starting a conversation; 5) *survey*, similar to the previous category, but usually a compilation of several closed questions that could help publishers to have more knowledge of their audiences, their needs and, consequently, provide them with better products or services; 6) *feedback*, when news organizations asked the users to provide their opinions on specific subjects without limiting the answers one could give to a short number of objective alternatives; and, finally, 7) *crowdsourcing*, when publishers asked their readers for support in performing specific tasks (for example, analyzing a large sum of documents, finding sources to be interviewed in a specific subject, etc.).

It was possible to notice that, on both platforms, the analyzed cases mostly stimulated basic forms of engagement, such as *promotion* (present on 53.7% of messages that contained a call to engagement on WhatsApp and on 83.1% of the same kind of messages on Telegram), *share* (on 52.9% of the messages containing calls to engagement on WhatsApp) and *contact* (9.9% of these kinds of messages on WhatsApp and 16.9% on Telegram) – see figure 37. Interestingly, I did not find more complex categories

of engagement being encouraged in the Telegram sample, while *crowdsourcing* and *questions* were ones with a significant frequency (17.4% and 8.3% of the messages containing calls to engagement, respectively) on WhatsApp. These percentages were largely influenced by very specific cases: Brazilian fact-checking agency *Aos Fatos*, which encouraged crowdsourcing in all its news distribution messages, as it largely relies on readers' support to collect rumors circulating on messaging apps, and *UOL Economia+*, which asked several different questions in eight of their 22 messages.



Figure 37. Most common forms of engagement promoted by news organizations on their WhatsApp and Telegram channels in the period from January 11 to 24, 2021.

News organizations' little encouragement to more elaborate forms of audience engagement can be attributed to platform limitations: automation of responses on WhatsApp, for example, could at least open room for news companies to start answering more contact from readers and assess the eventual moments when there was a need to put their scarce workforce in more active play. But that is still impossible on the platform unless publishers pay exorbitant fees.

I also noticed during the interviews that the eventual use of messaging apps to stimulate readers engagement and, eventually, increase their participation in the development process of news companies is highly motivated by individual actions: leaders, whether editors or news executives, who are convinced that the use of these tools can be transformative for the relationship that their companies have with their readers. They are people like Fábio Gusmão, considered the pioneer in the use of WhatsApp for distribution (and production of news), who in the already distant year of 2013 saw a very large growth in the use of the platform among acquaintances and developed a way to create a role for *Extra* newspaper on the tool. Some others can be added to this list: FêCris Vasconcellos, from *Matinal*; Maurício Ferro, from *Correio Sabiá*; Lilian Ferreira, from *UOL*; Rafael Maia and Rodrigo Cunha, from *Tribuna do Paraná*; Débora Pradella, from *GZH*, Luiza Bodenmüller and Bernardo Moura, from *Aos Fatos*. They are usually editors and executives from Brazilian initiatives who seemed still motivated to overcome the obstacles of messaging platforms (mainly WhatsApp) to make their news organizations grow and have a different relationship with readers on them. It seemed to me that, beyond this firm belief, these people needed to have a great power of persuasion to convince overworked teams to assume a certain burden of doing manually the daily management of this relationship in the tool, which is not, a priori, a function traditionally expected of a journalist (always more focused on producing and editing the news). The problem is that it does not seem sustainable in the long term to have a single person in charge of the concept and often the execution of the initiative. As they are naturally motivated, enthusiastic (Ferro, for example, works as a full-time reporter for one of the largest newspapers in the country and until recently he ran *Correio Sabiá* practically alone), and competent, they end up rising in the profession and being promoted to other positions. They rarely manage to leave successors as motivated and competent as they are, and the fact that the tools bring so many obstacles and still do not give such a clear palpable return ends up standing out and undermining initiatives that could focus on simpler and more tangible relationship-building possibilities.

This perception helps us to understand why the most innovative and reader-friendly initiatives in messaging apps typically come from smaller, less established publishers such as *Tribuna do Paraná*, *Aos Fatos*, *Correio Sabiá* rather than more traditional news organizations. In general, therefore, the cases contained in the sample have been

limited to a more technological level of adaptation to messaging applications, focused mostly on news distribution, without developing significant new practices and closer relationships with audience members. This finding is hardly surprising, given that previous studies based on the diffusion of innovations theory (Rogers, 2003) have already shown that newsrooms really have difficulties in changing their internal logics and building different relationships with readers even when adopting social media with a more open character such as Twitter (Boczek & Koppers, 2020; Bruns, 2012; Ekdale et al., 2015; Hermida, 2013; Lasorsa et al., 2012).

6.3.4. Strategic use of messaging apps for enhancing news organizations' business models: better in speech than in practice

Once again, as already addressed in this research, several recent studies have pointed to a trend of news organizations employing digital platforms (especially social media) more strategically as a reflex of an increasing perception that over-reliance on these intermediaries could be dangerous for their long-term sustainability and an understanding that constantly seeking for increasing audience numbers in these tools has not resulted in growth of advertising revenues (Cornia et al., 2018; Jenkins, 2020; Rashidian et al., 2019). Thus, at least some news outlets have supposedly made a smaller amount of their content available on social media and have sought to encourage their readers to opt for online subscription or membership programs. Others, unable to redirect their followers on social media to their own websites, have sought for advertising monetization directly on platforms – via commercial insertions in videos on YouTube or podcasts on Spotify, for example. In this section, I examine whether this logic was reflected in similar practices by the news organizations present in the sample in the messaging environment of WhatsApp and Telegram (sub-RQ3.3). In the manual content analysis of over 1,500 messages sent by publishers over two weeks in January 2021, I searched for signs of these practices related to their business models, whether messages containing advertisements and/or sponsored content (which were compiled in the *advertising* category), offers of subscriptions and/or exclusive content for subscribers (compiled in *subscriptions*), or requests for readers support and/or the offering of benefits for members (*memberships*).

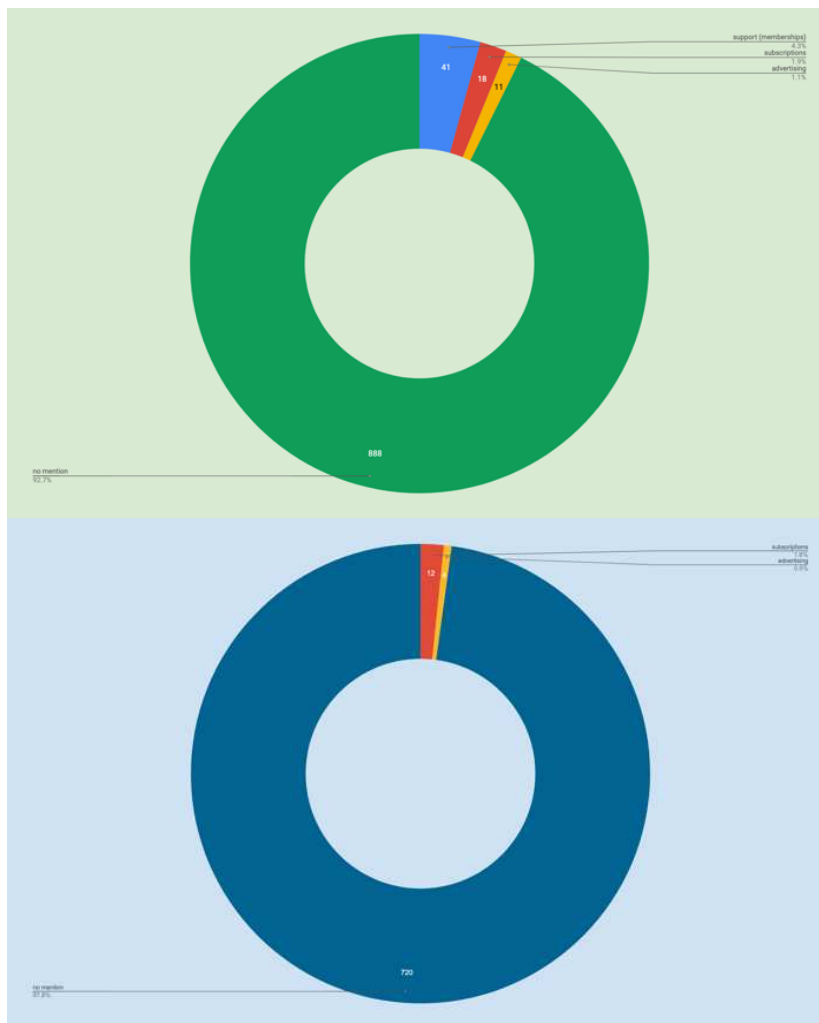


Figure 38. Percentage of messages sent by news organizations on WhatsApp (on top, green background color) and Telegram (below, blue background color) with mention to the company's business model (period from January 11 to 24, 2021).

In general, this was the section where practices turned out to be more different from the discourse of the editors and executives interviewed (see figure 37). Mere 41 messages out of 958 selected on WhatsApp (or 7.3%) and 16 out of 736 (2.1%) on Telegram contained any sign or mention to the business models of the news organizations present in the sample. I could not find any sign or mention to *memberships* in the messages analyzed on Telegram, although this is an important revenue source for the majority of the cases from the sample on the platform (news outlets such as *Agência Pública*, *The Intercept Brasil*, *Animal Político*, *eldiario.es*, *Newtral* and *Maldita.es*). However, it was the most mentioned category on WhatsApp (4.3% of all the messages). *Subscriptions* maintained similar low averages across both platforms (1.9% on WhatsApp

and 1.6% on Telegram), while I found a form of *advertising* in only 1.1% of the messages analyzed on WhatsApp and 0.5% on Telegram – perhaps a demonstration of the potential in this form of channel monetization in messaging applications, but still a revenue stream that is underdeveloped on these platforms.

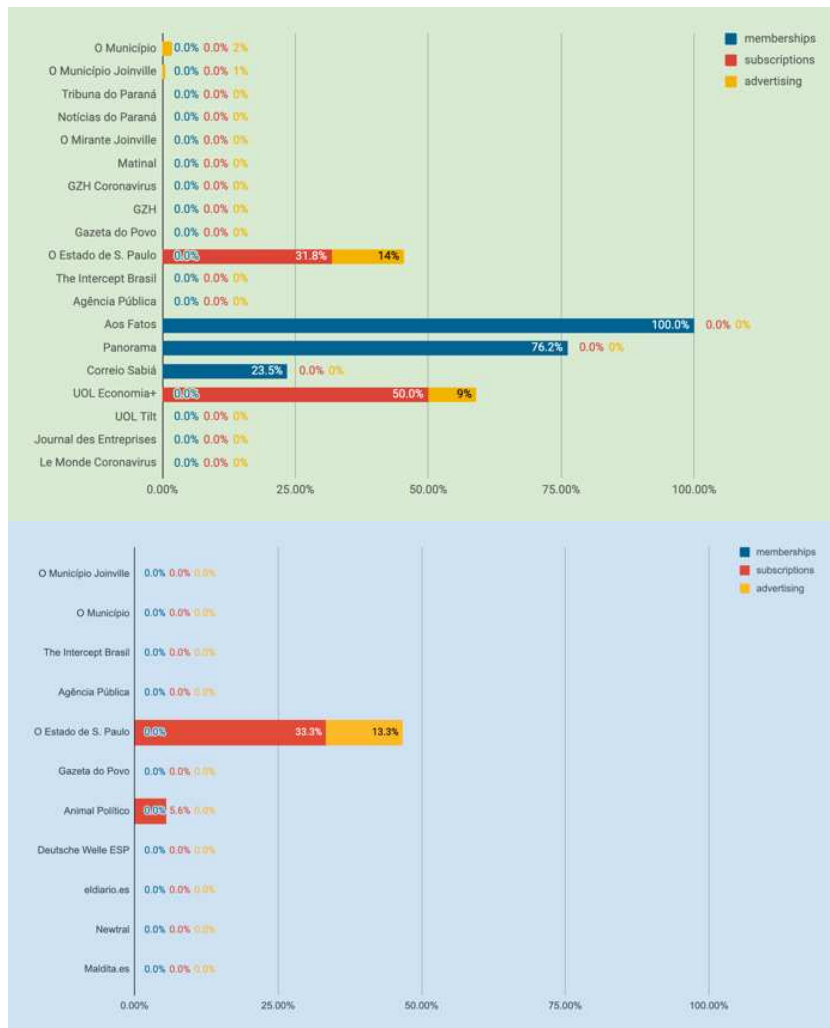


Figure 39. Percentage of messages sent within each WhatsApp (on top, green background color) and Telegram (below, blue background color) channel with mention to the company's business model (period from January 11 to 24, 2021).

As in previous two sections, I found exceptions to the general limited strategic use of the two messaging apps available in the regions of the sample (see figure 39). These exceptions were much more frequent on WhatsApp, where *Aos Fatos*, for example, tried to convince its readers to become members in 100% of its messages and *Panorama* on 76.2%, and *O Estado de S. Paulo* e *UOL Economia+* stimulated their readers to buy subscriptions in 31.8% and 50% of their messages, respectively. With mixed revenue

sources, these two last publishers also sent advertisements or sponsored content at a reasonable frequency (14% and 9% of all messages from each, respectively). By sending practically the same messages also on Telegram, *O Estado de S. Paulo* maintained similar numbers in both categories in the tool, which was practically not used strategically to transform readers into subscribers, members, or target audience of advertisements by the other channels of our sample.

With the exception of the very rare mentions of subscriptions on *Animal Político's* channel on Telegram, French, Spanish and Hispanic Latin American initiatives seemed neglective to tie their channels in the most popular messaging apps to their current business models. News organizations limited strategic use of messaging applications has been quite surprising due to the finding, in other studies, that publishers have already made significant efforts on other platforms to promote their own digital properties and privilege those that revert to revenue. Expanding this strategy to messaging applications should not be difficult or expensive, just requiring the adaptation of existing practices from other platforms to the more closed and private environment of these tools. Furthermore, the editors and executives interviewed for this research highlighted the importance of acting strategically, considering each channel on the platforms as a specific product and seeking to monetize them individually.

7. Conclusion

This study is initially interested in understanding how the relationships between news organizations and messaging applications evolved in the wake of the algorithmic changes implemented by Facebook between late 2016 and early 2018, which have caused a decline in the traffic redirected by the platform to news websites (Cornia et al., 2018), an increase in the use of chat apps for news consumption (Newman et al., 2021) and wide dissatisfaction among publishers with the contingent governance of the world's largest social media company (Rashidian et al., 2019) – here the term ‘contingent’ refers not only to the creation of dependences but also to the realization that the platform's boundary resources are constantly changing and requiring quick adaptation from complementors (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). As is known, platforms do not create content, but after assuming a leading role in the distribution and curation of news, they also began to perform other functions of publishers such as editing and commissioning (Bell et al., 2017). I found that news editors and executives' frustration with Facebook has extrapolated the borders of developed countries in North America and Europe, regions usually targeted by the research of the field, and has spread throughout Latin America and specially Brazil, country that has the fourth largest user base of the platform in the world²⁵¹. Publishers' distrust with the platform has been carried over into the realm of messaging apps, affecting the adoption of these tools for news distribution and audience engagement despite general media interest mostly in WhatsApp due to its significant popularity among users worldwide.

7.1 Publishers' staying away from WhatsApp because of its connection to Facebook

While platform policies and the increasing perception of disproportionate dependencies has rarely led news organizations to quit distributing content on Facebook, regulation by the platform has been, indeed, largely considered by the media as a justification for staying away from a chat app such as WhatsApp. This is the first large

²⁵¹ Dixon, S. (2022, July 26). Countries with the most Facebook users 2022. *Statista*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/268136/top-15-countries-based-on-number-of-facebook-users/> on October 12, 2022.

difference this research noticed between the platformization of the news on social media – and more specifically Facebook – to this process on the domain of the messaging apps owned by Meta. An obvious explanation for the phenomenon is that Facebook, despite recent changes, still reverts a significant audience to publishers who have often spent several years building a follower base that frequently exceeds the millions of users on the platform. As shown earlier, growing an audience on WhatsApp is difficult, and, at best, it only allows reaching the tens of thousands of users after a few years.

In addition, news experts reported several technical and structural limitations that constrain the news work on WhatsApp, such as the large manual effort required to send messages to a limited numbers of users in groups and broadcast lists, lack of automation, constant bugs that prevent messages to reach recipients, lack of analytics tools that can reassure editors that messages are effectively being distributed, read and, perhaps, even shared by users, and lack of a supporting team in the platform to listen to the media's demands and align improvements: a situation that leads part of the cases addressed in this research to have a perception that WhatsApp was not developed for journalism – or at least not for publishers' institutional distribution of their own content specially after the ban of automation and bulk messaging in December 2019, which caused several European publishers such as *Le Monde* and *Deutsche Welle* to flee of the platform. In practice, therefore, although it does not openly state its intention to keep publishers out of the platform, WhatsApp creates barriers that force most news organizations to stay away from its messaging ecosystem or even deplatforming.

7.2. The influence of national contexts and media fragmentation in the adoption of messaging applications for news distribution

Different national contexts and the fragmentation of the news industry, though, seem to play a crucial role in the decision-making process of some news players for using WhatsApp for news distribution despite its limitations to news work and general frustration with the broad Facebook governance. Brazilian publishers, for example, appear to feel more coerced to at least experiment with the tool due to its ubiquity and importance in the digital life of a large part of the population, as it is one of the few platforms in the country together with Facebook and Instagram to benefit from exemption

from data charges by telecom companies – a preponderant factor in the adoption of an application, since a large part of the population access the Internet only by smartphone and through cheap prepaid plans. For these people, WhatsApp and the platformed ecosystem provided by Meta are the Internet. Meanwhile, in Spain and Hispanic Latin America, where the app enjoys a lower degree of ubiquity despite great popularity, the vast majority of established news organizations seem to have already ruled out using the tool; and in France, its use for news distribution still appears to be driven by the curiosity of publishers thirsty by experimentation as utilization of messaging apps for news consumption has not boomed nor established yet.

Local news publishers and organizations devoted to fact-checking and debunking rumors demonstrate more interest in experimenting with and eventually implementing WhatsApp for news distribution and audience engagement. The former group is motivated by the possibility of increasing audiences as small media initiatives have faced almost insurmountable barriers for that task on Facebook after the algorithmic changes already mentioned in this study; the latter because a considerable part of their budget can be already attributed to partnerships with the leading messaging app, which also provides them fertile ground and unique tools for crowdsourcing mis- and disinformation. While the first kind of usage seems to be just a breach found by local news organizations and not a strategic approach validated by the platform, the second has become highly institutionalized by WhatsApp and can also be seen as a confession or a public acknowledgment from Meta that the tool has been conducive to the circulation of rumors without factual support, which has been already highlighted by researchers and the media in the recent years (Recuero et al., 2021; Rossini et al., 2021).

While part of the editors from fact-checking organizations interviewed for this research see this type of partnership as an initial step towards an expansion of the platform's cooperation with the press as a whole – something that has not been confirmed yet, – another part considers this effort insufficient because it only addresses one face of the problem of disinformation (i.e., countering actions), neglecting possible stimulus for greater presence of more reliable sources such as professional media and accredited journalists in the tool and the consequent circulation of more reliable journalistic content. Anyway, the partnerships with fact-checking organizations seem to be well aligned with Meta Journalism Project's mission of helping “build sustainable futures for

community-based news". Perhaps, news organizations would prefer it to represent the intention of building "a more sustainable, diverse and innovative news ecosystem", but that is the mission from Google News Initiative, a project from a platform that generally received a little more sympathy from the news companies in this sample.

On the one hand, WhatsApp's approach to partnerships seems unique in the scenario of the platformization of the news: instead of seeking to collaborate essentially with well-established and renowned partners, as Google and Facebook have originally done over the years every time they presented a new feature for the news industry (Bell et al., 2017; Smyrnaio & Rebillard, 2019), the messaging app has targeted several newly founded, independent initiatives which are only starting to build larger audiences (i.e., fact-checking news startups such as the ones addressed in this study, *Aos Fatos*, *Maldita.es* and *Newtral*). On the other hand, this approach also maintains a certain logic similar to the original partnerships of the main platforms in the sense that WhatsApp seeks, above all, essential alliances: and these emerging news organizations are front-runners in the sector of fact-checking, a newly created role in the media with the massive dissemination of disinformation enabled by platforms with user bases in the billions.

Although they seem to be benefiting from WhatsApp so far, when local news organizations take advantage of breaches in the tool to target larger audiences and fact-checking initiatives enter into broad partnerships with the platform like those reported in this research, it seems that they create direct dependencies on this messaging application as large or even larger than those built by news media (especially digital news natives such as *BuzzFeed* and *HuffPost*, who largely relied on digital advertising as their main source of revenues) with Facebook and Google throughout the 2010s. Although, in theory, these smaller and digital initiatives appear to be more capable to adapt than legacy media (Nee, 2013; Negro et al., 2020; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022), any changes to WhatsApp policies that affect their practices on the chat app can have very drastic consequences to their sustainability – it is worth remembering that the platform is today the main source of resources for *Maldita.es* and *Aos Fatos*, for example.

The scenario of frustration with Facebook and WhatsApp opens room for the emergence of a messaging application such as Telegram, which holds no affiliation with large platforms and has reached more than 700 million users worldwide (a considerable part of them also news consumers). Developed by Russian entrepreneurs, based in the

United Arab Emirates, and shelter for far-right political celebrities banned from mainstream platforms (Rogers, 2020), the application allows publishers to maintain distribution channels with similar logics to open social media that can be easily verified by the tool, which offers content automation, minimizing the manual effort of use for content producers. Messenger, on the other hand, usually attracts little interest from publishers, both because of its strong connection with Facebook in terms of business model and policy integration and its timid adoption for news consumption – no more than 15% of its users, at best national scenarios, use it to get the news (Newman et al., 2021). In this research, the only case that quit using WhatsApp out of frustration with the tool's policies and migrated to its brother app was *Deutsche Welle*, with its service aimed at Brazilian users: a solution that can be only justified by the publisher's habit and convenience, as this last chat app largely allows automation, integration with the main Facebook page and, therefore, limited effort from a team that already has few professionals.

7.3. The role of affordances

News organizations' migration to Telegram and even the utilization of Messenger for news distribution demonstrates the importance of messaging applications' affordances for their effective adoption by news players. In the opinion of the experts interviewed, both tools are much friendlier – or more practical to use – than WhatsApp for content distribution, generating superior *efficiency*, one of the important affordances from these platforms for news work this research finds. Beyond friendliness of use, another component of messaging applications' efficiency for news distribution is the possibility of making direct contact with users and avert algorithm curation, which has become standard practice in social media and search engines and an essential factor within the governance by platforms (Gillespie, 2010, 2018a, 2018b). That is, except in case of bugs, messages with the news tend to reach news organizations' whole base of groups/broadcast lists contacts (on WhatsApp), channel subscribers (on Telegram) and page followers (on Messenger). Telegram channels and Facebook/Messenger pages on Facebook/Messenger allow an unlimited number of members.

In addition to being connected with the affordance of efficiency, therefore, messaging apps' characteristic of *allowing direct access* to readers is, in itself, an affordance

of these tools for news organizations. It composes a larger group of affordances that work differently for different types of news players which I labeled *accessing audiences*. Besides allowing direct access to users, messaging apps afford at least part of the media (in this case, small local news publishers) *to increase their reader base* and, when that is not possible, *to improve engagement*, as not only communication with users seems more friendly in these applications than on open social media but also readers frequently spend more time consuming news content shared through these kinds of channels, according to the experts interviewed.

While these results might seem unsurprising at first glance, they are unique as I am not aware of studies that specifically address the affordances of messaging apps for news organizations. Perhaps more specific studies aimed at analyzing the affordances of each type of platform for the media could delve deeper into the subject and identify other affordances that were not mentioned during this research. However, at least until now, the study of affordances of this type of platforms has focused mainly on users and their role of news consumers (Lou et al., 2021; Masip et al., 2021).

The power of platforms over the news industry in the domain of messaging applications is manifested in a more subtle way than on social, as their algorithms of content selection lose importance compared to other governance mechanisms and these tools' affordances and constraints. Algorithm criteria seem to change more frequently than platforms' written guidelines, terms of service and standards, demanding constant adaptation from news publishers. As algorithms carry a high degree of opacity, this adaptation requires from news organizations a work of investigation, trial and error, search for information with the staff of the platforms: in short, a troubled process that tends to generate concerns and anxieties, as expressed by the experts interviewed.

From a platform perspective, there seems to be little or no interest from Facebook/WhatsApp in courting the media for their chat structures. During the infancy of social media, Facebook's interest in the news industry was justified by the need to better serve advertisers, clients who provided a traditional source of revenue to the media. By controlling the online news distribution with their powerful curation mechanisms, platforms managed to capture most of that revenue as advertising increasingly migrated from print and electronic environments dominated by traditional media to digital controlled by platforms. WhatsApp's business model has only recently taken shape and it

seems there is no clear competition between it and the media. Therefore, the need for Meta to create an approach around this platform instance for news organizations is less pronounced: there would be no financial return on that. And it seems that the tech company reckons that even the reputational payoff from larger partnership schemes with the news industry on the domain of messaging applications is not worth the effort.

7.4. Publishers' adoption of messaging applications for news distribution: a subjective multi-factor calculation

This research found, therefore, that the decision to adopt or not a messaging application for the distribution of news and audience engagement involves a series of factors. The largest set of factors is mainly related to the characteristics of the chat app addressed by the news organization: first, the tool's *popularity and ubiquity* in the national context of the publisher; second, the messaging application's *connection to Facebook*, which can allow data integration to the media organization's page on the parenting platform on the one hand, but also carries a set of contingent policies that generates distrust from publishers on the other hand; third, the chat app's *technical and structural limitations* that constrain news work; and, fourth, connected to the previous variable, the messaging platform's *affordances for media organizations*. Additionally, there is a crucial factor directly related to the media company itself: its *type* – as previously mentioned in this study, local news and fact-checking organizations, for example, tend to be more inclined to adopt messaging applications in general and WhatsApp in particular, while large/mainstream outlets may perceive fewer effective benefits in these kinds of mobile applications.

The weight attributed by editors and executives to each factor is highly subjective, though. When discussing the adoption or not of a messaging application, two similar news organizations from different national contexts can define very distinct and even opposite values to the same factor. If we take 'connection with Facebook' as an example, we can see that a local media group in France (*Centre France*) evaluated this factor positively when it chose to create a chatbot on Messenger. Thus, it was possible for the company to use data already collected through its page on the parenting platform to target users with content about the new initiative. Dependence and contingent

issues were left on the background by the team headed by Cédric Motte, director of digital products and editorial development. A local news group in the neighboring country (*Vocento*, from Spain) had an opposite view of this factor, immediately discarding Messenger but also ditching WhatsApp after tests because of Facebook's policies, which, in the view of editorial director Fernando Belzunce, primarily serve the interests of the platform and neglect publishers' needs. In fact, *Centre France* was basically the only case to clearly see the connection to Facebook as a clearly positive factor. The other few cases that adopted Messenger (*Deutsche Welle*, *Robot Labot*) did so despite the tool's connection with Facebook and one (*Politibot*) even quit the chat app and discontinued its services for that reason.

7.5. Publishers' strategies for news distribution and audience engagement on messaging applications

After analyzing all the decision factors for publishers' adoption of a messaging application for news distribution and audience engagement, this study examined news organizations' strategies for that purpose on these tools. I found the adoption of three basic strategies: one aimed at building a wider audience on chat apps, a second one which I call 'newsletter strategy', and a third one focused in keeping a minimal presence on these tools. The first, evidently, is implemented mostly by local news publishers in Brazil and bears similarities to the basic dynamics of news distribution in open social media: sending short messages, each with a link that redirects to a news article on the publisher's website – here news outlets can even benefit from these tools' feature of previewing the link shared with a picture thumbnail, when available, and the headline. The second type is similar to email newsletters, i.e., each message contains several links for news articles which redirect the readers both to the website of the message sender and also to other news sources in the case of initiatives focused on content curation. These newsletters are sent a maximum of three times a day to recap the main news produced in a previous period of time (mornings, afternoons, evenings, the day before, etc.). The minimal presence strategy seems to be an attempt of sending at least one message a day but without the amount of content of a newsletter (i.e., no more than two links to news articles on publisher websites). It has been mainly adopted by Brazilian

investigative news initiatives that do not usually produce much more than a single in-depth article a day.

Despite the absence of algorithms, which are largely considered factors that influence the production and distribution of news on platforms (E. J. Bell et al., 2017; Bucher, 2012; Caplan & boyd, 2018; DeVito, 2017; Musiani, 2013; Pasquale, 2016; Smyrnaio & Rebillard, 2019), I argue that the architecture of messaging applications somehow also shapes the content shared by news organizations on these infrastructures. This research found that news experts are generally aware of particular habits of news consumption on mobile tools such as news snacking, which refers to users constant and numerous checks on messaging applications along the day during their routine activities (Molyneux, 2018). News snacking is composed by multiple dimensions: message lengths, formats, frequencies, multimedia, etc. In that sense, to adapt to the users' habits of news consumption on messaging applications, content sent by publishers tend to be, in the first place, short. Even newsletters, which in emails tend to become longer texts, on chat apps are formatted in order to take no longer than five minutes to be read by users. Sometimes, they are followed by audios of a narrator doing the reading, making the information process even easier. Due to the technical limitations of WhatsApp, photos and videos on this tool are not usually sent directly in the chats, taking up even less time for users.

Messages are also sent by publishers in frequencies that attempt to make a negotiation between taking advantage of the ubiquity allowed by messaging applications and realizing the inconvenience that can be generated with messages in times users do not want to be disturbed. Thus, even local publishers who send several messages a day in order to build a larger audience try not to do so after 10 pm and before 6 am, the time window when most users are expected to be asleep. Even though some news publishers analyzed in this research are still reluctant to use emojis, it is clear that most cases do make use of this figure of speech only on messaging applications in an attempt to adapt to the language employed by the users of these tools. In a sense, emojis provide important evidence of how messaging apps shape the content offered by the media on these platforms: not in a coercive or mandatory way, but in a form that most publishers feel the need to integrate themselves into user practices and build an identity of their own that aligns well with the consumption of news on these platforms.

On the other hand, only a minority of publishers use messaging apps to encourage user participation, neglecting the fact that these tools are essentially used for interpersonal communication (i.e., making conversations). Thus, I can infer that, with significant exceptions such as *Tribuna do Paraná*, which has a specific person on its staff to manage WhatsApp conversations, and fact-checking organizations, which use this tool for mining the main rumors that are circulating on the platform, the direct influence of reader contact and feedback through chat apps on news production is still limited.

If messaging apps' architecture and their users' habits of news consumption do have an influence on the news content shared by publishers, I tend to believe this impact is significantly smaller than the impact of open social media's constructs. On mainstream platforms such as Facebook, users' behavior do play a role in the process of content selection (Napoli, 2015; Vos, 2015) but, eventually, the algorithms have the upper hand on the decision of which kinds of content will receive larger reach and visibility. And it has already been widely argued that these mechanisms are not neutral and altruistic, but they rather reflect platforms' values and work in conjunction with their commercial business models (Bucher, 2012; Gillespie, 2010; Rieder & Sire, 2014). Algorithms play a large role not only in defining which formats reach larger bases of users (the increasing sharing of short videos across all platforms, for example, is no mere chance, but a reflection of platform business strategies: they need to maintain high levels of user permanence and engagement in their interfaces for the provision of advertising) but also the topics that will become more visible to them – which, notably, tend to be matters more related to entertainment than to public affairs (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; Lischka, 2021).

The cases analyzed in this research showed considerable autonomy from chat apps to apply journalistic criteria such as public interest and immediacy to select the news subjects they distributed in their channels on these tools. The topics that received more coverage on the messages examined are connected to public affairs such as health, politics and economics, positioning that seems to make sense for news outlets at the turn of the first to the second year of the covid-19 pandemic – a historical period that would clearly fit as a time of crisis or tension in which the interest for more serious information increases (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013). There is no guarantee that these types of content have been also the most distributed by major social media platforms

because their visibility depended more on algorithmic criteria than on the content produced by the media. At first, sensing the great interest from society in this type of content at the beginning of the pandemic, platforms may have adjusted their algorithms to value it, but the growth of news avoidance as the pandemic developed (de Bruin et al., 2021; Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, et al., 2020; Mannell & Meese, 2022; Schäfer et al., 2022) may also have influenced a reassessment from platforms that this type of content would not be ‘healthy’ for their ecosystems as they risked losing user attention. Besides covid-19-related subjects, there is a prevalence of themes such as disasters and crime in the messages sent by the publishers analyzed in this research: they are connected to the notion of proximity that guides local news initiatives (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2020).

7.6. Publishers’ emerging product orientation and implications for news distribution on platforms

Finally, this study focused on the emerging understanding among news publishers that their content distributed through platforms should, besides essentially providing information to news consumers on public and non-public affairs, promote the news outlets’ subscriptions and memberships programs. After the changes in Facebook’s algorithms, media strategists have increasingly developed the argument that news content should act as a bait for the reader to begin traversing a funnel, eventually staying within the online environment of the publisher and enshrining a subscription/membership, allocating direct revenue to the news organization (Rashidian et al., 2019). This approach served as a basis for a new kind of publisher strategy for platforms: the promotion strategy, which was summed up by Jenkins (2020) as “publish less but publish better” (p. 1), i.e., privileging the effort on producing fewer quality news content instead of the large-scale production of news articles on subjects that can be found elsewhere.

Curious initial evidence of a more business-oriented publisher approach for content appeared at the selection of the experts interviewed: a significant part of them had the words ‘product’ and ‘strategy’ on their functions – also common terms in staff positions on the platforms. During the interviews, indeed, they have reported that a large part of their work was developing other revenue sources besides advertising, which is not considered sustainable for publishers in the long-term by most of them. Hence,

interviewees confirmed that their companies are increasingly integrating their content and even their journalists into their reader conversion strategies on platforms: content is used as a bait and their staff lend their reputation on the quest of improving credibility and convincing readers to fund quality journalism – whatever may be its definition, reason for a discussion that has already lasted several years both in the media and in the Academia (Bachmann et al., 2022; Lacy & Rosenstiel, 2015; I. Shapiro, 2010).

In speech, messaging apps would be integrated into the publishers' overall platform strategy. In practice, however, at least after the analysis of over 1,500 messages sent by news organizations, we can hardly speak about the broad implementation of a promotion strategy on chat apps. I found only a few calls to action related to subscriptions/memberships on the sample. There were exceptions, though: Brazilian cases *Aos Fatos* (fact-checking), *Panorama and Correio Sabiá* (WhatsApp-based newsletters), *O Estado de S. Paulo* (national newspaper) and *UOL Economia+* (a national news website's niche economy channel) had calls to action regarding their membership and digital subscriptions programs in a considerable part of their messages – these last two news outlets also presented sponsored content/advertising. Particularly in the case of *O Estado de S. Paulo*, *GZH* and *Gazeta do Povo*, every time the users tapped on a link on their messages, they would hit a rigid paywall that did not allow them to read much more than a headline, making it difficult for the readers to perceive the value of the content. In practice, therefore, this would be another difference from the platformization of news on social media and messaging applications. However, it should be emphasized once again that the studies that mentioned news publishers' development of a promotion strategy were solely based in expert interviews (Cornia et al., 2018; Jenkins, 2020; Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018; Rashidian et al., 2019). Content analyses of publishers' posts on the main social media would be needed to confirm, in practice, how this strategy actually works.

7.7. Limitations and suggestions for further research

As Bell et al. (2017), Rashidian et al. (2018, 2019) and Smyrnaio and Rebillard (2019) demonstrate, along the time, the relationships between platforms and publishers reflect the contingent dynamics of these digital infrastructures' governance

mechanisms: they are continuously evolving and being transformed, going through moments of greater proximity, almost symbiosis, and also of tension and threats of rupture. Therefore, it seems important to constantly monitor these dynamics and their effects on the relationship between platforms, their complementors and end-users.

The same applies to platform instances such as messaging apps. Changes to Facebook's algorithms that reduced traffic redirected by the platform to publishers created opportunities for news consumption to migrate to chat apps. This research showed that several difficulties imposed by WhatsApp limited the migration of publishers to this tool, especially from December 2019, when it banned the use of automation mechanisms and massive messaging on the eve of the launch of important new updates to the company's business model, which is currently largely based on its business version. Although unlikely, the launch of a premium version for publishers, for example, an alternative ventilated by some of the experts interviewed for this research, could change this scenario – and encourage further research that could assess the functioning and effects of such a novelty.

Regulation appears to be a likely source of change for the relationship between platforms and publishers in the next years. In early 2021, backed by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp, one of the main opponents of the platform policies for the media, the Australian government began debating legislation that would force Facebook and Google to pay for publishers' content. In retaliation, Facebook even banned the publication and sharing of news by users on the platform for a few days, while the company negotiated an agreement with local authorities and other with publishers to launch a new feature dedicated to this type of content: Facebook News²⁵². Google has reached a similar agreement with the media to launch another tool, Google News Showcase. As both tools are expanded to other countries, new tensions and consequent agreements are bound to occur, but their terms remain uncertain.

This study captured only a specific frame – the period between November 2019 and September 2021, when I carried out the last formal monitoring of selected cases – of the longer film about platforms-publishers relationships with specific focus in the domain of messaging applications. As I was writing this thesis, some news outlets may have

²⁵² Facebook reverses ban on news pages in Australia (2021, February 23). *BBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-56165015> on September 14, 2022.

already changed their strategic approach to these tools and even completely given up on using them. The decrease in the intensity of the covid-19 pandemic, the outbreak of new crises such as the Russian war against Ukraine and the economic difficulties caused by the conflict at a global level have probably already altered press coverage and the consequent balance I found on the distribution of news topics in messaging apps.

This study also placed particular emphasis on the media systems of Brazil, Hispanic Latin America, Spain and France. There were no human conditions to increase the focus to other important regions where the use of these tools is widespread, and they have gained great importance for news consumption such as Asia and Africa. In these different national contexts, messaging applications other than WhatsApp, Messenger and Telegram may have greater or different importance for the distribution of news and engagement with the audience: Telegram seems to be receiving attention from users in parts of Africa, Line is very popular and ubiquitous in Japan, while KakaoTalk dominates the market in South Korea and WeChat is the monopolist platform for messaging (and other uses) for over a billion users in China. These different apps may provide other affordances and constraints for publishers, which can implement different kinds of strategies for news distribution and audience engagement on them – I have already monitored publishers use of Telegram in India, Singapore, Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates and noticed, for example, that the frequencies of messages are incredibly higher than what I have found in this study. Therefore, an important limitation of this research is the generalization of its results to national contexts and cultures very different from those examined here.

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