



Politics and ethics of user generated content : a cross-national investigation of engagement and participation in the online news ecosystem in 80 news sites

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THÈSE

**En vue de l'obtention du
DOCTORAT DE L'UNIVERSITÉ DE TOULOUSE
Délivré par l'Université Toulouse 3 - Paul Sabatier**

**Présentée et soutenue par
Gabriela GRUSZYNSKI SANSEVERINO**

Le 1 décembre 2023

**Politique et éthique du contenu généré par les utilisateurs: une
enquête transnationale sur l'engagement et la participation à
l'écosystème d'information en ligne dans 80 sites d'information.**

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Thèse dirigée par
Franck BOUSQUET et NIKOS SMYRNAIOS

Jury

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POLITICS and ETHICS OF USER-GENERATED CONTENT
**A cross-national investigation of engagement and participation in
the online news ecosystem in 80 news sites.**

Gabriela Gruszynski Sanseverino

This thesis is presented in view of obtaining the
DOCTORATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF
TOULOUSE in Sciences de l'information et de la
Communication issued by the University
Toulouse III - Paul Sabatier

Advisors: Franck Bousquet and Nikos Smyrnaio



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“Started making it. Had a breakdown. *Bon Appetit!*”
(James Acaster, The Big British Bake-Off, 2010)

SO LONG, AND THANKS FOR ALL THE FISH¹

“I want to thank me for believing in me, I want to thank me for doing all this hard work. I wanna thank me for having no days off. I wanna thank me for never quitting. I wanna thank me for always being a giver and trying to give more than I receive. I wanna thank me for trying to do more right than wrong. I wanna thank me for being me at all times, ~~Snoop Dogg~~ *Gabriela* you a bad mother*cker” (Snoop Dogg, 2018).

¹This title is taken from the book “So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish” – the fourth in Douglas Adams’ “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy” series. Paired with this quote from Snoop Dogg, it signals a personal acknowledgement, a show of resilience. It is to express the hardship that was walking this path and arriving here, and how, despite all support, it is a journey you have to choose to finish for yourself and on your own.

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ABSTRACT

Politics and ethics of User-Generated Content. A cross-national investigation of engagement and participation in the online news ecosystem in 80 news sites.

This thesis was written as part of the initiative EU H2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie ITN “JOLT: Harnessing Digital and Data Technologies for Journalism, with the focus on **Politics and Ethics of User-Generated Content in Journalism**. We consider journalism as a social practice that circulates knowledge through different platforms. From the first printed newspapers to the recent platforms based on digital technologies, the transformations in the profession—go through content, through editorial and organizational structures of the newsroom and media companies, as well as the relationships between news organizations, journalists, and their public. Online journalism blurred the lines between the concepts of public and audience, as well as participation and engagement (Deuze, 2019), and new challenges arise for the profession with the need to manage online communities, and for media organizations to foster more inclusive and diverse forms of participation (Siapera, 2019). And yet, despite the rise of User-Generated Content and social media, media organizations still retain significant power in shaping public discourse (Couldry, 2018). In this context, we proposed a cross-national empirical analysis, with the goal of understanding the relationships between media and their audience/public in the online news ecosystem and how national contexts affected them, highlighting the convergences and divergences between the spaces and strategies that enable participation and engagement in news sites. With a *corpus* of 80 news sites from 8 countries – USA, UK, France, Spain, Germany, Netherlands, Brazil and Argentina, the investigation aimed to answer: RQ(1) What are the divergences and convergences between the spaces created and hosted by news organizations to engage and encourage participation from the user according to their country of origin? RQ(2) How/when does the national context of a media company become a variable for their relationship with the user? Our research use a mixed-methods approach and made use of case studies (Yin and Davis, 2007) to answer our research questions. It consisted of two concomitant activities: desk research, with extensive bibliographical and documental review, and platform research, the in-depth analysis of our *corpus*. The study was directed by the perspective of the news organizations (their journalists, editors, employees) and examined the strategies of engagement and the spaces for participation in our *corpus* to understand how the user – and consequently UGC – was included in the news process. All 80 media organizations selected had webpages accessible by desktop and by mobile browser and 63 had applications for mobile devices. We determined that three internal factors affect the relationship of media companies with users: (1) nature (digital native or legacy media); (2) business models; and (3) the place of the user, which considered their designation (member, subscriber, supporter/ally, just the reader, costumer) and the news organization proposal of journalism. Considering these factors, we analyzed what are the strategies used for engagement by the 80 news sites in our *corpus* and identified three primary tools: share buttons, present on 77 news sites; newsletters, present on 73; and comment sections present on 49. As per the use of UGC in news stories, we categorized the uses from minimal to maximal, according to the role journalists had in mediating the content. We also observed that most of this type of content comes from social networks, from viral videos and memes that become news for their popularity, unexpected events (i.e., natural disaster) or from places/situations which are difficult for journalists to access (i.e., Ukraine War). Through that investigation of the *corpus* and the data collection, we outlined six external factors that are determining for the participation/engagement ecosystem of online news in a national setting: (1) government regulations, (2) language barriers, (3) cultural relevance, (4) revenue, (5) audience loyalty, and (6) niche market. We concluded that, as for the relationships established through the engagement strategies and spaces of participation in news sites, Western tradition and the globalization of online practices determine the features and policies employed. There are divergences in strategies across countries, which diverge due to internal factors. After over 20 years of being online, changes in Western journalism continue to be focused on a technological level (i.e. as new forms of content distribution) rather than in cultural or relational levels (Bruns, 2012; Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton, 2012; Hermida, 2013; Ekdale et al., 2015; Boczek and Koppers, 2020), as the profession continues to hold on to its role of gatekeeper, preaching the ideal of public interest, while being limited by economic constraints and having to prioritize financial sustainability over everything else. However, cross-national differences are not insubstantial for the relationships between the company and the audience/public: national settings are important mainly due to language barriers and cultural relevance, that make it so geographical borders and national identities remain significant, despite globalization and widespread technological advancements.

RESUME

Une enquête transnationale sur l'engagement et la participation au journalisme en ligne dans 80 sites d'information.

Cette thèse a été rédigée dans le cadre de l'initiative EU H2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie ITN « JOLT: Exploitation des technologies numériques et de données pour le journalisme, avec un accent sur la politique et l'éthique du contenu généré par les utilisateurs dans le journalisme. Nous considérons le journalisme comme une pratique sociale qui fait circuler les connaissances à travers différentes plateformes. Des premiers journaux imprimés aux récentes plateformes basées sur les technologies numériques, les transformations de la profession passent par les contenus, par les structures éditoriales et organisationnelles des rédactions et des entreprises de médias, ainsi que par les relations entre les organes de presse, les journalistes et leur public. . Le journalisme en ligne a brouillé les frontières entre les concepts de public et d'audience, ainsi que de participation et d'engagement (Deuze, 2019), et de nouveaux défis se posent pour la profession avec la nécessité de gérer les communautés en ligne et pour les organisations médiatiques de favoriser des activités plus inclusives et diversifiées. formes de participation (Siapera, 2019). Et pourtant, malgré l'essor du contenu généré par les utilisateurs et des médias sociaux, les organisations médiatiques conservent toujours un pouvoir important pour façonner le discours public (Couldry, 2018). Dans ce contexte, nous avons proposé une analyse empirique transnationale, dans le but de comprendre les relations entre les médias et leur audience/public dans l'écosystème de l'information en ligne et comment les contextes nationaux les ont affectés, en mettant en évidence les convergences et les divergences entre les espaces et les stratégies qui permettent la participation et l'engagement dans les sites d'information. Avec un *corpus* de 80 sites d'information de 8 pays – USA, Royaume-Uni, France, Espagne, Allemagne, Pays-Bas, Brésil et Argentine, l'enquête visait à répondre: RQ(1) Quelles sont les divergences et convergences entre les espaces créés et hébergés par les agences de presse pour engager et encourager la participation de l'utilisateur en fonction de son pays d'origine ? QR(2) Comment/quand le contexte national d'une entreprise de médias devient-il une variable dans sa relation avec l'utilisateur ? Notre recherche utilise une approche à méthodes mixtes et s'appuie sur des études de cas (Yin and Davis, 2007) pour répondre à nos questions de recherche. Elle comprenait deux activités concomitantes : la recherche documentaire, avec une revue bibliographique et documentaire approfondie, et la recherche sur plateforme, l'analyse approfondie de notre *corpus*. L'étude a été orientée du point de vue des organes de presse (leurs journalistes, rédacteurs, employés) et a examiné les stratégies d'engagement et les espaces de participation dans notre *corpus* pour comprendre comment l'utilisateur – et par conséquent l'UGC – était inclus dans le processus d'information. Les 80 organisations médiatiques sélectionnées disposaient de pages Web accessibles par ordinateur et par navigateur mobile, et 63 d'entre elles disposaient d'applications pour appareils mobiles. Nous avons déterminé que trois facteurs internes affectent la relation des entreprises de médias avec les utilisateurs : (1) la nature (média numérique natif ou hérité) ; (2) les modèles commerciaux ; et (3) la place de l'utilisateur, en tenant compte de sa désignation (membre, abonné, sympathisant/allié, juste le lecteur, client) et de la proposition de l'agence de presse en matière de journalisme. Compte tenu de ces facteurs, nous avons analysé quelles sont les stratégies utilisées pour l'engagement par les 80 sites d'information de notre *corpus* et identifié trois outils principaux : les boutons de partage, présents sur 77 sites d'information ; newsletters, présentes sur le 73 ; et des sections de commentaires présentes sur 49. Concernant l'utilisation de l'UGC dans les reportages, nous avons classé les utilisations de minimale à maximale, en fonction du rôle des journalistes dans la médiation du contenu. Nous avons également observé que la plupart de ce type de contenu provient des réseaux sociaux, de vidéos virales et de memes qui font l'actualité en raison de leur popularité, d'événements inattendus (par exemple, catastrophe naturelle) ou de lieux/situations difficiles d'accès pour les journalistes (par exemple, Guerre d'Ukraine). Grâce à cette enquête sur le *corpus* et à la collecte de données, nous avons identifié six facteurs externes déterminants pour l'écosystème de participation/engagement des informations en ligne dans un contexte national : (1) les réglementations gouvernementales, (2) les barrières linguistiques, (3) la pertinence culturelle. , (4) les revenus, (5) la fidélité du public et (6) le marché de niche. Nous avons conclu que, quant aux relations établies à travers les stratégies d'engagement et les espaces de participation dans les sites d'information, la tradition occidentale et la mondialisation des pratiques en ligne déterminent les caractéristiques et les politiques employées. Il existe des divergences dans les stratégies entre les pays, qui divergent en raison de facteurs internes. Après plus de 20 ans de présence en ligne, les changements dans le journalisme occidental continuent de se concentrer sur le niveau technologique (c'est-à-dire sous forme de nouvelles formes de distribution de contenu) plutôt que sur les niveaux culturels ou relationnels (Bruns, 2012 ; Lasorsa, Lewis et Holton, 2012 ; Hermida). , 2013 ; Ekdale et al., 2015 ; Boczek et Koppers, 2020), alors que la profession continue de s'accrocher à son rôle de gardien, prêchant l'idéal de l'intérêt public, tout en étant limitée par les contraintes économiques et en devant donner la priorité à la viabilité financière plutôt qu'à la viabilité financière. tout le reste. Cependant, les différences transnationales ne sont pas négligeables pour les relations entre l'entreprise et le public : les contextes nationaux sont importants principalement en raison des barrières linguistiques et de la pertinence culturelle, qui font que les frontières géographiques et les identités nationales restent significatives, malgré la mondialisation et la généralisation les avancées technologiques.

RESUMEN

Una investigación transnacional sobre el compromiso y la participación en el periodismo en línea en 80 sitios de noticias.

Esta tesis fue escrita como parte de la iniciativa EU H2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie ITN "JOLT: Aprovechamiento de tecnologías digitales y de datos para el periodismo, con enfoque en la política y la ética del contenido generado por el usuario en el periodismo. Consideramos el periodismo como una práctica social que hace circular conocimiento a través de diferentes plataformas. Desde los primeros periódicos impresos hasta las recientes plataformas basadas en tecnologías digitales, las transformaciones en la profesión pasan por los contenidos, por las estructuras editoriales y organizativas de las redacciones y las empresas de medios, así como por las relaciones entre las organizaciones de noticias, los periodistas y su público. El periodismo en línea desdibuja las líneas entre los conceptos de público y audiencia, así como de participación y compromiso (Deuze, 2019), y surgen nuevos desafíos para la profesión con la necesidad de gestionar comunidades en línea y para que las organizaciones de medios fomenten medios más inclusivos y diversas formas de participación (Siapera, 2019). Y, sin embargo, a pesar del aumento del contenido generado por el usuario y las redes sociales, las organizaciones de medios aún conservan un poder significativo a la hora de dar forma al discurso público (Couldry, 2018). En este contexto, propusimos un análisis empírico transnacional, con el objetivo de comprender las relaciones entre los medios y su audiencia/público en el ecosistema de noticias en línea y cómo los contextos nacionales los afectaron, destacando las convergencias y divergencias entre los espacios y estrategias que permiten la participación y el compromiso en sitios de noticias. Con un *corpus* de 80 sitios de noticias de 8 países - EE.UU., Reino Unido, Francia, España, Alemania, Países Bajos, Brasil y Argentina, la investigación tuvo como objetivo responder: RQ(1) ¿Cuáles son las divergencias y convergencias entre los espacios creados y alojados por ¿Las organizaciones de noticias involucran y fomentan la participación del usuario según su país de origen? RQ(2) ¿Cómo/cuándo el contexto nacional de una empresa de medios se convierte en una variable para su relación con el usuario? Nuestra investigación utilizó un enfoque de métodos mixtos y utilizó estudios de casos (Yin y Davis, 2007) para responder nuestras preguntas de investigación. Constó de dos actividades concomitantes: investigación documental, con amplia revisión bibliográfica y documental, y investigación de plataforma, análisis en profundidad de nuestro *corpus*. El estudio fue dirigido desde la perspectiva de las organizaciones de noticias (sus periodistas, editores, empleados) y examinó las estrategias de engagement y los espacios de participación en nuestro *corpus* para comprender cómo el usuario - y consecuentemente el UGC - fue incluido en el proceso informativo. Las 80 organizaciones de medios seleccionadas tenían páginas web accesibles desde computadoras de escritorio y navegadores móviles y 63 tenían aplicaciones para dispositivos móviles. Determinamos que tres factores internos afectan la relación de las empresas de medios con los usuarios: (1) la naturaleza (medios nativos digitales o heredados); (2) modelos de negocio; y (3) el lugar del usuario, que consideró su designación (miembro, suscriptor, partidario/aliado, sólo lector, cliente) y la propuesta periodística de organización periodística. Teniendo en cuenta estos factores, analizamos cuáles son las estrategias utilizadas para la participación de los 80 sitios de noticias de nuestro *corpus* e identificamos tres herramientas principales: botones para compartir, presentes en 77 sitios de noticias; boletines, presente en el 73; y secciones de comentarios presentes en 49. Según el uso de UGC en las noticias, categorizamos los usos de mínimo a máximo, según el papel que tenían los periodistas en la mediación del contenido. También observamos que la mayor parte de este tipo de contenido proviene de redes sociales, de videos virales y memes que se convierten en noticia por su popularidad, de eventos inesperados (i.e., desastres naturales) o de lugares/situaciones de difícil acceso para los periodistas (i.e., Guerra de Ucrania). A través de esa investigación del *corpus* y la recopilación de datos, describimos seis factores externos que son determinantes para el ecosistema de participación/compromiso de las noticias en línea en un entorno nacional: (1) regulaciones gubernamentales, (2) barreras del idioma, (3) relevancia cultural, (4) ingresos, (5) lealtad de la audiencia y (6) nicho de mercado. Concluimos que, en cuanto a las relaciones establecidas a través de las estrategias de engagement y espacios de participación en los sitios de noticias, la tradición occidental y la globalización de las prácticas en línea determinan las características y políticas empleadas. Hay divergencias en las estrategias entre países, que divergen debido a factores internos. Después de más de 20 años de estar en línea, los cambios en el periodismo occidental continúan centrándose en un nivel tecnológico (es decir, como nuevas formas de distribución de contenidos) más que en niveles culturales o relacionales (Bruns, 2012; Lasorsa, Lewis y Holton, 2012; Hermida, 2013; Ekdale et al., 2015; Boczek y Koppers, 2020), ya que la profesión continúa aferrándose a su papel de guardián, predicando el ideal del interés público, mientras está limitada por restricciones económicas y tiene que priorizar la sostenibilidad financiera sobre la sostenibilidad financiera. todo lo demás. Sin embargo, las diferencias entre países no son insignificantes para las relaciones entre la empresa y la audiencia/público: los entornos nacionales son importantes principalmente debido a las barreras del idioma y la relevancia cultural, que hacen que las fronteras geográficas y las identidades nacionales sigan siendo significativas, a pesar de la globalización y la generalización de avances tecnológicos.

RESUMO

Uma investigação transnacional sobre o engajamento e a participação no jornalismo online em 80 sites de notícias.

Esta tese foi escrita como parte da iniciativa EU H2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie ITN “JOLT: Aproveitando Tecnologias Digitais e de Dados para o Jornalismo, com foco em Política e Ética do Conteúdo Gerado pelo Usuário no Jornalismo. Consideramos o jornalismo como uma prática social que faz circular conhecimento através de diferentes plataformas. Dos primeiros jornais impressos às recentes plataformas baseadas em tecnologias digitais, as transformações na profissão – passam pelos conteúdos, pelas estruturas editoriais e organizacionais das redações e das empresas de comunicação social, bem como pelas relações entre as organizações noticiosas, os jornalistas e o seu público. O jornalismo online confundiu os limites entre os conceitos de público e audiência, bem como de participação e envolvimento (Deuze, 2019), e surgem novos desafios para a profissão com a necessidade de gerir comunidades online, e para as organizações de comunicação social promoverem formas mais inclusivas e diversificadas. formas de participação (Siapera, 2019). E, no entanto, apesar do aumento do conteúdo gerado pelo utilizador e das redes sociais, as organizações de comunicação social ainda detêm um poder significativo na formação do discurso público (Couldry, 2018). Neste contexto, propusemos uma análise empírica transnacional, com o objetivo de compreender as relações entre os meios de comunicação social e o seu público/auditório no ecossistema noticioso online e como os contextos nacionais os afetaram, destacando as convergências e divergências entre os espaços e estratégias que permitir a participação e o envolvimento em sites de notícias. Com um *corpus* de 80 sites de notícias de 8 países – EUA, Reino Unido, França, Espanha, Alemanha, Holanda, Brasil e Argentina, a investigação teve como objetivo responder: RQ(1) Quais as divergências e convergências entre os espaços criados e hospedados por organizações de notícias envolvam e incentivem a participação do usuário de acordo com seu país de origem? RQ(2) Como/quando o contexto nacional de uma empresa de mídia se torna uma variável no seu relacionamento com o usuário? Nossa pesquisa utiliza uma abordagem de métodos mistos e faz uso de estudos de caso (Yin and Davis, 2007) para responder às nossas questões de pesquisa. Consistiu em duas atividades concomitantes: a pesquisa documental, com extensa revisão bibliográfica e documental, e a pesquisa de plataforma, a análise aprofundada do nosso *corpus*. O estudo foi direcionado pela perspectiva das organizações jornalísticas (seus jornalistas, editores, funcionários) e examinou as estratégias de engajamento e os espaços de participação em nosso *corpus* para compreender como o usuário – e consequentemente o UGC – foi incluído no processo noticioso. Todas as 80 organizações de mídia selecionadas tinham páginas web acessíveis por desktop e por navegador móvel e 63 tinham aplicativos para dispositivos móveis. Determinamos que três fatores internos afetam o relacionamento das empresas de mídia com os usuários: (1) natureza (mídia digital nativa ou legada); (2) modelos de negócios; e (3) o lugar do usuário, que considerou sua designação (membro, assinante, apoiador/aliado, apenas leitor, cliente) e a proposta de organização noticiosa do jornalismo. Considerando esses fatores, analisamos quais são as estratégias utilizadas para engajamento pelos 80 sites de notícias do nosso *corpus* e identificamos três ferramentas primárias: botões de compartilhamento, presentes em 77 sites de notícias; newsletters, presentes em 73; e seções de comentários presentes em 49. Quanto ao uso de UGC em notícias, categorizamos os usos de mínimo a máximo, de acordo com o papel que os jornalistas tiveram na mediação do conteúdo. Observamos também que a maior parte deste tipo de conteúdo provém de redes sociais, de vídeos virais e memes que se tornam notícia pela sua popularidade, de acontecimentos inesperados (ou seja, desastres naturais) ou de locais/situações de difícil acesso aos jornalistas (ou seja, Guerra da Ucrânia). Através dessa investigação do *corpus* e da coleta de dados, delineamos seis fatores externos que são determinantes para o ecossistema de participação/engajamento de notícias online em um cenário nacional: (1) regulamentações governamentais, (2) barreiras linguísticas, (3) relevância cultural, (4) receita, (5) fidelidade do público e (6) nicho de mercado. Concluímos que, no que diz respeito às relações estabelecidas através das estratégias de engajamento e dos espaços de participação nos sites de notícias, a tradição ocidental e a globalização das práticas online determinam as características e políticas empregadas. Existem divergências nas estratégias entre os países, que divergem devido a fatores internos. Depois de mais de 20 anos online, as mudanças no jornalismo ocidental continuam a centrar-se num nível tecnológico (ou seja, como novas formas de distribuição de conteúdo) e não em níveis culturais ou relacionais (Bruns, 2012; Lasorsa, Lewis e Holton, 2012; Hermida, 2013; Ekdale et al., 2015; Boczek e Koppers, 2020), à medida que a profissão continua a manter o seu papel de guardião, pregando o ideal de interesse público, ao mesmo tempo que é limitada por restrições económicas e tem de dar prioridade à sustentabilidade financeira em vez de todo o resto. No entanto, as diferenças transnacionais não são insubstanciais para as relações entre a empresa e o público/público: as configurações nacionais são importantes principalmente devido às barreiras linguísticas e à relevância cultural, que fazem com que as fronteiras geográficas e as identidades nacionais permaneçam significativas, apesar da globalização e da generalização. avanços tecnológicos.

A HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO READING THIS THESIS²

Dear reader, welcome to this exploration of the evolving relationship between media companies and their users in the digital age. I must confess that in this thesis you might find far more questions than answers. But, alas, isn't this what a PhD is all about? Opening your mind not only to investigate, but also to the humility that not all questions have one absolute answer, and the phenomena of our reality cannot be put into a box with a neatly tied bow? At the end of my research, I find myself humbled by the process, and find it necessary to explain how this thesis came to be and how to read it.

After years of studying journalism and fiction – such as the representation of the profession in Harry Potter and in television series – I made the decision to return to reality, that is, study journalism as it is. After an application process to become a part of the JOLT project, which aimed to investigate digital and data journalism, I was accepted to become one of the PhDs at the University of Toulouse III – Paul Sabatier, in the work package of *Politics, Values and Ethics*. The city of Toulouse was the battle ground of my struggles to embrace reality, as I had the pressing challenge of not only quickly learning French (at which I failed miserably!), but specially finding a new angle to talk about the *Politics & Ethics of User-Generated Content*

The Research

The thesis focused on the factors that affect the relationship between users and media companies in an online news ecosystem in 80 news sites, spread across eight different countries, from digital natives to legacy news media. Through the effort of systematizing the internal and external factors that impact the complex connection between the public/audience and news organizations, we observed what spaces are *concretely* created for public participation *today*, 20 years after the internet hype began and tools for interactivity, such as comment sections, became a standard for journalism online. These led me to my first paradoxical problem, am I talking about participation or engagement? Have they become synonyms in the digital world? And *why, be it participation or engagement, in and with journalism, still worth studying?*

I believe participation and engagement are worth discussing and, to for that matter, researching, because **the public/audience is the core of journalism**. Journalism would not exist without the public/ audience! Well, to be fair, it might... *but what would be its point?* The channels created for engagement and participation by media companies to connect to the user in an online

² This title is inspired by the book “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy”, the first Douglas Adams’ series.

environment are at the core of the relationship they are able to build with the public/audience. While interaction with the user is always good for financial sustainability, which is essential for any company; we have also seen great examples that show us that there is a way to give the public a voice in the news process. Each organization can choose the best way to connect with their users, that works for them and their idea of journalism.

In this context, this thesis became a comprehensive examination of the evolving digital media landscape and the relationships between news organizations and their users. It embarked on a journey that begins in the realm of theory, moves through a clear methodological path, dives deep into empirical insights, and emerges with a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted relationship between media organizations and their users and the internal and external factors that affect it. It is a study that's rooted in both the past and present, while also hinting at the future, providing a holistic view of the current media landscape.

The Narrative Overview

The thesis progresses from foundational theory to specific empirical research, analyzing both the internal and external factors affecting the user-media relationship in a digital age. The flow is logical: setting the stage with theoretical frameworks, defining terms, detailing methodology, presenting findings, and then synthesizing all this information in a cross-national comparative discussion. Each chapter, as shown below, exists to either build upon the previous one or delve deeper into a specific aspect of the overarching narrative, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the topic.

I. Foundation in Theory (Chapters 1-3)

- **Chapter 1** introduces the shifting terrains of journalism, framing the digital transformation in historical and theoretical contexts.
- **Chapter 2** delves into the nuanced difference between 'public' and 'audience', central to understanding modern digital journalism. It establishes how the audience has become more active in the age of the internet.
- **Chapter 3** situates the media within global paradigms - modernity, globalization, and capitalism, setting the broader scene.

II. Establishing Terms and Methodology (Chapters 4-5)

- **Chapter 4** translates the theoretical foundation into precise definitions essential for empirical analysis. It is a bridge between theory and practice, ensuring clear understanding for the upcoming analysis.
- **Chapter 5** is methodological, explaining the selection of the 80 news sites across eight countries, detailing the why and the how. It sets the groundwork for the subsequent empirical chapters.
- **Chapter 6** an overview of the media settings of the countries in our *corpus*.

III. Empirical Insights (Chapters 6-10)

- **Chapter 7** dives into the intrinsic attributes of news organizations, outlining three internal factors to media organizations that affect their relationship with their users.
- **Chapter 8** studies the practical tools for user engagement, providing real-world examples and connecting theory with practice.
- **Chapter 9** looks at User-Generated Content (UGC) as a major avenue for user participation, weaving historical context with modern applications.
- **Chapter 10** critically examines engagement strategies and participation, questioning the underlying assumptions and practices of digital journalism, exemplifying why internal factors are not enough to explain the media-user relationship.
- **Chapter 11** is the other side of the coin from Chapter 7 – examining external factors that shape media-user relations.

IV. Bringing It All Together (Chapter 11)

- **Chapter 12** compares patterns and variances across countries. It contextualizes the empirical findings within the theoretical framework, showcasing the intricate dance between internal and external factors.

This thesis is not just a static document, but a dynamic conversation about the ever-evolving world of digital journalism. Your active engagement, reflections, and curiosity will make this journey enriching. As you embark on this journey, consider the following suggestions to maximize your understanding:

- **Begin with an Open Mind:** Journalism, like many fields, is undergoing rapid changes. Approach this text with curiosity and a willingness to understand the nuances.

- **Flow and Continuity:** While each chapter can be appreciated in isolation, they are structured to build on one another. Following the sequence can provide a more enriched and interconnected view of the central themes.
- **Case Studies are Illustrative Tools:** The case studies used in this thesis, encompassing varied countries and news sites, have been chosen for their potential to illuminate broader industry trends.
- **Open Dialogue:** I eagerly anticipate your feedback, critiques, and observations. Every perspective broadens the scope of this research, and I truly value the collaborative spirit of academic discourse. Feedback, critiques, and further explorations are not only welcomed but actively sought. This thesis stands as a point of discussion, and I eagerly anticipate the diverse insights that our collective expertise can bring.

This thesis is an invitation to delve into the intricate world of media-user relationships in the digital age. Your involvement and input are paramount to its evolution and relevance in the broader academic conversation. I'm grateful for your commitment to engage with this thesis on the evolving dynamics of digital and online journalism.

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INTRODUCTION

Our PhD project was developed as part of the initiative EU H2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie ITN “JOLT: Harnessing Digital and Data Technologies for Journalism,” which aimed to advance new theoretical insights, technical advancements, and best-practice guidelines for digital and data journalism. Research aimed at digital journalism has been developed over the last 25 years (Salaverría, 2015). The field was born with the emergence of Computer-Assisted Reporting (RAC), took shape in the form of web journalism with the popularization of the World Wide Web and established itself as digital journalism throughout the 21st century. Discussions about the definition of the field revolve around similar concepts such as online journalism, electronic journalism, and digital journalism. From the first studies, it is evident the importance that technological support, multimedia and data processing would have for this new investigation on journalism to take shape.

The line of research for our PhD within the project was **Politics and Ethics of User-Generated Content (“UGC”) in Journalism**. UGC is a complex concept, and it opened a wide array of possibilities for our thesis. As newspapers are thrust into the internet, and digital news has a defining role in journalism, the profession must reshape its relationship with the public, as the audience seems to gain a more participatory role in news, we believe there is still plenty to learn, be it for journalists, media companies or researchers. Media organizations are constantly innovating and experimenting with new forms of journalism and engagement strategies. By studying media organizations across countries, we can identify best practices and innovative approaches that can be shared and adapted globally. A cross-national comparison can enrich our understanding of how media organizations in a globalized world are attempting to effectively communicate, engage and encourage a relationship with their audiences, and to explore what are the convergences and diversions on their strategies to relate to their public.

Our work investigated the cross-national differences between 80 news sites in eight countries as we believe they play a significant role in shaping the media landscape and the relationships that media organizations have with their audiences. A cross-national comparison of online journalism can contribute to understanding the impact of globalization on media companies. By examining how media organizations engage with their users across borders and cultures in the online news ecosystem, we can gain valuable insights into their engagement and participation strategies, and the factors that affect the relationships news organizations build with their public/audience.

1. The Research Imperative: Context and Significance

Our thesis proposes an empirical cross-national comparison of news sites from Brazil, Argentina, Spain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States, which provides a rich and diverse dataset for exploring how the relationship between journalism and the public/audience is being evolved and constructed in the online news ecosystem. In the ever-evolving landscape of online journalism, this interplay between media organizations and their users is not just a subject of casual observation; it forms the bedrock of how information is disseminated, consumed, and acted upon. Within this dynamic, a myriad of factors, ranging from technological advancements to socio-cultural shifts, mold and remold the contours of this relationship.

1.1 Journalism, Online News, and User-Media Company Relationships

Have you ever wondered how the world would be without journalism? The profession has a critical role in a democratic society, informing people about what is happening in the world around them. A world without journalism would be a very different place, a world without journalism would be a place without the critical information that people need to make informed decisions and hold those in power accountable for their actions. The history of journalism dates to ancient civilizations, where news was communicated through various means, including oral traditions, smoke signals, drumbeats, and town criers (Gibson, 2008).

The modern concept of journalism we hold emerged during the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe, driven by the need for information about the world beyond one's immediate surroundings (McQuail, 2010). The emergence of news organizations dedicated to gathering and disseminating information to a wider audience occurred in the 17th century with the publication of the first newspapers in England, France, and other European countries. Although often controlled by the government, these newspapers provided a means for officials to communicate with the public. The development of advanced printing technology allowed independent newspapers to emerge, providing more objective and critical coverage of events (Schudson, 1994).

Journalism underwent significant changes during the 19th and early 20th centuries, including the emergence of investigative reporting, the rise of photojournalism, and the growth of radio and television news (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014). These changes established journalism as a critical component of democratic societies, providing citizens with the information they need to make informed decisions and hold those in power accountable for their actions. Through the evolution of journalism over time, what has always been highlighted is the continued importance of providing access to information and the role of journalists in informing and engaging the public.

We understand journalism as a social practice that circulates knowledge through different platforms. From the first printed newspapers to the recent platforms based on digital technologies, we notice that the transformations – that are still under way – go through content, editorial and organizational structures of the newsroom and media companies, as well as the relationships between news organizations, journalists, and their public. Throughout the years, journalism has evolved: from the press to the radio, then the television, and now to the internet.

Journalism has often been defined by the emergence of different platforms, models, and modes for the elaboration of products and for the way in which journalistic content can be composed, presented, and distributed. Currently, we are living through a breakdown of paradigms provoked by the new technologies of information and communication, as they undermined the support of the classic business model that has been in place for more than a century in the journalism industry, while also giving the citizen an unprecedented role in communication.

For the past decades, researchers have tried to understand the so-called new modality of journalism, with the formulation of concepts, categories, operational definitions, identification of properties, reference standards, evaluation of the impacts brought to the processes, professional routines, and business models, as well as addressing the challenges posed to understand it in the light of journalistic theories. Digital journalism eventually became synonymous⁵ with online journalism, web journalism, and cyberjournalism – all nomenclatures that have been helping to demarcate a two-decade old new type of journalism, in an environment that allows to publish and circulate information without time and space limitations taking advantage of the ability of continuous updating, of hypertextuality, interactivity, multimedia and personalization (Mielniczuk, 2003; Palacios, 2003).

We argue that all journalism now is, in every way, digital, as news technologies mediate production and distribution for every medium – print, television, radio and online (which often converge in one platform through websites). Online news is intrinsically a part of the journalistic field (Domingo, 2011) and is irrefutably altering the profession (Tandoc, 2014). The processes of news production have undergone drastic changes in the 21st century (Bell et. al, 2017), moving from an industrial model controlled by media companies to a post-industrial one, marked by the use of technologies that optimize the work of journalists and, at the same time, allow audience participation (Anderson et. al, 2013). To meet new demands, newsrooms went through a reorganization that generated new segments and routines.

⁵ When journalism first touched upon digital technologies and the web, authors used these different terms to attempt and identify the diverse modalities of the profession in this environment. These terms, now, tend to be interchangeable to discuss online news.

Different media organizations have their own unique approaches to journalism, reflecting their values, goals, and audiences. Moreover, the emergence of digital media has led to the proliferation of new forms of journalism, including citizen journalism, data journalism, and immersive journalism, which further expand the boundaries of what we consider to be traditional journalism. These new forms of journalism often involve different modes of audience engagement and interaction and may blur the lines between traditional journalistic roles of gatekeeping and agenda-setting, and the roles of the audience as creators and participants.

Some scholars argue that online journalism is not a revolutionary change, but rather an evolutionary development of traditional journalism practices enabled by new digital technologies (Boczkowski, 2010; Domingo, 2008). They contend that online journalism has simply adapted to the new environment of the internet, rather than fundamentally transforming it. On the other hand, some see online journalism as a potentially revolutionary force that could transform the media landscape by increasing diversity, expanding access, and creating new opportunities for public engagement and participation (Gillmor, 2004; Shirky, 2008). The internet offers unique affordances that can empower individuals and communities to create and share their own news and information in ways that were previously impossible.

In terms of journalistic practices, media companies need to consider what they want from the public/audience and from the relationship want they build. When it comes to understanding such relationships, the stakes are high, as they establish everything from journalism's economic feasibility to its democratic impact, and sociocultural role (Swart, Peters and Broersma, 2019; Peters and Witschge, 2015). The public/audience matter because without them the main purposes of modern journalism – acting as a watchdog, an information source, an intermediary between people and government, and so forth – would be meaningless. This thesis is built on the understanding that relationships between media companies and users' era essential for the survival of news organizations: they are an imperative of the reason for the existence of journalism and for the financial sustainability of a media company.

Technological advances have expanded how news is made, consumed, and distributed, and have changed the reach the public/audience can have into the realm of journalism. The public is making news, and now it is up to each company to choose how to engage their audience and if they are going to give the public a relevant space in their journalism beyond consumer. Online journalism becomes the future of the profession, as legacy and digital native news sites attempt to innovate, and interactivity increasingly becomes a large draw to engage with users and create spaces for them to participate. User-Generated Content became one facet of those efforts, existing as a

pillar of the complex relationship that is established between news media and their public/audience.

We consider that “news is meant to be read” (Tandoc 2014, p.02) and that journalism cannot be separated from its audience. As such, we cannot study journalism without considering the audience. Therefore, the future of journalism depends on understanding how people navigate the online environment and the behavior of the news consumer in this ecosystem (Mitchell, Rosenstiel and Olmstead, 2011). The field of online journalism is a complex and dynamic space, where media organizations are constantly grappling with the nuances of engaging with online users. Online journalism has blurred the lines between the concepts of public and audience, as well as participation and engagement (Deuze, 2019), and new challenges arise for the profession with the need to manage online communities, and for media organizations to foster more inclusive and diverse forms of participation (Siapera, 2019). And yet, despite the rise of User-Generated Content and social media, media organizations still retain significant power in shaping public discourse (Couldry, 2018).

1.2 A Cross-national Examination of User-Media Company Dynamics

The digital age has ushered in an era of rapid transformations in the media landscape. Amidst these tumultuous changes, academia often grapples with understanding these shifts. This state of flux begets a pivotal inquiry: Why is there a pressing need to dissect the intricate relationship between news sites and their users, especially when examined across national boundaries?

In 2021, Li et al. offered a comprehensive review of the existing literature on audience engagement on digital news platforms, subsequently proposing a research agenda to delve deeper into this realm. This agenda seeks to illuminate our understanding of digital news platform engagement by addressing several pivotal queries:

- What are the factors that influence audience engagement on digital news platforms, and how do these factors vary across different platforms and contexts?
- What are the most effective audience engagement strategies used by news organizations, and how can these strategies be optimized to improve engagement outcomes?
- How can news organizations effectively measure and evaluate the impact of audience engagement efforts on their audience, content, and revenue?

- How can news organizations effectively balance their editorial goals with audience engagement goals, and what are the trade-offs associated with these goals?
- What are the ethical implications of audience engagement strategies, particularly regarding issues such as privacy, data security, and algorithmic bias?

Such an agenda underscores the necessity for a refined comprehension of digital news audience engagement and the elements molding it. Echoing this sentiment, Deuze (2019) emphasized the evolving dynamics between online users and media entities, while Siapera (2019) accentuated the complexities inherent to online engagement and participation. Engaging with these inquiries allows scholars to bolster a robust, evidence-backed understanding of audience engagement, ultimately guiding news organizations in refining their strategies and better catering to their audience.

Deepening these understandings, our research embarks on an exploration, uncovering previously overshadowed nuances and layers of audience engagement. By broadening the horizons of established works, we apply these principles across novel contexts, glean unique insights and reinforcing their versatility. Furthermore, our research amalgamates insights, spawning a synthesis that radiates a refreshed perspective or a more integrated grasp of the subject. Such endeavors ensure that our academic pursuits remain pertinent and contemporaneous, offering tangible dividends that equip media experts with advanced stratagems and insights tailored for the challenges of today.

The broader significance in the academic realm of our research lies in its commitment to expanding on this knowledge. Our study, rather than merely bridging gaps, builds on existing works, pushing the boundaries of what's known and casting it in a new light, offering both media practitioners and academics fresh insights and perspectives. Notably, our exploration of engagement and participation across 80 online journalism sites is in sync with the research agenda presented by Li et al. (2021), with a pronounced focus on user participation in news creation, an essential facet of the user-news organization relationship.

By juxtaposing the dynamics of online journalism participation across an array of countries, our study unravels the nuanced evolution of news consumption and production within diverse cultural, political, and economic backdrops. As the online journalism domain is in a constant state of flux, a cross-national comparison offers a window into the adaptive strategies of varying media systems to technological innovations. Thus, our study, rooted in the pivotal understanding of when a media organization's national context becomes a determinative variable in its relationship with users, serves as a testament to the evolving user-media company dynamics in today's globalized world. This understanding underscores the symbiosis between media enterprises and users,

highlighting the importance of this relationship not only for journalism's core mission but also for the financial longevity of news establishments.

2. Research questions and hypothesis

This thesis investigates engagement and participation in the online news ecosystem to explore the factors – internal and external – that affect the relationship between users and media companies. To do so, we propose an empirical cross-national comparative analysis⁶, a research practice that systematically compares and analyzes differences and similarities between multiple countries or cultures. This approach seeks to understand patterns, variations, and causal factors across different national contexts, allowing for a deeper understanding of social, political, economic, or cultural phenomena beyond a single-country perspective.

By juxtaposing data from various nations, we can identify unique national characteristics, common trends, or overarching global patterns, and can also evaluate the influence of specific national settings on particular outcomes. As such, we proposed a *corpus* of 80 news sites from eight countries – USA, UK, France, Spain, Germany, Netherlands, Brazil and Argentina. This *corpus* of 80 news sites from eight countries enabled us to understand how and in what ways audience/public engagement/participation is currently occurring in different countries. The empirical cross-national comparative analysis aimed to answer:

RQ (1) What are the convergences and divergences between the spaces created and hosted by news organizations to engage and encourage participation from the user according to their country of origin?

RQ (2) How/when does the national context of a media company become a variable for their relationship with the user?

Through these questions, **our objective is to investigate what are the factors that can affect the relationships between media organizations and their audience/public (user)**, considering internal factors of the companies, such as nature and business models, and external factors, such as government regulations and language barriers, in order to understand when national contexts matter to these relationships.

Our **research hypothesis** assumes that there are cross-national differences between media organizations, mainly due to cultural and language barriers with a diverse range of users. However,

⁶ We chose to refer to our research procedure as an “empirical cross-national comparative analysis” to emphasize that our work is based on actual data collected from multiple countries and involves a systematic comparison of that data. We wanted to stress both the data-driven nature of our research and its comparative, multi-national scope.

when it comes to their relationships with the audience/public formed through the spaces of participation of their news sites, Western tradition and the globalization of online practices will determine the employed strategies for handling the users, making the cross-national differences insubstantial for the relationships between the company and the audience/public. Thus, we believe we will see convergences in strategies across countries, which diverge not because of national contexts, but rather due to business models, professional practice, and the consequential place of the public in their proposal of journalism, with media organizations often diverging within their own countries, but finding similarities with media in other countries.

3. Thesis Design

This thesis posits that the relationships between media companies and users are vital both for the core mission of journalism and for the financial sustainability of news organizations. To explore this phenomenon through a cross-national lens, we propose a *corpus* of 80 websites from eight different countries to debate forms of participation and engagement in news sites, considering how the promise interactivity brought on by digital technology clash with journalistic values and practices. This allows us to postulate the factors that shape the relationship between user and media companies in an online news ecosystem.

Our thesis is qualitative in its approach, given that our research choice required facing the challenges of a contemporary and changing object of study, as the implementations of User-Generated Content, the strategies for engagement and the spaces for participation, vary just as the media organizations themselves, whose practices change according to their origin, structure, and publishing platforms (Salaverria et al., 2019). In fact, they have to continuously adapt to demands from their audience and new technological advancements, while also responding to a changing social (economic, political, cultural etc.) context.

We anchored our research in the already consolidated theory of the journalistic field, while bringing new perspectives from studies that were developed in a period near or simultaneous to ours, which proves indispensable to develop new ideas. As such, in our thesis, we opted to for a continuous dialogue between theory and empirical data, to construct a richer analysis, grounded on theoretical contributions and previous scholarly works. *Chapters 1, 2 and 3* relied on bibliographical research, and they are the foundational theoretical chapters of our thesis; but all other chapters are structured bringing the relevant State of the Art of research and concepts to the discussion of our data.

We consider that the subject of online journalism has been in vogue for over two decades now, and, as such, as we consider findings of other scholars, we have a scenario that allows us to

ponder what has changed in recent years – if anything. Our theoretical chapters do not intend to exhaust the diverse theoretical perspectives on journalism and its complex relationship with the audience/public; or draw an extensive and detailed description of how forces such as modernity, globalization and capitalism influence the historical, political, economic, social, and cultural context in which media organizations operate. Our objective, with these theoretical chapters of a foundational nature, is to present solely the theoretical and contextual aspects relevant to the understanding of our research and the thesis developed.

Chapter 1 presents a brief review of journalism theory, establishing “*The evolving landscape of journalism: from tradition to transformation*”. On *Chapter 2* – “*Navigating the digital shift: journalism, audiences and the evolution of news consumption*” – we bring an essential and paradoxical discussion between the divergences and convergences of the concepts for public and audience, which are at the core of journalism itself, and then discuss the parameters of a theoretical active audience with the internet and new technologies. *Chapter 3* – “*Global Forces*” – presents a critical perspective of the setting in which journalism and news organizations are inserted, considering the effects of modernity, globalization, and capitalism. This has a contextual purpose. Our research does not focus on a critical perspective of the relationship between media companies and the user through the scope of these concepts, but we add them to our theoretical framework because we recognize that modernity, globalization, and the pervasive logic capitalism have a significant impact on country’s national settings – specially in a Western context, and on journalism, news organizations and their proposed relationship with the audience/public.

Chapter 4, “*Thesis Tenet and Definitions for Cross-National Comparative Analysis*” derived predominantly from the foundational insights of the initial three chapters, endeavors to meticulously define and conceptualize key terms and relationships, particularly those between media companies and their users, in which upon this thesis is built. Within this context, the chapter underscores the imperative nature of these relationships, both as the lifeblood of journalistic missions and as a cornerstone for the financial sustainability of news organizations. Through precise demarcation of how this research understands and uses the terms such as “media companies,” “public,” “audience,” and “user,” as well as a definition of the online news ecosystem and the broader socio-political forces it shapes it this work proposed to study, the chapter serves as an academic touchstone, ensuring clarity and scholarly rigor for the ensuing analytical discussions of the thesis.

The subsequent chapters were based on case studies conducted from January 2020 to April 2022, defined around the *corpus* of 80 news sites from eight countries. As empirical inquiries, they prove useful in an in-depth investigation of contemporary phenomena, such as the multiple paths

taken by digital journalism with regards to engagement, participation and UGC. The use of case studies allowed us to consider the real-life settings of our *corpus*, encompassing the contextual conditions that are pertinent for this research. They relied on multiple sources of evidence, benefiting from prior developments in theoretical research that can guide our data collection and analysis (Yin and Davis, 2007). The case studies were constituted of two concomitant activities⁷: desk research with the bibliographical and documental review pertinent to our *corpus*, and platform research, which pertains to the review and analysis of the news sites selected for this study. We also relied on 15 exchanges with members of news organizations from our *corpus* to complement our findings.

Choosing cases for studies with small samples is a challenge, as they have to be appropriate and sufficient to answer our research questions (Gerring, 2007; Seawright and Gerring, 2008). It is valid to take pragmatic considerations, like time, money, expertise, and access into account for case selection, as well as theoretical prominence of certain cases (Seawright and Gerring, 2008). We attempted to select a diverse number of cases inside the parameters of our research, for an exploratory investigation, choosing outlets that could give us a broad and pertinent view of the spaces created for user engagement and participation in news sites. To do so, we first determined what countries we would focus on and then proceeded to decide which news sites from each of them would form our *corpus*, following the rationale described in Chapter 5.

In *Chapter 5, “Research Design: corpus of study and methodology”* we delved into how the countries and news sites that became the objects of our empirical research were chosen. First, we presented the context of our country selection, and outlined the process that led to our decision to select eight Western countries. Second, we explained the process of selection for media companies and their equivalent news sites from each of the countries. Finally, we presented the exchanges conducted with members of news organizations for our *corpus*, that were used to enrich and complement our findings. In *Chapter 6, “Media Landscapes: a brief overview of country-specific settings”*, we provided an outline of the national context of each of the countries of our *corpus*, describing the media markets and factors that affect it, relying on bibliographical and documental research. These two chapters – 5 and 6 – delineate the scenario for our empirical the cross-national analysis.

In *Chapter 7, “Internal Factors of Relationships between User & Media Company”*, we discuss the three factors internal to media organizations that affect their relationship with the users: (1) Nature – legacy or digital native; (2) business models; and (3) the place of the user. We consider the

⁷ Desk research entails bibliographical and documental research, while platform research implies the exploration of the news sites, their interfaces, and the user experience they provide.

symbiotic connection between these three factors in the online news ecosystem, and the influence of global forces in their setting.

In *Chapter 8*, we investigate “*Strategies for Engagement and Spaces for Participation in News Sites*” through the platform analysis of our *corpus*, combined with an extensive documentary research. First, we review key concepts for the relationship between the user and digital journalism: access, interaction/interactivity, engagement and participation, and debate how these terms have often become interchangeable in our day-to-day when we talk about journalism on the web. These concepts provide the theoretical basis for us to understand the three popular tools we outline from our platform analysis of the 80 news sites that are used for interacting with the user: comment sections, newsletters, and share buttons. We explored how these three tools are being used by these news sites and debated how they evolved in the past decades since journalism has gone online. In this chapter we also highlight tangible spaces for participation created by certain websites from our *corpus* that go beyond the usual tools, relying on desk research, platform analysis and exchanges with members of the organizations.

As we move on to *Chapter 9*, “*User-Generated Content and Online Journalism*”, we began by presenting its history in journalism and its evolution given digital technologies. We proceeded to look at how UGC has been used by the news sites in our *corpus* during our period of study, providing examples to the multiple uses and functions that it can have in journalism, especially as part of storytelling. We also made considerations on the future of UGC in online journalism and considered the public’s desire to contribute with content in/for news sites.

With *Chapter 10*, we discuss, through a critical lens, engagement, and participation in online journalism practices, considering the data we collected from desk research and platforms analysis (Yin and Davis, 2007), using examples of the news sites that compose our *corpus*, and the panorama we have been painting of the user – media company relationship in the previous chapters, especially Chapters 8 and 9. The chapter aimed to synthesize the internal factors that affect the relationship between user and media companies, through channels of engagement and participation, in order to demonstrate that they are not enough to understand what elements impact this relationship.

In *Chapter 11*, “*External Factors of Relationships between User & Media Company*”, we define six external factors that play a crucial role in shaping the relationship between media organizations and their audiences in a national setting: government regulations, language barriers, cultural relevance, revenue, audience loyalty, and niche market. We discuss what each of these external factors to media companies indicates for the relationship they establish with the user in the online news ecosystem, illustrating it with practical examples from our *corpus*.

Through a critical look at the tools, strategies and spaces used for engagement and participation, we examined the news organizations in our *corpus*; considered their approaches to financial sustainability and user interactions; and understood that, while some media companies thrive, others struggle and fail because of various aspects that go beyond internal factors (their nature, business models etc.) and the usual strategies for engagement (comment sections, newsletters and share buttons), but touch *precisely* on their national contexts. For that reason, Chapter 6, which discusses the internal factors, is not followed by a chapter on the external factors that affect the relationship between user and media company. We first needed to explore the strategies used for engagement in the countries of our *corpus*, as well as the spaces created for participation (Chapter 8) and the uses of UGC (Chapter 9), before we could understand and systematize the internal aspects from a cross-national perspective that impact that relationship and outline why they are insufficient to fully understand the factors that affect the connection formed between media company and the user (Chapter 10).

In Chapter 12, “*A Cross-National Understanding of the User-Media Company Relationship in Online News Ecosystems*”, our final chapter, we examined the cross-national convergences and divergences between the eight countries of our *corpus*, considering the internal and external factors that affect media companies’ relationships with the user in the online news ecosystem. A discussion anchored in the foundational theoretical framework presented in the first three chapters, that endeavored to provide a systematic discussion of how there is a symbiotic relationship between internal and external factors that impact the news organization connection with their users, with internal factors being related to the channels created for that relationship online and the external factors determining the relevance of national settings for those relationships.

Our thesis, through its eleven chapters, endeavored to understand the factors that affect the relationship the 80 new sites from our *corpus* create with their users, given their diverse national contexts (external factors), and diverse journalistic characteristics (internal factors: ex. business models and nature). We presented quantitative and qualitative data collected through platform analysis, documental research, and exchanges with members of news organizations, regarding their uses of tools and strategies designed for audience/public interaction, their spaces created for participation and their perceptions of the users to answer the questions that motivated this research.

4. Dynamics of the Online News Ecosystem

We talk about an online news ecosystem because “ecosystem” seems to be the best word to represent the fact that it is all connected: there is a symbiotic relationship between several factors

that shape news organizations, their relationship with the user, what affects that relationship, how we study the factors that affect that relationship, and how we interpret them.

Our exploration in this thesis, while meticulous and exhaustive in its breadth, is but a singular vantage point in the vast panorama of the online news world. By focusing on the internal and external factors influencing the relationship between media companies and their online audience, particularly in news sites, we aim to provide a concentrated lens into the intricate mechanics of this ecosystem. Yet, it is essential to emphasize that every finding, every statistic, every narrative we present, exists within a web of myriad other data points, interactions, and dynamics.

The phrase “it is all connected” is not just rhetoric—it is the heartbeat of this ecosystem. Each decision a media company makes, from its editorial angle to its engagement strategies, has ripple effects, influencing user behavior, dictating platform algorithms, or even shaping global narratives. Similarly, users, with their clicks, shares, and comments, feed back into this system, often setting the agenda for future content. Thus, while our lens may be trained on specific facets of this world, we are keenly aware that those facets don’t exist in isolation—they are interlinked in intricate and often surprising ways.

In our endeavor, we’ve amassed a vast collection of data. Yet, the data presented in this thesis is a carefully curated snapshot, selected to best represent the overarching themes we sought to explore. Culled from 80 news sites spanning nine countries—UK, US, Spain, France, Germany, Netherlands, Brazil, and Argentina—we’ve endeavored to capture a predominantly Western perspective on the evolving news ecosystem. The timeframe, limited from January 2020 to April 2022, serves as a temporal boundary, but within these confines, our aim has been to dig deep, uncover patterns, trace anomalies, and offer insights.

This time frame, though dictated by the timeline of our PhD, is not arbitrary. The period from early 2020 to mid-2022 was replete with global events that tested, stretched, and often redefined the boundaries of journalism. From pandemics to political upheavals, the news sites we studied navigated a rapidly changing global landscape, and their strategies for engaging with users evolved in tandem.

In essence, our thesis, while a distinct and in-depth exploration in itself, is a part of something much larger. It is akin to analyzing a single, vibrant thread within a complex tapestry. The richness of the broader tapestry cannot be understated, and while we may focus on our chosen thread, we are constantly aware of its connection to the surrounding threads, the role it plays in the larger design, and the myriad ways in which it is influenced by and influences the greater whole.

5. The Temporal Caveat of the Thesis

Understanding and accounting for temporality is pivotal when analyzing dynamic realms such as digital media. The period under investigation in this research, January 2020 to April 2022, encapsulates a time of profound global change and turbulence. Our data collection began in January 2020, on the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, a development that drastically altered our existence and whose full implications remain to be completely understood. This period of time has had a significant bearing on the user engagement patterns observed and analyzed within this study.

- **Emerging Technologies:** The constant emergence of new technologies such as AR, VR, and AI-driven platforms means that any snapshot taken can quickly become outdated. While this research didn't delve deeply into these nascent technologies, future studies focusing on them can reveal how they alter user engagement and adoption dynamics. Pilot projects and experimental designs focusing on these technologies would be particularly enlightening.
- **Algorithmic Influence:** Algorithms dictate a substantial portion of the content we are exposed to. However, the proprietary nature of many of these algorithms makes it challenging to understand their exact impact. Collaborating with tech entities or leveraging open-source platforms would be beneficial for future studies aiming to unravel the influence of algorithms on user behavior.
- **Network Effects and Virality:** The digital age sees stories gaining rapid momentum, influencing user behavior. An in-depth exploration into virality metrics, sentiment analysis, and network effects can illuminate the profound effects of virality on user engagement.

Moreover, the temporal scope of the research inherently introduces some potential limitations:

- **Short-Term vs. Long-Term Dynamics:** The observed user engagement, influenced by globally significant events, might not reflect the more stable, long-term patterns that emerge in quieter periods.
- **Post-Research Evolution:** As global situations stabilize, and as new forms of 'normalcy' emerge, user patterns might change, and the findings of this research may not capture these shifts. With the digital landscape constantly evolving, it is also likely

that new technologies and platforms will come to the fore, influencing user engagement patterns in ways not covered in this research.

For these reasons, it is crucial to view the findings of this research within its temporal context. While the insights offer a valuable understanding of the patterns from January 2020 to October 2022, future research should be conducted to monitor ongoing shifts and evolutions. This will ensure a more holistic understanding of user engagement patterns across different temporal landscapes, providing a richer and more comprehensive view of the digital media domain.

6. Research Boundaries and Limitations

As we consider our research into User Generated Content, engagement/participation, and the relationship between the audience/public and media companies, it is essential to highlight its limitations. Due to time and resource constraints, we had to make practical choices regarding the scope of our work. We decided to conduct our research from the viewpoint of the journalistic enterprises, instead of considering the perspective of users of news sites. While this angle is fruitful, we acknowledge the value of exploring user perspectives through methods such as surveys and interviews in future research. Another decision was to anchor our research in journalism and journalistic theory for reference, touching only tangentially on related concepts like platforms, business models, and moderation. Although concepts like digital labor and the work of moderators are undoubtedly relevant, they lie beyond the scope of this research.

Methodologically, our reliance on a specific method – case studies for an empirical cross-national analysis – is limited in capturing the full spectrum of user-news dynamics and the intricacies of online interactions. With technology's rapid evolution, there's an inherent risk that some findings might soon be outpaced by newer platforms or technological advancements that reshape audience engagement. While our research is rooted in journalism theory, interdisciplinary insights from fields such as sociology or psychology could further illuminate complex user behaviors, enhancing the depth and breadth of our findings.

Our research also suffers from a so-called flattened temporality, placing references from 2003 alongside those from 2019. While our bibliographical research spanned from the late 90s to the early 2020s, focusing on concepts like online/digital journalism, interactivity, and participation, we noted recurring conclusions in studies of journalistic practices online over two decades. This extensive exploration highlighted a diminished academic interest in certain aspects of UGC in the web environment over time.

Furthermore, we concede that our study is Western-centric, limited to a select number of countries and news sites. While our findings provide valuable insights into interactive tools in

distinct media systems, the scope limits their broad applicability. Ideal research would encompass a more diverse and representative sample to enhance the validity of investigative work. Thus, our conclusions may be most pertinent to the specific news sites studied in our *corpus*.

Lastly, given our research's sensitivity to the intricate and diverse nature of user engagement and participation, formulating a singular, overarching thesis was challenging. Our aim was to produce nuanced, context-dependent findings that underline various influencing factors in user-news organization relationships, such as national context, cultural nuances, media company business models, and the journalistic principles they uphold.

CHAPTER 1

THE EVOLVING LANDSCAPE OF JOURNALISM: FROM TRADITION TO TRANSFORMATION

Through these initial chapters, we aim to offer readers a robust theoretical grounding, enabling a deeper comprehension of the multifaceted shifts and nuances that characterize contemporary journalistic practices. Chapter 1 embarks on a journey through time, tracing the contours of journalistic evolution, and framing the impacts of digital transformation within its vast historical and theoretical expanse.

As a theoretical object, journalism presents itself as a heterogeneous and complex field. In this chapter, we will discuss the historical, socio-cultural, political, economic, and technological variables affecting the development of the activity since its origins and constituting different *journalisms*. These journalisms can be classified according to the different historical periods, national contexts, production models and technical means of broadcasting the news, ways of narrating the journalistic event and sectors of the audience for which the information product is intended.

Furthermore, in recent years, the financial model of the journalism industry has shifted significantly, with the decline of print media and the rise of digital media. This has led to the need for journalism to be more audience-centered and focused on audience engagement. Many news organizations are now using audience engagement metrics to measure the success of their content and to inform their content strategy. This is because news organizations rely on audience engagement to drive revenue through advertising and subscriptions.

Journalism has been in a state of crisis, in the face of two unavoidable facts: the world has changed, and the transformations are becoming faster; and the practices and concepts of recent times undergo major shifts in the face of new technologies. What we had always believed the key function of journalism to be, that is, what it is supposed to do *in* and *for* society, is being questioned with the rapid technological advancement that seems to be radically changing the profession. As such, we try and define the perceptions of journalism such as it was and it is now, as a service, as a social function and as a profession, considering this new complex ecosystem, where news organizations must continuously refigure their relationship with the audience, answering to the platformization of journalism, the constant emergence of new tools and technological advancements, financial and commercial pressures, and the social, political and cultural contexts in which they are inserted.

1. Journalism as a profession

In the 17th century, with the emergence of the printing system, the necessary conditions were established for the production of newspapers and for the characterization of journalism as an activity based on the collection and transmission of news. The newspaper printers themselves collected, recorded and transmitted what they wanted to offer to the public, whether correspondence, advertisements or information. The printers were the link between the source and the public, and the journalist still did not have an identity of his own (Brin et. al., 2004). The Western model of journalism, which exists today in most democratic states, is structurally based on the British model of journalism that emerged in the 17th century – the country was the first to guarantee formal freedom of the press and expression (Sousa, 2008).

With the emergence of opinion journalism, journalism will make itself available to political struggles (Brin et. al., 2004). During this period, a discursive identity for journalists begins to be constructed. From the transformation of political institutions, debates on the right to vote, ministerial responsibility and the development of a party system, the owners of newspapers also become editors and transform them into places of expression and political struggles. In this context, the newspaper still does not have a commercial feature, because the technological limits and the illiteracy of a large part of the population prevent it from reaching the general public (Brin et. al., 2004).

At the end of the 18th century, with the consolidation of press freedom in the United States in 1791, legal certainty emerged for the publication of a newspaper to become a mercantile activity (Neveu, 2006). While, in England, the press gained full freedom to self-regulate, without any interference from the government or any political entity, at the beginning of the 19th century. Only, however, from the second half of the 19th century onwards, journalism ceased to be, above all, a vehicle for opinion.

In the last decades of the 19th century, the new technical and commercial conditions allow a large-scale production of newspapers, as well as the creation of a news collection network, which allows the expansion of the distribution of newspapers, that now have more pages, greater circulation, and better print quality. In this context, the owners of newspapers abandon political debates and start to deal with contents that interest the majority of the population. This allowed the number of readers to be substantially increased along with advertising gains (Brin et al, 2004). In the United States and England, where newspapers acquired the ability to channel sales and advertising revenues, they managed to establish a financial independence that contributed to depoliticizing journalistic discursive practices and encouraging the development of information journalism (Sousa, 2008). The press barons, the first to form economically powerful journalism

groups, are, according to Neveu (2006), capitalist entrepreneurs who impose a business logic on the activity, which would have no choice but to become professional.

The Anglo-American journalism model, which would become a reference for the development of the activity in most other countries, was the first format in which the press began to respond to the practical and daily needs of society and became the perfect place for journalism to reach the status of a business activity. It was in the United States, and to a lesser extent in England, that the practices and strategies that characterize journalism were invented. It is also in these countries that the industrialized press quickly became an autonomous field of discursive production (Chalaby, 2003).

Journalism begins to be more than a mere craft, that is, to become a profession, when it starts to operate from social ties that allow it to be established as an institution. In the 19th century, the institutionalization of journalistic culture took place through the gradual independence from other institutions. That is when the foundations of modern journalism are established, with values such as journalistic objectivity and the formation of a readership market. This journalism format was developed in a democratic society, when, with the expansion of newspapers, a greater number of people began to dedicate themselves exclusively to the activity that aimed to provide information (Traquina, 2008).

It is during this period that the journalist becomes a salaried employee, who is required to have the necessary skills to carry out his profession and his remuneration depends on his ability to collect information (Neveu, 2006). Recognized as professionals, journalists have a specific competence: the provision of information to society, that is, the provision of news. They master the specific language needed to produce the news and follow values identified until today as central to journalism, such as the search for truth, independence, accuracy, and the notion of their profession as a public service (Traquina, 2008). Information becomes the central element of the profession, embodying the *raison d'être* of journalism. The profession is legitimized based on the roles it plays in society and, therefore, when studying journalism, it is essential to reflect on its social function.

2. Journalism as a social function

Journalism as a social function begs the following question: Without an audience, is there a point to it? There could be, but the idea that without the audience there is no journalism is part of the ideology of the profession as a public service. The habit of following the media is established in our society – people drink coffee and read the newspaper, sit down at night to watch the news, always follow the articles in a magazine and listen to the radio while cooking, for example. In this

context, journalism assumes different functions that are assigned to it according to the different demands of social life. The desire to be informed is imbued in our daily lives, and we start to look at journalism as a mediator of reality, as a social aggregator that protects the public interest.

There is a requirement for information due to the way in which social life is organized: citizens, in their private lives, are required to be informed about their rights, their duties and the means they have to apply them (Charaudeau, 2013). The facts that we can learn without journalism are very few. Without the news, we would only come into contact with a small amount of information through our everyday life. Therefore, we need a specialized vehicle in its transmission, which justifies the existence of journalism (Miguel, 1999). The profession grows from its specific role as disseminator of information about everyday life (Fraciscato, 2005), thus having greater cultural and social importance where it operates.

Traditionally, news has functioned as an important avenue for public connection (Couldry et al., 2010; Kaun, 2012; McCollough et al., 2017), with news organizations presenting themselves as almost obligatory points of passage to find out what is happening outside people's private worlds. Journalism has played a vital role in society since the 19th century, when seeking information and reporting it to the public became its primary obligation (Erlich, 2004; Charadeau, 2013; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014), but the process of accelerated change driven by technology transformed the way it is produced, distributed, and used. Although we see the emergence of new tools and practices, we assume that there are non-negotiable and fundamental values of the profession, that constitute the ideology of the profession, such as truth and accuracy, and, especially, a commitment to the public (Dahlgren, 2010; Hayes, Singer, and Ceppos, 2007; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014)—which also happens to be their consumer audience.

The relationship between journalists and the audience has been based on a pact of mutual trust, of shared expectations, on a kind of social contract (Karlsson and Clerwall, 2018). This relationship is based on the trust that readers place in journalists, hoping that what they publish is really what they should publish and what will interest them; and the confidence of journalists that what they publish is really what the public expects to receive, and meets their expectations as citizens (Miguel, 1999; Masip & Suau, 2014).

In the context of digital journalism, as the profession continues to face long-term structural changes towards more digital, more mobile, a more platform-dominated media environment (Newman et. al, 2020), news organizations and researchers alike have found themselves needing to invest time and resources to understand, measure and engage the audience, forced to embrace the public that journalism so often took for granted (Newman et. al, 2021). The audience is important from a normative point of view, as the purpose of journalism is to provide the citizen

with the information necessary to be free and capable of governing himself (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014); but, also, from a strictly economic point of view (Masip, 2016).

3. Journalism as a service

The newspaper industry is at a crossroads when it comes to reader engagement and interactive online platforms. While journalism remains surrounded by a professional ideology (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014), media outlets are commercial enterprises that survive by attracting an audience. News companies are faced with challenges that derive from the failing of the traditional business model of the profession and an economic motivation for newspapers to move to the web.

From a management perspective, customer relationships are essential to the value creation side of a business model: by developing them, companies are able to make a connection between their value propositions and their customer segments—and, eventually, acquire revenue from it (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010; Carpes da Silva and Sanseverino, 2020). Due to its essence of public interest and importance to people's exercise of citizenship, Jarvis (2014) suggests journalism should also be understood as a service. In this sense, news companies would be able to solve real information needs for their readers and start developing closer relationships with them in order to keep improving the service—and, consequently, find commercial opportunities derived from this connection.

This approach to journalism can obviously generate criticism. It may be considered excessively attached to commercial interests or overly utilitarian, turning journalists into mere producers of content to satisfy people's basic interests—or curiosity—instead of contributing to needed civic discussions (Carpes da Silva and Sanseverino, 2020). We understand there is a duality to the idea of journalism as a service. Beyond the notion of journalism as a public service (the function of providing the audience with credible information), journalism gained commercial value in the 19th century, with the institutionalization of journalistic culture, and the formation of a market for readers (Chalaby, 1996). At the same time, it also became a paid service provided by journalists to a consumer public. According to Carlson (2016), journalism varies constantly and continuously, taking many forms even simultaneously, depending on geographic and contextual factors, and is always subject to a set of social relationships and a dispute of forces from different fields. In that sense, even imbued with a commercial logic, media companies can continue to fulfill their duty to the public with reliable information and, at the same time, be perceived as service providers to a consumer audience.

4. Does the web demand a new journalism?

Journalism is an arduous, critical and ethical process, and though it may be changing, it continues to have an important role in our society – the profession remains intrinsically connected to how we live our daily routine, even if in a manner we could not imagine two decades ago. It is essential to discuss journalism in this current context, in which interactions with subjects (consumers, other organizations and sources) in new channels stress the journalistic field and dilute the journalist's role as the main intermediary filtering authorized messages that enter the public sphere. There are criticisms and challenges to conventional journalism, as technological advancements have forced a series of changes in its professional routines and business model.

The history of journalism is intertwined with that of the printed newspaper, uniting the imaginary of the term *journalism* to the newspaper itself (Sousa). The first regular printed newspaper, which was weekly, dates back to 1605 in Belgium. Today, the newspaper has been losing ground in the media market, with a future where the end of paper editions and the dominance only of digital editions is not far off. Now, we face a process of cultural transformation, a transformation that also affects the supports and the materiality of the news, influencing even the imaginary of the concept of journalism, which is transformed in the face of the possible disappearance of the printed newspaper and its disconnection from the concept of journalism.

The arrival of the internet did not herald a new entrant in the news ecosystem, it heralded a new ecosystem in itself for the industry (Anderson, Bell and Shirky, 2013). The advertising-based business model that underpinned journalism collapsed, as advertisers could reach consumers directly, without paying a toll, and it turned out many consumers preferred it that way. Platforms such as Google and Facebook have become the powerful distributors of news and information, accidentally unleashing a historic flood of misinformation in the process. Amateurs could be reporters, in the most literal sense of the word—stories from the Szechuan quake to Sullenberger's Hudson River landing to Syrian massacres were broken by firsthand accounts. There is a uniqueness to this context, as present time and the social construction that underlies journalism becomes demarcated by new structures and practices (Franciscato, 2005).

This is a crisis for modern journalism that is changing the profession. And while its values are being challenged, are they being changed? Hayes, Singer and Ceppos (2007), Dahlgren (2010) and Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014) defend that, even if the functions of the profession are being remodeled, there are primary principles that remain, despite technological advancements. We argue that digital media and the internet have been altering the journalistic practice in the last decades, resulting in a seeming variety of crises in the profession – of identity, audience, credibility – that

occur both internally, in the relationship of journalists with communication institutions; and externally, in the relationship formed between the public and the profession.

However, we consider the crises experienced by both the public and journalists to be interconnected with the journalism industry's challenges as a business (Meyer, 2006, 2009; Ramonet, 2012; Haak, Parks, and Castells, 2012). In the face of a rapidly changing technological, social, and political landscape, there is a pressing need for a transformation in its commercial model. Meanwhile, the fundamental principles of the profession remain steadfast (Hayes, Singer, and Ceppos, 2007; Dahlgren, 2010; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014). We defend that the current business model of journalism is dying or is possibly already dead – nonetheless, this does not represent the end for the profession and its basic values, but a *forced* opportunity for journalism to reinvent itself.

We acknowledge that journalism involves a form of reciprocity, albeit asymmetrical, in the relationships between journalists, organizations, and readers (Genro Filho, 1987). Furthermore, we believe that the technological aspects of journalism are intertwined with its social role, which evolves over different historical periods (Franciscato, 2005). In this emerging landscape of journalism (Anderson et al., 2013), interactions with new participants place additional stress on the field of journalism. However, we assume that, despite the transformations resulting from technology, there are non-negotiable and fundamental values of the profession.

The concept of journalism, in its nature, goes beyond materiality and supports. The concept of news goes beyond the written text and is distributed in its most different forms. Journalism is a practice that transcends media but shares a common concept and objective. The purpose of journalism has remained constant throughout its history, no matter how much journalism has changed. Its aim has remained remarkably constant, though not always well served, since the notion of the press emerged more than three hundred years ago. And despite all the changes in the speed, techniques, and nature of news diffusion, there has always been a clear theory and philosophy of journalism that flows from the very function of news: the main purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and to govern themselves (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014).

CHAPTER 2

NAVIGATING THE DIGITAL SHIFT: JOURNALISM AND THE EVOLUTION OF NEWS AUDIENCES

After charting the vast terrains of journalism's digital transformation, we narrow our gaze to a fundamental distinction pivotal to the world of modern digital journalism: the 'public' versus the 'audience' intricate dichotomy. In this chapter we will explore the relationship between journalism and its audience, which has undergone an important transformation in the past few decades – a matter that is not trivial if we consider that public is essential for journalism to continue to exist. We observe that this transformation is primarily linked to changes in the consumption of news driven by new technologies. The public's shift towards the internet and social media platforms provides them with a wider array of reading options. Consequently, journalism must reconsider its approach to engaging and retaining its audience of consumers. Within the hierarchical parameters of the relationship, journalists remain the gatekeepers of news, and media organizations retain the power to choose how the public is included (if at all) in the journalistic process. In this panorama, this section presents the context of journalism relevant to our investigation, considering that our research arises from the implications of this relationship between media organizations and their audiences, and the changes and news processes that occur in the context of digital journalism.

1. An Evolving Relationship

In the last decades of the 20th century, we observed several changes in the technical and material conditions and in the methods used in the investigation and dissemination of news, from the propagation of the internet, digital media, and social networks. We have reached the era of post-industrial journalism. Everyone has a lot more freedom. News producers, advertisers, new actors and, above all, the group *formerly known as the audience* (Rosen, 2006), today enjoy unprecedented freedom to communicate, without the old limitations of broadcasting models and the written press (Anderson, Bell and Shirky, 2013).

The news business in the 20th century was a fairly linear process, where reporters and editors would gather facts and observations and turn them into stories, which were then committed to ink on paper or waves in the air, and finally consumed, at the far end of those various modes of transport, by the audience. Part of the conceptual simplicity of traditional media came from the clarity provided by the near-total division of roles between professionals and amateurs. Reporters and editors (and producers and engineers) worked as the source of the news, and then there were the recipients of this product, seeing it only in its final, packaged form. It could be consumed,

talked about around the dinner table or the water cooler, but little more. News used to be acquired by the audience, and if individuals wished to share their own observations publicly, they required approval from professionals. These professionals had to be convinced to publish letters to the editor or allocate a few moments of airtime on a call-in show.

Traditional business models for print, radio, and television journalism are suffering from a crisis because the public has more power than ever to choose where to find content. Audiences assume a dual role, as consumers and producers. When the link between public and journalism becomes unstable, these individuals can choose to renew or not their relationship with a media organization (Franciscato, 2005). Consequently, this democratization of information in the generation of content in an online and digitally mediated space (Havey, 2020) has also resulted in a fragmentation of consumption, requiring companies to customize their content or programming to niche audiences.

There is a myriad of choices that can range from free to paid, from niche to mainstream, giving the possibility to choose the most convenient news source, which more often means online news or available through digital media. Thus, the media, the pattern of discourse, and the reading of journalistic material have changed. This calls into question the business models based on the sale of traditional advertising space that was the rule in the media industry. These changes, mostly imposed by the disruption of novel technologies and in the ways that users consume news, have pushed these organizations to innovate in order to remain profitable (van Der Haak et al., 2012). Audiences are not only their customers but news organizations' key resources, and their movements towards the mobile and social web need to be followed closely by these outlets.

There is a substantial body of literature concerning the online and digitally mediated public sphere, which has facilitated the *democratization* of content generation. Consequently, various terms and definitions have been employed to describe and represent similar or identical concepts. For instance, *citizen journalism* denotes the involvement of individuals formerly categorized as the audience (Gillmor, 2004; Rosen, 2006). *Producership* refers to the amalgamation of information production and consumption (Bruns, 2007; 2008), while *participatory journalism* emphasizes the notion of collaborative action (Singer et al., 2011).

The use of the expression *User-Generated Content* gains space with Web 2.0⁸ (O'Reilly, 2005) and the advent of social platforms, which encompass different types of content and resources,

⁸ The Web 2.0 refers to the second generation of the World Wide Web, which began around the late 1990s and early 2000s. It was a significant evolution from the first generation of the Web, which was primarily focused on static content and one-way communication. Web 2.0 introduced interactive and user-generated content, allowing users to contribute and share information through blogs, social networking sites, wikis, and other platforms. It also facilitated collaboration and collective intelligence, enabling users to work together on projects and share ideas. The rise of Web 2.0 led to a significant shift in how people interact with the Web, and it opened up new opportunities for

associated with the notion of collaborators who generate content outside routine and professional platforms (Livingstone, 2004; van Dijck, 2009).

Widely adopted, the concept of participatory journalism starts to be used to describe the different formats implemented by news media sites in which citizens are invited to contribute to the processes of news gathering, selection, publication or commentary, all this always within a framework designed by news organizations (Nip, 2006). Participation mechanisms become integrated into the media. Comments on news, valuation and viralization of information, intervention in forums, interviews, surveys, sending news content, etc., are part of the usual landscape of news websites around the world. All of them were conceived as ways to maintain public loyalty and increase the number of users.

This prompts us to question whether the dichotomy of passive consumer/active producer adequately addresses participation in an online setting, as user agency is considerably more complex than what these binary terms imply (van Dijck, 2009). The implied and often proposed opposition between passive recipients defined by old media, such as television and radio, and active participants inhabiting digital environments, particularly in the context of User-Generated Content, is a historical misconception (van Dijck, 2009) that arises from audiences' increased potential to contribute to media production, often seen as the blurring boundaries between producers and audiences (Graham, 2019; Picone et al., 2019).

In the new media environment, intermediate roles and participatory practices with different intensities take on greater importance (Masip et al., 2015), as the nature of the interaction with the media may vary wildly (Bird, 2011), and as we have to account for the diverse roles of users in a media environment, in which the boundaries between commerce, content and information are continuously redrawn (van Dijck, 2009). Instead, user agency comprises different levels of participation, varying from 'creators' to 'spectators' and 'inactives.'

According to Bird (2011), our tendency to classify all participatory activity is proof of a revolutionary change in our relationship with the media. In fact, it is partly a mistake; because while we produce data for free, there is the fact that most people, due to accessibility or due to the availability of time, are not creators, but reproducers or collectors of content. It is a great leap to presume that the availability of digital networked technologies turns everyone into active

businesses and individuals to connect and engage with their audiences (O'Reilly, 2005; Anderson, 2007; Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Tapscott and Williams, 2006). We use this term because it has become a standard manner to refer to this period of evolution of the internet and digital media. However, we must note that the concept of Web 2.0 cannot be taken as a given, as it originated in the industry. There was a lot of hype surrounding the discourses welcoming Web 2.0 as the rebirth of direct democracy; but while the internet does foster communication, it does not necessarily correspond fruitful political debate (Sunstein, 2002; Lin et al., 2005) and actual quality debates promoted by participatory journalism (Noci et. al, 2012).

participants. In our embrace of the producer, we should not lose sight of the more mundane, internalized, even passive articulation with media that characterizes a great deal of media consumption (Bird, 2011). There can be totally different types of User-Generated Content and audience participation, but we often lump it all together into participatory activity.

Recipients of cultural content have always engaged in activities in relation to different mediums, and what is different in the digital era is that users have better access to networked media, enabling them to talk back in the same multimodal language that frames cultural products formerly made exclusively by so-called professionals. This is partly due to the availability of cheap and easy-to-use digital technologies, but a more important driver is the many internet channels that allow for do-it-yourself distribution.

The basic logic of the internet is digital reproduction, universally available, without dividing participants into producers. Abundance creates more disruption than scarcity; when everyone suddenly has a lot more freedom, every relationship in the old model, in which the media was charged with operating the bottleneck, is questioned (Anderson, Bell and Shirky, 2013). Currently, there is a supersaturation of information in the digital environment, which allows the amateur content – produced by several users – and the professional – produced by journalists – to compete in a parallel way for the attention of consumers. In the scenario where users can also access databases, electronic files, discussion forums and real-time chat systems, online classified search engines, up-to-the-minute news updates and a host of other services, only possible thanks to digital support, the professional journalist finds his space for the credibility and legitimacy of his speech. Journalistic mediation socially legitimizes information and imposes procedures so that indispensable credibility is required.

It is likely that in times of cell phones with cameras and digital social networks, the journalist will not be the first to broadcast an event. The probability that an ordinary citizen is at a certain time and place and is able to register and disclose an occurrence is much greater. The internet has given all users the publishing power that once only journalists wielded – journalists must now adapt to not being the only ones telling the story. Technological developments have changed the relation to the audience: the journalist no longer has the privileged position of exclusive access to sources and the public sphere. Both the sources of news and the audience can build their own channels, reducing the journalist to one of many actors in the public sphere.

Likewise, gathering a large amount of information in a short time is a much more complicated task for a single journalist, compared to the ability of several people to network together, even if they are physically distant. The machines, in turn, are able to quickly survey data and calculations, activities that would take more time for the journalist. In fact, these are three

factors that today need to be considered in the journalistic ecosystem: amateurs, crowds and machines (Anderson, Bell and Shirky, 2013). Their entry on the scene has profoundly affected the professional journalistic activity.

If the internet made it possible for ordinary people to become content distributors, and the media no longer have publication exclusivity, journalists claim the space of credible information professionals. For Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014), when information becomes an over-supply commodity, it becomes more difficult to acquire knowledge, because it becomes necessary to sift and synthesize more information to give order to reality. The knowledge gained may be deeper and more qualified, but it will also become more specialized. In this panorama of supersaturation of information, there is, therefore, a greater need for intermediaries. There are situations that require the work of the professional journalist, especially if we consider the current context of overexposure of information. This is the case with research and interpretation work. The role of a journalist “as a bearer of the truth,” an opinion maker and an interpreter cannot be replaced (Anderson, Bell and Shirky, 2013).

There is a growing scholarly literature researching active citizens participating in content production both outside (Jenkins, 2006), in the outskirts (Bruns, 2005; Allan and Thorsen, 2009) and inside journalism (Heinonen and Domingo, 2008). Empirical literature on audience participation in mainstream online news media addresses the implications of the phenomenon from different angles, from the ethical implications (Singer and Ashman, 2009; Singer, 2011) to the attitudes and strategies of professionals (Thurman, 2008; Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Williams et al., 2010; Bergström, 2009; Bækker and Pantti, 2009; Singer et al., 2011).

Naturally, the interaction between media and the public is not new. Letters to the editor have been in the written press for over 200 years (Da Silva, 2012; Richardson and Franklin 2003, 2004; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002a; Wahl-Jorgensen 2002b), and in the 1990s we saw the emergence of the first initiatives aimed at bringing journalism closer to citizens through public journalism. Although digital technologies are the main factor in changing the role of the recipient, the first programs with telephone listeners’ requests date back to 1945 in the United States (Gillmor, 2006). In the late 1980s, the possibilities for participation gained ground, especially in the United States, when many communication organizations, mostly newspapers, began to invite their readers to participate – through focus groups, interviews, and research – suggesting themes and agendas. Even so, news production continued to be the exclusive domain of journalists, since ordinary citizens were only given the right to express opinions and suggest topics.

Public participation was not born on the web. Therefore, this is a phenomenon that, not being new, has gained novel contours with the internet and with the ease of access to the tools of

production, publication, cooperation and information sharing. Admittedly, the transaction between journalists and the public has never been entirely straightforward. Nevertheless, when the public goes from technically passive receivers – whether from television, radio or newspapers – to active, being able to interfere and participate more effectively in the process of producing media content, there are several possibilities that arise for what the future of the profession looks like.

The evolution of public participation in the digital age has sparked nuanced perspectives among media scholars, shedding light on the dynamic interplay between media organizations and users. Deuze (2006, 2007, 2012, 2019) argues that the internet has triggered a substantial shift in this relationship, granting users greater influence in shaping media content. He underscores the role of digital technologies and platforms in empowering users to create and disseminate content globally, thereby necessitating media organizations to adapt by being responsive to user needs and interests while upholding journalistic standards (Deuze, 2019). Deuze (2019) recognizes both the opportunities for user engagement and participation and the attendant challenges, including the management of online communities, addressing online abuse and hate speech, and navigating the complexities of algorithmic filtering and personalization.

In contrast, Siapera (2019) takes a critical stance, emphasizing the challenges faced by media organizations in navigating the multifaceted landscape of online engagement and participation. The digital era has fundamentally transformed the dynamics between media organizations and users, endowing users with greater access to information and the ability to actively participate in content creation and dissemination (Siapera, 2019). She advocates for a more reflexive approach by media organizations, one that acknowledges their role in shaping the norms and values of online discourse. Siapera (2019) asserts that media organizations must foster more inclusive and diverse forms of participation to effectively engage with online audiences. Her perspective underscores the imperative of media organizations to adapt to the changing dynamics of user participation in the digital age.

Couldry (2018), however, offers a contrasting viewpoint, challenging the notion that the relationship between media organizations and users in the online context has become more collaborative and participatory (Couldry, 2018). He contends that media organizations retain substantial power and influence in shaping public discourse, historically deciding what issues are deemed newsworthy and how they are framed. This power has been reinforced by the concentration of media ownership and the strategic use of digital technologies for data gathering and targeted audience engagement. Couldry (2018) argues that despite the rise of User-Generated Content and social media, the fundamental power dynamics between the public/audience and journalism have not fundamentally shifted (Couldry, 2018). Media organizations continue to

control the platforms and algorithms that determine the visibility and reach of user-generated content.

It is unrealistic to believe that the technological environment has enabled equal participation between the audience and media organizations in content production. Therefore, in our work, as we scrutinize the spaces established and maintained by news organizations for users, we delve into how the public has truly been integrated into professional journalism. This exploration reveals nuances within the concepts frequently employed interchangeably to discuss the relationship between media organizations and online users.

2. An Active *What* for Journalism?

In recent years, special interest has been devoted to analyzing the relationship between audiences and the media, and in particular the role of audiences and participatory journalism, perceived as a way of establishing a new relationship between journalists and their public. This coincides with changes in the profession over the past two decades, influenced by technological, organizational, professional, economic, social, and cultural factors, that led to the configuration of a much more complex media system, in which the role of journalism itself is being reformulated (Chadwick, 2013; Masip, 2016). Formerly abstract concepts such as *audience* and *public* start to have an active and permanent presence, both in the newsroom and on online news sites (Heinonen, 2011).

The concept of *the public*, the group of people on whose behalf hard news is produced, is the *god* term of journalism: the final term, the term without which nothing counts. Journalists justify their actions, defend the craft, and plead their case in terms of the public's right to know, their role as the representative of the public, and their capacity to speak both to and for the public. The public is the group whose interests are to be served by the news ecosystem. It is also very difficult to define cleanly.

The word audience has become similarly problematic. When the media landscape was cleanly divided into publishing (print, broadcast) vs. communication (telegraph, then telephone), the concept of an audience was equally clean—the mass of recipients of content produced and distributed by a publisher. Movies, music, newspapers, books—all these had obvious audiences. In the past, we understood by audiences those citizens who read the newspaper in a cafe, listened to the radio on their way to work or watched television in the living room at the end of the day with their family (Motta, 2003; Benetti, 2009). Consuming media could easily be associated with a particular moment and space, often having a certain sense of ritual (Couldry, 2003; Sparks and Tulloch, 2000).

The audience has traditionally been viewed as the receiver of news and information created, packaged and distributed by professional media organizations. In a broadcast model, the audience is an unidentifiable mass brought into being by its passive consumption of media (Livingstone, 2005). Scholars have argued that far from being passive, the audience actively makes sense of media, by bringing individual interpretative lenses (Fiske, 1987). But traditionally, individuals have had limited ability to directly affect the construction of media messages or communicate with the producers of the media (Ha and James, 1998).

One of the most disruptive effects of the internet is to combine publishing and communications models into a single medium. When someone on Twitter shares a story with a couple of friends, it feels like a water cooler conversation of old. When that same person shares that same story with a couple thousand people, it feels like publishing, even though it is the same tool and the same activity used to send the story to just a few. Moreover, each of these recipients possesses the capability to continue sharing the story. The once-privileged position of the original publisher has significantly diminished, and we now inhabit a world where audience members have transcended their role as mere information recipients.

The concept of the audience in digital journalism is often pulled in two opposite directions. On the one hand, audiences are labelled as things of the distant past in the changing media environment—as Rosen’s famous formulation about “people formerly known as the audience” suggests—and subsequently upgraded into a generative entity, “producers” (Bruns, 2008), carrying the capacity to take part in and change cultural production and the production of cultures (Jenkins, 2006; Tapscott and Williams, 2006). On the other hand, due to the technological affordances to monitor web traffic and measure clicks, news audiences are being reduced to quantifiable aggregates: herds or masses rather than creative individuals or groups (Napoli, 2011; Anderson, 2011). Even if these notions are not mutually exclusive, there is a risk that they promote a polarized understanding of the audience. As a media developer, it is not possible to give equal weight to both audience models without compromising consistent thought.

The new nature of audiences is diffuse, but at the same time connected to day-to-day life, this being precisely one of the main characteristics of what can be thought of as the *multifaceted nature of audiences* (Schröder et al., 2003). But we often remain attached to the idea of understanding audiences as “people out there,” relying on the fact that it is so commonsensical to think that audiences are social beings or fixed target groups constituted of distinct demographic features regarding, for instance, age, gender, and education (Heikkilä and Ahva, 2014).

The new media ecosystem has brought a new dimension in relation to the nature of audiences. The current media environment is modifying the opportunity structures by which

people can participate in an increasingly mediated society (Livingstone, 2013). Without going into detail on the question of whether these participatory opportunities are relevant to democracy or not, the fact is that large numbers of citizens are adopting them. There are more and more practical currents such as commenting, sharing and creating, available at any time and space, all of them aimed at connecting users with each other and/or with media content (Singer et al., 2011; Dahlgren, 2013; Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013; Press and Williams, 2010).

The term *audience* does not refer any longer to a mass of individuals who only receive content produced by the media, in the sense in which it was used in the past (Anderson, Bell and Shirky, 2013). Today, everyone can do much more. You see the emerging culture of participation, in which people like to consume, but also like to produce and share. We consistently held an appreciation for these three activities, yet traditional media predominantly rewarded only one of them (Shirky, 2011). The newfound freedom brought about by these new technical conditions has profoundly disrupted journalistic institutions, which had hitherto been indispensable in providing the requisite structure and funding for journalism production.

Uncertainty dominates the current changing media scenario: we no longer have clear differences between production and reception, between mass and interpersonal communication, or between hitherto different forms of media (print, image, music, broadcasting and games), etc. (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2006). Among all the concepts and theories that have had to be reviewed in recent years, one of the most prominent is that of audience. The term “active audiences” began to be used precisely to distinguish the new nature of audiences (Bruns and Highfield, 2016). Audiences are beginning to be perceived not only as active in interpreting journalistic texts and messages, but also as active in the sense of production, dissemination of content and public debate in online environments (Suau, 2015).

This new participatory dimension of the nature of audiences incorporates a new social or relational component absent in previous definitions of the audience (Livingstone, 2013). In this way, the concept of *audiences* develops characteristics previously attributed to the concept of *publics*. Audiences, even in their conceptualization as active in the interpretation of texts and messages from the media, have traditionally been understood in relation to their supposed individual and non-deliberative nature (Butsch, 2008), remaining absent from debates on public affairs. The audiences, then, were differentiated from the traditional definition of the public, a concept always associated with deliberation and of a relational nature.

The concept of public in journalism is related to the ideal of public interest that guides the profession from its inception as an institution. The idea of public interest arose from the enlightened ideals of the free press as an essential condition for establishing a democratic society

(Sartor, 2016). The public is that group of consumers or citizens who care about the forces that shape their lives and want someone to monitor and report on those forces so that they can act on that knowledge (Anderson, Bell and Shirky, 2013).

It was in the context of the struggles of the European bourgeoisie against the absolutism of the aristocracies from the 17th century onwards that the press gained space as a legitimate institution designed to disseminate information of general interest and constitute a public sphere. It is in this period that journalistic organizations, as well as the subjects involved in the production of information, incorporated the notion of public interest in their identity and legitimizing discourses. With the delegated role of fostering public debate, discussing issues relevant to citizens and inspecting the spheres of power, journalism formed its identity and justified its existence and relevance for democratic societies. From this historical context, the role of representation and defense of the public interest gradually became the profession's ethical-epistemic foundation, constituting its deontology and focusing on journalistic production as one of the most important criteria for selection, hierarchization and construction of news (Sartor, 2016).

In the value system that governs journalism, the notion of public interest takes center stage. When it comes to establishing the ethical principles of the profession, it seems easier to deny or relax other values commonly associated with the duty of journalism, such as objectivity and impartiality, than to discard the idea of serving, representing or defending the interests of citizens. This assertion can be made by both traditional journalism, which aims to provide an objective account of current significant events, and opinionated journalism, characterized by its interpretative or openly engaged perspective. It finds support among professionals working in large and influential media organizations, as well as those in the so-called *independent* or *alternative* media. It resonates with individuals who trust news as a means of neutral and transparent understanding of reality, as well as with theories that view news as a construct shaping our perception of reality. The service to the public interest presents itself, therefore, as a discourse that crosses different traditions and different models or conceptions of journalism.

Dahlgren argues that “isolated individuals, who consume media in their homes, are not part of a public” (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 149); however, this distinction between thoughtless and disconnected audiences and reflective and participatory audiences could be losing its meaning due to social changes in the media ecosystem (Livingstone, 2005). The idea of the public has always been associated with the media. Habermas (1989) and Tarde (1969) saw the media (basically, the press) as the sources from which citizens provided information on public affairs. The publics were formed in other spaces of participation and meeting, such as cafes, social clubs or squares, where citizens met and held the debates and exchanges of points of view that contributed to formulating

public opinion (Dewey, 1927; Habermas, 1989). Consequently, audiences and the public have always been understood as opposing concepts, separated in space and time. However, in the new media ecosystem where the media is an essential part of everyday life, and audiences are becoming more relational and participatory, this traditional separation between audiences and public is blurred (Papacharissi, 2010).

3. The Blurred Lines between ‘Public’ and ‘Audience’ in Journalism

The concepts of public and audience are often used in journalism to refer to groups of people who consume news and information. While these terms are often used interchangeably, there are nuanced and complex differences between them, that can have important implications for how journalism is practiced and understood. The tension seen between the idea of audience and of public reflects the permanent strain between, on the one hand, the normative, the duty to be, the ideal, and, on the other, the empirical, the concrete, the possible and the commercial in the daily practice of journalism (Sartor, 2016).

When the journalistic activity must also be seen as business, and the concern to please readers and generate profitability for journalistic organizations becomes a part of the journalists’ job, there is an increasing subjection to the private interests of advertisers, on top of the lack of time and resources that limit the work of reports, creating an abyss between professed values and the concrete reality of newsrooms. And though audience and public are often used as interchangeable when we talk about journalism, they can be taken as the same in every context, especially when the notion of public interest gains practical and emerging meanings, associated, and interpreted as consumer preference.

The ideas of *public interest* and *interest of the public* are confused. Meeting the immediate interests of readers has increasingly become a normative principle for journalistic work, as professionals recognize, albeit critically, that working guided by audience preferences is easier and produces more financial return for the media company; and that the premise of pleasing the consumer is an emerging value, presenting itself more and more linked to the strained notion of public interest (Sartor, 2016)

News organizations can have journalistic missions that are profoundly similar; and both can, for example, be anchored on a sense of public interest, and yet their websites can go in profoundly different directions when it comes to the space given to the audience and the management that implies. This is extremely interesting, because it shows how the concept of public is subjective when it comes to media organizations. Though there is, in academia and the literature studied, a consensus to how we can define the public in its relation to journalism; the interpretation

is plural when it comes to the how each news organization perceives who this public is in relation to their brand and considering what they want from the user of their website.

It is not a coincidence that journalism itself has had such difficulty in defining who their audience is. The fact is, despite an increase in participation with digital and social media, the audience may have become more active, but it is still in many ways imagined. Because in the end, in professional journalism, the public is limited to the spaces the organization decides to host for them, it is defined by how each company answers the question "*what do we want from our audience?*". The choices news organizations make about what can appear, how it is organized, how it is monetized, what can be removed and why, and what the technical architecture allows and prohibits, are all real and substantive interventions into the contours of public discourse.

If the distinction of public and audience, participation, and engagement, can be hard to delineate in theory, is even harder to do so when we look at the practice of journalism in the digital environment. If we say "they say public when they mean audience" is not a literal representation of media organizations *self-discourse*, but a way to explain how the participatory promise of journalism for the web, translates more to a consumer strategy to retain an audience than to a way to let the users be part of the debate in a significant way in the public sphere.

Do news organizations use the terms "public" and "audience" interchangeably? And when does the difference matter? For news media companies, the distinction is more often than not blurry, and in many ways, inconsequential for their daily practices and ultimate goals as media companies. They must cater to both the public and the audience. The concept of the public in journalism comes from the idea of a democratic society and the need for truthful information to enable citizens to participate in that society. This ideal is still at the core of the profession and the institution of journalism. However, the public has also always been a consumer-audience that interacts with news content, pays for it through subscriptions, memberships, or clicks, and has the choice of when, where, and how to consume news.

This duality is complex. In the day-to-day operations of news organizations, the terms "public" and "audience" get mixed and tend to become synonymous. News organizations try to serve the public by providing informed and accurate information while also trying to attract and retain a consumer-audience with their content to make money and continue to exist. While journalism may have arisen as an ideal to serve the public, it continues to exist as a business that trades in content. The value of the content has gone beyond the primary purpose of informing citizens about their rights in a democratic society. However, journalism has evolved with society and the demands of the hybrid public/audience it serves, which is increasingly complex.

Public and audience can be synonyms, but they can also be polar opposites when it comes to how a news organization views and relates with them. We argue most news organization say public when they mean audience, because the *you* that becomes a part of their practices means more for the financial bottom-line in a competitive business scenario plagued by platforms and competition in the context of digital capitalism; then to their ideal of journalism, where the words public interest are used more as long-standing staple of the profession, without actually considering what it should mean for the relationship built with their readers (users, viewers, listeners, etc.).

Journalism continues to be a bridge between people's private lives and the world around the world, and it remains as the institution meant to be a beacon for credible information in the chaotic panorama brought on by the web, where disinformation has found a perfect place to grow wild. But the profession finds itself unable to go beyond the premise and promise of interactivity that the internet brought forward, where there would a democratization of information and the public would be able to participate.

Thought, of course, there are causes beyond the reach of the profession for that, such as social and economic issues that maintain a digital divide; there is the responsibility that media organizations bear in their choices to include or not the public in their journalism. And on the news sites we have seen that choice is rarely made in a consistent and constructive way. So, when we talk about a responsibility to the public interest, though that does exist in the traditional sense to provide relevant information, it does not extend to allowing the public to actively participate in the debate and in the construction of discourse in the space's media organizations host.

Surely, there are exceptions, but in its majority, the idea of public – and participation – remains delegated to the theory, to the way to justify their existence; while dealing with the user as an audience, as people whose attention and loyalty they need to continuously retain to survive, is what guides the spaces media organizations open for the user. Tools for engagement, for audience retainment, as the promise of interactivity that arose with the internet falls short of the ideal of democratic participation. Despite the initial speeches, the media have so far failed to build true spaces for debate. A new public sphere that offers an environment in which citizens of different ideological positions can meet and exchange their perceptions and attitudes towards the public. The existence of these spaces for dialogue defines real democracies, and their scarcity is precisely one of the reasons why modern democracies are not working (Barber, 2003).

CHAPTER 3

GLOBAL FORCES

With a grasp on the active role of the modern audience, it is imperative to understand the global stage upon which this dance unfolds. This chapter extends our discourse into wider paradigms, setting the larger scene of our study: we question how do the constructs of modernity, globalization, and capitalism intricately mold the dynamics of our contemporary online news ecosystem. We explore the impacts of technology on journalism, as technological developments are intrinsically connected to the manifestations of modernity, globalization, and capitalism within the Western socio-political scenery⁹, and debate the impact of these factors on the relationship between media companies and their users in an online environment.

1. Modernity, Globalization and Capitalism

The entwined forces of modernity, globalization, and capitalism have significantly sculpted the contemporary news media landscape. These forces, underpinned by historical and cultural contexts, provide a rich tapestry against which the evolution and dynamics of news media can be understood.

Modernity, often defined by technological progression and evolving societal norms, has revolutionized journalism, making news a real-time, digital, and often participatory endeavor (Castells, 2009). Yet, this modern transformation isn't solely technological. News media today echo societal values, emphasizing inclusivity, diversity, and representation (Couldry and Hepp, 2017). As we moved away from traditional news mediums to digital platforms, we ushered in both the democratization of news and the challenges of misinformation and echo chambers (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017).

Globalization, marked by a profound interconnectedness across nations and cultures, has amplified the reach of news (Tomlinson, 1999). Events anywhere on the globe can generate ripples worldwide. Such widespread dissemination fosters international dialogue but also risks the homogenization of cultural narratives, with Western-centric perspectives often prevailing (Robertson, 1992).

With the interweaving of modernity and globalization, the economic realm of news media has morphed dramatically. Media entities, while adopting digital monetization strategies, are also expanding their global footprints. The result? Powerful conglomerates that can influence global

⁹ We focus on the Western social-political scenery because that is the context for the countries, and, consequently, media companies and news sites in our *corpus* of study.

narratives (Bagdikian, 2004). This intertwined dynamic's political implications are equally staggering, as news platforms, with their pervasive reach, can mold political outcomes and perceptions internationally (Sunstein, 2017).

Historically, the complexities increase. European nations, bolstered by their technological superiority, modernized swiftly, exporting their narratives to their colonies (Said, 1978). Today's news narratives, both from Europe and post-colonial nations, resonate with these histories – the former focusing on current challenges while the latter grapple with colonial legacies.

Yet, to fully comprehend this tapestry, one cannot overlook the omnipotent force of capitalism. As an economic and sociopolitical system, capitalism has its roots in the complex intersections of modernity and globalization. European colonial endeavors, powered by technological advancements and seeking new markets, can be interpreted as early instances of global capitalism, where economic pursuits often trampled native rights and cultures (Wallerstein, 1974). This expansionist motive of capitalism dovetailed with European colonial ambitions. Empowered by their technological advancements and driven by the desire for new markets and resources, European nations embarked on colonial conquests across Asia, Africa, and the Americas.

The inception of capitalism in the European Renaissance paved the way for profound social transformations that later formed the backbone of modern societies. With the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of advanced manufacturing technologies, capitalism flourished, driving increased production and consumption. This not only accelerated modernization but also initiated the first significant steps towards globalization, as nations sought new markets and resources (Harvey, 1989).

Within this framework, news media played a critical role in shaping narratives. In European countries, the media often perpetuated colonial ideologies, framing colonial ventures as 'civilizing missions' and underscoring the supposed benefits of European intervention (Said, 1978). These narratives supported capitalist endeavours by promoting the idea that European intervention, modernization, and economic exploitation were not just beneficial, but necessary for the betterment of colonized societies. On the other hand, post-colonial nations, now free from direct colonial rule, faced a new set of challenges. Their news narratives began to grapple with issues of identity, sovereignty, and economic independence in a world system still dominated by capitalist forces. The legacies of colonialism, intertwined with the pressures of global capitalism, often posed dilemmas for these nations. For instance, the adoption of capitalist economic models promised modernity and progress, but at the same time, these models often perpetuated economic disparities and power imbalances reminiscent of the colonial era (Chomsky, 1999).

Furthermore, as global interconnectivity grew, the capitalist system expanded its reach, underpinning the structures of global media conglomerates. These media giants, driven by profit motives, often influence news narratives, shaping them to align with their commercial interests (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). Thus, the doctrines of capitalism, deeply rooted in the processes of modernity and globalization, have profound implications for the production, dissemination, and consumption of news. Today, as the threads of capitalism run deep, influencing vast media conglomerates, the implications for news are significant. Capitalist motives can sometimes dictate news trajectories, aligning them more with commercial interests than unbiased reportage (Herman and Chomsky, 1988).

In essence, the triad of modernity, globalization, and capitalism offers a comprehensive lens to understand our hyperconnected, digital, and Western-centric news media ecosystem. While they provide avenues for global discourse, inclusivity, and information democratization, they also present challenges tied to bias, commercial interests, and historical imbalances. Recognizing their pervasive influence is vital for any discerning news consumer in today's world. News media stands as a reflective mirror to the dynamic interplay of modernity, globalization, and capitalism. It not only narrates but also shapes the discourse around historical imprints, socio-economic transformations, cultural dialogues, and technological evolutions in an intricately connected global landscape (Castells, 2009; Tomlinson, 1999). While modernity and globalization have dramatically transformed societies and interconnections, capitalism serves as the driving force, influencing not just economic transactions but the very fabric of global narratives.

2. The Capitalist Lens in Modern News Media

Building on the notions of modernity and globalization and their profound influence on the news media landscape, one cannot overlook another overarching force that shapes global narratives: capitalism. As modernity paved the way for technological advancements and globalization expanded the horizons of interconnectedness, capitalism acted as the economic engine propelling these transformations forward. Capitalism, as a global force, not only drives economic interactions but deeply permeates the structural underpinnings of media institutions, content creation, and dissemination.

Capitalism, with its deep historical roots and expansive reach, has left an indelible mark on the news media landscape, both in its traditional and digital incarnations. Historically, thinkers like Marx already underscored the role of media in legitimizing the capitalist system. He posited that the intrinsic conflicts of capitalism empowered elites to control not only technological and economic aspects but also the cultural and political narratives, leveraging media as a tool to

maintain status quo and resist reform (Marx, 1906; 1970). This perspective aligns with the institutionalist approach that bemoaned the transformation of the commercial press into a capitalist enterprise, seeing journalism's democratic ethos subsumed by commercial imperatives (Ross, 1910).

Fast-forward to recent decades, the digital age and the emergence of the internet brought about a paradigm shift. Castells' (2009) concept of a network society highlights how the evolution of information and communication technologies (ICTs) since the 1970s laid the foundation for a globalized, financialized version of capitalism. These technologies not only restructured the global economy but also buttressed an evolved capitalist system in which capital, now working globally in real time, chiefly circulates as finance capital, much of it grounded in the sphere of information and knowledge (Castells, 2009).

In the modern media milieu, this historical foundation combines with new dynamics: large conglomerates like News Corp control vast networks, sometimes sidelining diverse voices in favor of profit (Bagdikian, 2004). The digital age has exacerbated this trend with a clickbait culture. The urgency to go viral, spurred by capitalist imperatives, sometimes sacrifices depth for sensationalism (Tandoc et al., 2018). News, previously seen as a vehicle for information, now also wears the hat of a marketable commodity, leading to the rise of infotainment. Moreover, in this age of digital capitalism, editorial integrity is occasionally compromised when stories counter the interests of advertisers or parent corporations, undermining media's role as a societal watchdog (McChesney, 1999).

The internet era, though democratized in many ways, has intensified competition. Major media entities, equipped with vast resources, often overshadow indie journalists. Platforms like Substack and Patreon do provide alternatives, but big players' dominance remains a formidable challenge for grassroots journalism (Couldry and Curran, 2003). On a global scale, as media magnates broaden their reach, there's a looming risk of news homogenization, potentially sidelining local narratives in favor of overarching capitalist narratives (Robertson, 1992). This intertwined relationship between capitalism and media, evolving through history and now manifesting prominently in the digital age, underscores the intricate challenges for today's journalistic landscape.

3. The Impacts of Technology on the development of Journalism

The history of journalism is tied to the evolution of technology (Pavlik, 2000; Deuze, 2007; Briggs and Burke 2010, Heinrich 2011). If we consider that the invention of writing marked the most important technological advance in the history of mankind by transforming the relationship

between man and his past, as it made it possible to give materiality to information (Darton, 2009); the emergence of electronic communication was a revolutionary technological advancement.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, a set of transformations has affected media organizations and motivated reflections on the current context. The creation of the cylinder press, radio, and television marked pivotal points in media history. Particularly in the United States during the 20th century, media entities and their proprietors effectively integrated reform movements, warding off governmental interference. This allowed them to retain significant political influence and become intricately linked with a form of capitalism where individual and corporate liberties frequently supersede communal interests (McChesney, 2013; Pickard, 2015).

We consider that journalism has always suffered the impact of technology, and we are not thinking about the current reflections in terms of a rupture with previous formats and values. The movement of the constitution of new media formats, in function of the new technologies, does not occur as a linear evolutionary process and of surpassing previous supports, but rather as a complex and dynamic articulation of diverse journalistic formats, in coexistence and complementation (Palacios, 2004). Thus, values exist in continuity of journalism practiced in previous times, despite the changes in the format and working conditions in the profession.

The rapid technological and social changes brought about by the advent of digital media and the internet have given a radical appearance to the recent revolutions in journalistic practices, mainly because they are a hindrance to the traditional business model of the profession. Two advances, one of a technological and one of a structural nature, had already been fundamental to the redefinition of journalistic production – the telegraph and the creation of news agencies (Primo, 2011). For Heinrich (2011) these consolidate, in the 19th century, the linear system of journalism, considering the arrival of the product to the public – in which the journalist has control over the information and the process of news making, and the means of communication determine their arrival to the public. With the digitization of the communication processes, the panorama of changes and news practices overcame the limitations imposed by point-to-point technologies (Heinrich, 2011).

The process of accelerated change driven by technology is causing journalism to be transformed in the way it is produced, distributed, and used. We see the emergence of new tools and practices, phenomena that are producing both a series of new ways of producing information and a redefinition of the place of professional journalism, in this new information system. Alves (2001) warned over two decades ago that new technologies would impact the media to the point of creating a new type of journalism that would be spread across multiple platforms.

Digital journalism has evolved significantly over the past twenty years, driven by advancements in technology and changes in the media landscape. Some notable transformations seen in the realm of digital journalism include:

- **Increased use of multimedia:** News organizations have been able to incorporate a wide range of multimedia elements into their digital stories, such as videos, images, and audio, which has made news more engaging and interactive for audiences.
- **Rise of social media:** Social media platforms have become an important source of news and information, as well as a distribution channel for news organizations. This has led to the development of new forms of journalism, such as social media-based reporting, and has also changed the way news is consumed and shared.
- **Growth of mobile:** The proliferation of smartphones has led to an increase in mobile news consumption, and news organizations have had to adapt by developing mobile-optimized websites and apps.
- **Data-driven journalism:** The availability of large data sets and advances in data analysis have led to the development of new forms of journalism, such as data visualization and interactive storytelling, which allow news organizations to present complex information in more engaging ways.
- **User-generated Content:** The rise of user-generated content has led to a greater emphasis on the participation of citizens in the news-making process and has provided new opportunities for news organizations to tap into the perspectives and experiences of their audience.
- **New Business Models:** The shift to digital has also led to new business models such as native advertising and sponsored content, as well as paywall and subscription models, as digital news organizations search for ways to monetize their content.
- **Artificial Intelligence and Automation:** With the advancements in AI and automation, news organizations have started to use these technologies to generate news, automate the editing process and personalize news.

Overall, the past twenty years have seen a rapid transformation in digital journalism, with new technologies and innovations continuing to shape the way news is produced, distributed, and consumed. A newspaper or any traditional medium is incomplete today if it does not have, in addition to the traditional operation, a dynamic website to complement it. Even within a more

optimistic scenario for traditional media, the internet would still be a growing force, and organizations would have to reevaluate what they were doing on the web and reposition themselves, based on the newspaper's reinvention on the internet (Alves, 2001). Other authors also predicted that the internet would revolutionize journalism (Dahlgren, 1996; Deuze, 1999; Heinonen, 1999; Pavlik, 2001) hand in hand with the opportunities offered by hypertext, interactivity, multimedia, personalization or constant updating – some of the characteristics of the *new* and *digital* journalism.

The internet and personal computers responded to a latent cultural demand for ubiquitous information. From 1994, when the internet stopped being use only for military purposes and became commercial, media communication became digital. Newspapers were the first commercial outlets to use the internet for their content, making websites and posting daily reports (Pellanda, 2001). The printed newspapers that migrated to the web have adapted news practices to the timelessness of the digital universe on the internet, and those organizations that appear on the web are already guided by this demand.

The updating of information in real time is different from the static printed model, in which the news, by itself, can never be changed during the day it was printed and published. Speed has always been something intrinsic to journalism and now, this translates into the process of instantaneity of the web. Another important aspect of the migration from print newspapers to online pages is that these vehicles broke through the barriers of the territorial and geographic borders of their productive origin. Published on the web, the media became global, and could be accessed by readers from anywhere in the world. With this, the instantaneity of the internet demands and pressures the updating of the content at every moment.

As for the social interactions related to the changes introduced by digital media, they initiated a *process of convergence* that comprises different spheres (Jenkins, 2006), which can be observed from four dimensions: technological, business, professional and editorial (Salaverría, Avilés and Masip, 2010); having a strong impact on the media and audiences, mobilizing corporations and consumers (Jenkins, 2006). Convergence provided the integration of tools, spaces, working methods and languages, so that journalists develop content that is distributed in multiplatform, each with their own languages (Salaverría, Avilés and Masip, 2010). As journalism goes digital and becomes a part of the web, we start to see the production of news for different platforms, and sites and applications emerge between parameters consecrated by the tradition of the printed newspaper and resources provided by digital and networked devices (Gruszynski et al., 2016).

4. An Overview of Platforms¹⁰

In the ever-evolving landscape of digital journalism, a critical examination arises surrounding the intricate relationship between news organizations and online platforms. While our primary focus isn't solely on this relationship, its significance cannot be understated, especially considering the direct impact platforms have on user engagement with news entities.

Platforms in today's digital age serve dual roles, acting as mediators and gatekeepers (Srnicek, 2016). Their ascendant role in the digital realm enables users to transition smoothly between services without ever departing from the platform's sphere (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018). These platforms, with their particular structure and purpose, have become foundational in defining online content services, shaping both their self-representation and public perception (Gillespie, 2010). The very essence of these platforms—especially their capacity to collect and monetize user data—places them at a strategic juncture in the digital domain. This positioning, particularly within the news and media sectors, has spurred discussions on the equilibrium of power between platforms and content creators (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018).

For many, platforms might appear merely as online tools facilitating various activities—from chatting and sharing to shopping and entertainment. Yet, behind these functionalities lies an intricate system that transcends mere facilitation, influencing our societal structures and daily lives (Gehl, 2011). Driven by data and automated through algorithms, platforms operate based on specific business models, bound by ownership norms and user agreements (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018).

¹⁰This research touches only tangentially on the theme of platforms, as it is not part of the scope of our work, providing only a superficial overview of their relationship to journalism, their relationship to online news and the public. Other works that explore the topic in-depth can be found as part of JOLT – Harnessing Digital and Data Technology for Journalism – a Marie-Sklodowska-Curie European Training Network Project funded by the European Commission (Grant Agreement number 765140). PhD Researchers from the University of Toulouse III – Paul Sabatier and the LERASS Research Group, Giuliander Carpes da Silva and Charis Papaevangelou, worked on dissertations that versed on the theme of platforms. The first presented the thesis on “The Platformization of the News: publishers’ relationships with messaging platforms and the adoption of these tools for news distribution and audience engagement” (Doctoral dissertation, 2022) and the second defended his work on “The political economy of digital platform governance” (Doctoral dissertation, 2023). Their research contributes to the State of the Art of this essential debate regarding platforms and their impact on our society.



Figure 1 – "The Big Five" Platforms: Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft. Source: laquadrature.net.

A case in point is how tech giants present themselves. The Big Five (Figure 1 **Error! Reference source not found.**), in the context of tech companies, typically refers to the major U.S. technology companies: Google (Alphabet Inc.), Amazon, Facebook (Meta Platforms, Inc.), Apple, and Microsoft. Each of these giants has been highly influential in shaping the digital landscape and has expanded its reach across various sectors and industries. They have not just been dominant in their fields but have also significantly shaped the technological, economic, social, and political landscapes of the 21st century. Their size, influence, and diversified businesses have also led to various discussions and

debates on topics like market dominance, data privacy, and antitrust regulations. These entities project a forward-thinking image, often obscuring the inherent tensions in their operations, such as the delicate balance between community-building and advertising or between content curation and neutrality (Gillespie, 2010). The immense market dominance of these corporations has not been without criticism. Many scholars contend that such conglomerates, by virtue of their size and influence, impede innovation and possess undue advantages (Khan, 2017).

While platforms purport to champion personalization, innovation, and economic progress, sidestepping bureaucratic hindrances, they are not without flaws. Inherent biases and challenges related to privacy, security, and equity often cloud their operations. Given their societal footprint, platforms face increasing scrutiny on various fronts—from disseminating misinformation and exploiting user data to market dominance and questionable labor practices. The road to mitigating these issues demands rigorous regulation and transformative shifts in their operational *ethos*—a feat yet to be achieved.

4.1 Digital Economy

The digital economy refers to an economy that is based on digital computing technologies. It encompasses a vast range of economic activities that use digitized information and knowledge

as key factors of production. With the rise of the internet and other advanced technological infrastructure, the digital economy has expanded to involve a vast array of businesses, from e-commerce giants to platforms offering digital services, content, and goods. The digitization of traditional industries, alongside the emergence of new digital-centric industries, has shifted how value is created, how transactions occur, and how businesses operate (Tapscott, 1997).

Within this framework, platforms play a critical role. Platforms, in the context of the digital economy, are digital environments that allow different user groups to interact, be it businesses, consumers, or software developers. These interactions often result in the creation, exchange, and refinement of goods or services. Companies like Amazon, Google, and Facebook epitomize the platform-based model, where they provide a foundational digital infrastructure for other businesses and individuals to operate upon. These platforms harness the network effect, meaning the value of the platform increases with more participants or users (Parker, van Alstyne and Choudary, 2016).

The digital economy, rooted in digital computing technologies, not only underpins a multitude of economic activities that use digitized information and knowledge but also significantly shapes the landscape of journalism. This vast shift towards online operations, from e-commerce to social media platforms, has both challenged and provided opportunities for journalistic endeavors. Platforms play a cardinal role in this. These digital infrastructures, exemplified by companies like Google, Facebook, and Twitter, have altered how news is distributed and consumed. They offer a broad reach and instantaneity that traditional journalistic mediums struggled to match.

However, the reliance on such platforms has brought about concerns. Revenue streams for traditional journalistic enterprises have been disrupted, with advertisers flocking to these platforms due to their targeted ad capabilities. The algorithms that determine content visibility on these platforms have sometimes inadvertently prioritized sensational or fake news over well-researched journalism, challenging journalistic integrity and trustworthiness (Bell, et. al, 2017). Moreover, these platforms, by virtue of their design, encourage rapid news cycles, often pressuring news outlets to publish quickly rather than comprehensively. This dynamic has reshaped the very essence of journalism, emphasizing speed and adaptability, sometimes at the expense of depth and accuracy.

Yet, on the flip side, the digital economy offers journalistic enterprises tools to engage with their audience like never before. Advanced analytics allows outlets to understand their readers' preferences, interactive multimedia capabilities enable richer storytelling, and direct channels on social media platforms facilitate real-time feedback and engagement.

Nevertheless, as we delve deeper into the implications of this digital economy on journalism, it becomes paramount to recognize the inherent value of digital labor, especially when considering the platform-based model. The digital activities of both journalists and their readers, while seemingly straightforward, are underlined by the complexities of digital labor. As users engage with news platforms, they are not just passive consumers; they are active participants in a digital ecosystem, often providing unrecognized labor that carries tangible economic value.

4.2 Digital Labor

The term digital labor encapsulates a broad range of activities that users engage in online, whether it is posting a photo, liking a post, or simply browsing. This term underscores the economic value that these seemingly mundane online activities generate for platform owners, usually without direct compensation to the users (Fuchs and Sevignani, 2013). Platforms harness users' digital labor to generate data, which in turn is commodified, processed, and often sold to advertisers or used to refine algorithms that maintain user engagement.

The exploitation of unpaid or underpaid digital labor has been a cornerstone of critique against big tech platforms. Companies like Amazon have been accused of mistreating workers and suppressing unionization efforts, leading to calls for increased regulation and oversight (Jaffe, 2021). This goes alongside the argument that big tech companies are contributing to the widening wealth gap and exacerbating social inequality. These platforms have created vast fortunes for their founders and executives, while many workers and communities are left behind. (Srnicsek, 2017).

In the context of news organizations, the dynamics of digital labor manifest in multiple dimensions:

- **Content Creation and Distribution:** In the era of user-generated content, many news platforms increasingly rely on citizen journalists or user submissions for content. While this democratizes news reporting, it often means that regular contributors are not compensated fairly for their labor. Additionally, the sharing of articles and engagement with news stories on platforms like Twitter and Facebook by ordinary users helps in the distribution of news, a labor again not monetized by those sharing but by the platforms hosting.
- **Data Generation:** Every time a user clicks on a news article, comments, or even lingers on a particular section, they generate valuable data. This data helps news organizations tailor their content, but it is often harvested and sold by intermediary platforms, further embedding the asymmetry in the value derived from digital labor.

- **Journalists and Gig Economy:** As the media industry grapples with the challenges posed by the digital economy, there's been a rise in freelance or gig-based journalism. While this offers flexibility, it often lacks the job security, benefits, and rights associated with traditional employment contracts. This precarity mirrors the challenges faced by gig workers in other sectors dominated by platforms (Deuze, 2007).
- **Labor Rights in News Tech:** News organizations also rely on tech infrastructure, whether it is for analytics, hosting, or content management. The employees building and maintaining these systems are part of the broader tech labor landscape, and they face challenges similar to those in big tech companies, including long working hours, high-pressure environments, and in some cases, suppression of collective bargaining rights.

News organizations are not immune to the challenges and criticisms of digital labor exploitation. The economic value generated by online activities primarily benefits platform owners, often without providing adequate compensation to users (Fuchs and Sevignani, 2013). Platforms commodify the data procured from users' digital labor, subsequently selling it to advertisers or refining algorithms to enhance user engagement. Alongside tech platforms, they reflect the broader implications of the digital economy, where the value is increasingly derived from intangible assets, data, and the uncompensated or under-compensated labor of many.

The vastness of the digital labor spectrum is beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is evident that these domains are rife with potential for future academic exploration. The complexities of our digital age, especially in the context of news organizations, beckon in-depth understanding and challenge established labor paradigms. An intriguing facet to explore, considering digital labor, is User-Generated Content (one of the subjects of this work, investigate in this case through the lens of journalism and participation). How do online platforms, consumers, and creators intersect within the digital economy? Key questions surround the concept of UGC as unpaid labor, platforms monetizing such content, and the emotional and algorithmic effort intrinsic to UGC creation.

Considering users as both consumers and producers (*prosumers*) of content reveals both their potential economic exploitation and the rewards tied to UGC creation. Further intersections of UGC with gig economy trends, skill development, community management, and potential avenues for resistance within UGC highlight the multifaceted nature of this subject. News organizations, in their quest to remain relevant and engaging, often depend on UGC. This democratizes journalism but also raises questions about the fair compensation of contributors. As

readers engage with articles, every click, comment, or share they make produces valuable data. This data, while instrumental for news organizations, is often captured and monetized by intermediary platforms, deepening the asymmetry in the digital labor value chain.

An adjacent realm in the media company-user relationship in the digital news ecosystem is comment moderation. Comment moderation is a prime example of digital labor where manual and emotional efforts merge. How much can technology automate moderation, and where is human judgment irreplaceable? Moderators often navigate a maze of harmful content, taking on significant emotional burdens. Global outsourcing trends for moderation tasks raise concerns about fair compensation and workplace conditions. In our shifting gig economy, many moderators lack traditional employment safeguards, echoing larger issues surrounding digital contractual work. This essential labor, which ensures the cleanliness of digital platforms, often goes unnoticed, overshadowed by user-friendly interfaces.

The act of moderation isn't an isolated endeavor. The guiding principles are shaped by various values and biases, introducing layers of ethics and politics. In our ever-changing digital era, moderators must adapt to evolving online comment trends, establishing feedback systems influencing both training and technology. Investigating this area promises to connect technology, human psyche, politics, and economics, offering insights into work in our digital age, and challenging established notions of labor and value.

While the intricacies of digital labor, from UGC to comment moderation, unfold in our present era, there's a shadowed underpinning that steers much of our digital interactions: the phenomenon of data colonialism. This concept, emerging at the intersection of technology and power dynamics, brings into sharp focus the commodification of user data and the structural mechanisms through which large tech corporations exert control over our digital lives.

4.3 Data Colonialism

The dawn of the digital age has ushered in new dynamics of power, control, and value extraction, leading scholars, and critics to identify parallels between current data practices and historical colonial endeavors. This comparison has given rise to the concept of "data colonialism," a term that captures the essence of how digital extraction, storage, and use of data, especially from marginalized and vulnerable populations, resembles historical patterns of colonialism. Historically, European powers extracted resources and exploited populations in colonized regions. Today, the digital landscape sees powerful entities, particularly tech companies, extracting vast amounts of data from global users. Often, this extraction happens without providing these users a fair share of the value created or obtaining genuine consent (Couldry and Mejias, 2019).

Much like colonial powers extracted tangible resources like gold and spices, tech giants mine data from users. This data, a veritable goldmine in the digital era, is used to train AI models, target advertisements, and generate insights. Yet, there's a glaring lack of reciprocity; the immense value derived from user data by these tech platforms often far outweighs the services or benefits provided to the user. As a result, users lose agency, with many lacking a clear understanding of their data's use or having little choice in the matter. This dynamic evokes the way colonized populations historically lacked agency over their resources and destinies.

Another concerning parallel emerges when examining the role of algorithms in shaping information flow, especially in news platforms. Algorithms, influenced by economic imperatives and the thirst for user engagement, can prioritize sensationalism over substantive journalism. This algorithmic determination of content can lead to echo chambers, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives and perpetuating biases (Zuboff, 2019). Moreover, these power dynamics are further exacerbated by the role of tech giants as modern gatekeepers of information. Their ability to determine digital rules, shape cultural narratives, and influence public discourse is reminiscent of the disproportionate power dynamics seen during the historical colonial era.

A major critique of these practices is the erosion of privacy rights. Large platforms' business models are predicated on accumulating vast amounts of personal information, which is subsequently used for targeted advertising and other profit-driven endeavors. This constant monitoring and prediction of user behaviors, which Zuboff (2019) terms "surveillance capitalism," is at the heart of many concerns surrounding data colonialism.

Couldry and Mejias (2019) delve deeper, positing that our increasingly quantified world isn't a new phenomenon but an evolution of longstanding colonial and capitalist ideologies. They challenge the notion that the digital age is an entirely new frontier. Instead, they highlight the continuation of historical extractive practices, drawing a line from previous exploitations to today's digital realm. They don't merely employ colonialism as a metaphor; they draw direct associations between historical colonialism's extractive rationale and contemporary data practices. This includes the commodification of human life for continuous data extraction, analogous to how historical colonialism saw the appropriation of land, resources, and even human life itself.

To ground these ideas further, consider how historical colonial narratives often presented a "civilizing" mission or development imperative. Similarly, the extraction and exploitation of user data in the digital age are frequently justified by narratives of "personalization," "connection," and "democratization" (Couldry and Mejias,). In this expansive digital landscape, it is crucial to critically assess these power structures, challenging the ethics and motivations behind them. The lens of

data colonialism serves as a potent tool, drawing on historical patterns to emphasize the urgent need for transparency, equity, and genuine user empowerment in our modern digital world.

4.4 The Plataformization of News

Platforms, operating at the epicenter of the digital economy, not only redefine user interactions but also recalibrate the mechanics of digital labor and the commodification of data in unprecedented ways, epitomized by the concept of data colonialism. Within this framework, user data isn't merely collected; it is actively harvested, mirroring historic patterns of exploitation and control. These processes, underpinned by powerful algorithms and corporate agendas, increasingly influence the very essence of journalistic practices, leading to what scholars' term as the "plataformization of new". This shift doesn't just transform the modes of news dissemination, but also reshapes journalistic values, editorial priorities, and audience engagement in a landscape where platforms dominate, and traditional news outlets grapple to retain their relevance and autonomy.

Platforms have revolutionized the way news is consumed and shared, offering traditional journalistic companies opportunities to innovate. With platforms like Facebook and Google News, journalists can reach a global audience, engage with them, and foster trust and loyalty (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, 2019; Hermida, 2010). However, these opportunities come with challenges. While platforms offer broader audience reach, they also exert considerable influence over the advertising market. Platforms like Google and Facebook capture a lion's share of digital advertising revenue, leaving traditional media companies grappling with diminished profits (Picard, 2018). This dominance by tech companies extends beyond just advertising, as they also control content hosting, distribution, and monetization. The result is a media environment increasingly defined by these platforms, a phenomenon referred to as the plataformization of journalism (Helmond, 2015; Bell et al., 2017; Smyrniotis and Rebillard, 2019; Poell et al., 2019). This has implications for not just where and how journalism is consumed, but also its very nature and quality (Bell and Owen, 2017).

These platforms have also been scrutinized for spreading misinformation and failing to manage harmful content (Woolley and Guilbeault, 2021; Gillespie, 2018). The digital era promised democratized gatekeeping, where news selection shifted from media professionals to the audience. Renowned gatekeeping theorists adjusted their models to account for this shift, recognizing readers as having their own gatekeeping roles (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). This led to the rise of secondary gatekeepers, particularly on social media, where users have gained editorial influence previously reserved for professional journalists (Singer, 2014).

With the proliferation of the internet, participatory journalism emerged, characterized by citizens actively engaging in news creation and dissemination (Bowman and Willis, 2003). The accessibility of news has led to the phenomenon of "incidental news exposure," where news is discovered without active seeking. With the rise of search engines and social media, people now often rely on algorithms for their news, leading to a perception that they are well-informed based on algorithmic recommendations (Tewksbury et al., 2001; Boczkowski et al., 2018; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Lee, 2020).

The dynamic between news organizations and platforms has been fraught with tension. The audience boost platforms provided didn't always translate to revenue growth for news organizations (Ju et al., 2014). Platforms, with their vast resources, often left publishers feeling they had no choice but to adapt to their terms (Nielsen and Ganter, 2018). However, in recent times, publishers have become more selective, seeking collaborations that align with their business strategies and insisting on more equitable compensations (Rashidian et al., 2019). As news organizations navigate this terrain, they must balance the opportunities provided by platforms with the challenges of maintaining editorial integrity and financial sustainability.

5. Technology, Platforms, and the New Global Media Landscape

The rise of technology has profoundly transformed journalism. Earlier, news dissemination was bound by geography and the physicality of newspapers or broadcast waves. However, with the advent of the internet and, later, digital platforms, information started flowing seamlessly across borders. This technological revolution facilitated a new era of journalism, where news became accessible instantaneously to anyone with an internet connection.

Simultaneously, modernity, characterized by rapid societal and technological change, paved the way for this technological surge. The drive for progress and development catalyzed the growth and adoption of new technologies, leading to the digitization of various sectors, including journalism. As technology provided the tools, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Google became the new town squares. They harnessed technology's power to aggregate, customize, and disseminate news on an unprecedented scale. In doing so, they also introduced a new form of gatekeeping, where algorithms decided what news reached which users (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009; Singer, 2014). These platforms effectively became global newsstands, showcasing content from around the world.

However, this rise of platforms must be viewed through the lens of globalization and capitalism. Globalization, the process by which businesses and other organizations develop international influence or start operating on an international scale, ensured that these platforms

were not limited to their regions of origin. Facebook, for example, isn't just an American platform; it is a global entity with users from every continent.

Capitalism played a dual role in this landscape. First, it provided the competitive impetus for platforms to innovate, capture users, and monetize attention. As platforms sought to maximize profits, they adapted their algorithms to keep users engaged, often at the expense of diverse and quality news (Ju et al., 2014). The very *ethos* of capitalism, characterized by profit maximization, influenced the news that users saw and the manner in which they saw it. Secondly, the capitalist drive pushed traditional media outlets to adapt or perish. As advertising revenues shifted from newspapers to platforms, media outlets had to reevaluate their business models, with many turning to online subscriptions (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018). This shift towards digital was not just a technological transition but a capitalist imperative.

Technology's impact on journalism, the rise of platforms in news media, and the overarching forces of modernity, globalization, and capitalism are intrinsically linked. Together, they've crafted our contemporary media landscape, redefining how we produce, consume, and value news in the 21st century.

CHAPTER 4

THESIS TENET AND DEFINITIONS FOR CROSS-NATIONAL COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

With the established theoretical framework in the initial chapters, we now venture into a space where these theories intersect with the tangible world. Transitioning from abstract concepts, the next phase will provide clarity, setting the exact terms and methods that will help us navigate the empirical research ahead. In the intricate fields of media studies and journalism research, the precision of concept definition and delineation stands paramount. This chapter seeks to offer clarity on what our research considers specific concepts, definitions, and contexts to be. The bedrock of this chapter's theoretical discourse is laid upon the insights from the preceding three chapters, all of which were built upon bibliographical research.

For the purposes of this work, Chapter 4 also sets out to elucidate the foundational tenet of this thesis. A thesis tenet refers to a fundamental principle or belief that underpins a thesis. It is a foundational statement or proposition that guides and informs the arguments, analyses, or research presented in the thesis. In other words, it is the central idea or core belief from which the entire thesis springs, the core premise or foundational assumption upon which the thesis is built. The goal is to provide our research with a lucid and scholarly prism, refining and honing users' insights as they navigate the following chapters.

Our thesis foundational tenet is that the relationships between media companies and users are vital both for the core mission of journalism and for the financial sustainability of news organizations. For the purpose of this work, we consider this relationship in the backdrop of the online news ecosystem. This tenet underscores the symbiotic relationship between media companies and their public/audience. Not only is this relationship foundational for fulfilling the ethical and civic responsibilities of journalism, but it is also crucial for the economic viability of a media company.

It posits two primary ideas. First, regarding the core mission of journalism, which considers that, at its heart, journalism seeks to inform, educate, and provide a check on power. It acts as a bridge between events happening in the world and the public, ensuring they are informed, aware, and empowered. Second, in regard to the financial sustainability of news organizations, media companies, like any other businesses, need revenue to sustain themselves.

When we discuss journalism and the relationship between media companies and users, it becomes crucial to regard the core mission of the profession. For journalism to be effective, readers/viewers/listeners/user must trust the media outlet. A good relationship ensures that the audience believes what they are consuming is accurate, fair, and unbiased. Engaging with the

audience allows media companies to understand what matters to them. This ensures that the news being produced is relevant and resonates with the audience. A healthy relationship provides a feedback loop. Journalists can adjust and improve their reporting based on user feedback, ensuring continual improvement in meeting the core mission of journalism.

Additionally, the relationship with users plays a pivotal role for financial sustainability. If users trust and value a media outlet, they are more likely to pay for subscriptions or buy issues, providing a direct revenue stream. Most media companies rely heavily on advertising revenue. A strong and large readership/viewership attracts advertisers. The better the relationship with users, the more engaged and larger the audience, making the platform more attractive to advertisers. In a digital age with numerous news sources, having a loyal user base ensures a steady flow of traffic and engagement, which translates to consistent revenue. Also, a strong relationship can lead to opportunities for media companies to offer other products or services, like events, merchandise, or premium content, which users might be willing to pay for.

Building on this foundational tenet, we will delve into a more nuanced exploration of key concepts. These concepts serve as the bedrock of our analysis and arguments throughout this thesis. By elucidating them, we aim to establish a shared understanding with our readers. This mutual comprehension ensures that as we navigate the intricate landscape of media relationships and journalism, readers will have a clear sense of the parameters and definitions we're operating within. This will ensure that the lens through which we examine our thesis is both transparent and precise, enabling readers to engage deeply and critically with the content of the subsequent chapters.

1. Pillars for understanding the Media Company-User Relationship

The digital age has ushered in seismic shifts in the ways we produce, disseminate, and consume information. At the epicenter of this transformation is the evolving relationship between media companies and their public/audiences. This section first sheds light on the dynamic nature of journalism and media companies and defines how these concepts are understood for the purpose of this work. Furthermore, it addresses the increasingly complex distinction between the concepts of public and audience in online journalism – an imperative understanding in today's media environment where distinctions are becoming blurred. Through this exploration, we aim to clarify our understanding of these terms, and how they relate to the concept of user, considering the context of this particular research.

1.1 Journalism & Media Companies

There is no identical reality at all times and in all countries, designated by the word journalism. On the contrary, journalism is a socio-cultural construction strongly marked by the context of its formation (Charron and Bonville, 2023). However, regardless of these and other possible differences that can be pointed out, there are a series of issues that cross journalism in its different contexts and distinct configurations, demarcating an identity place that defines it in relation to other institutions, professions, social fields, forms of knowledge or discursive genres.

For this particular work, we consider journalism to be a social practice that circulates knowledge through different platforms. From the first printed newspapers to the recent platforms based on digital technologies, we will notice that the transformations – that are still under way – go through content, through editorial and organizational structures of the newsroom and media companies, as well as the relationships between news organizations, journalists and their public. Three axes essentially support these changes throughout the history of journalism: social changes, such as urbanization and literacy, which have greatly influenced the construction of the newspaper consumer; technological innovations; and economic interests. And though, on a technical sense, journalism can exist without an audience, as journalists can produce and report on news stories even if no one is currently reading or viewing them, we consider that the purpose of the profession is to inform and engage the public, so in a practical sense, journalism cannot truly exist without an audience. Without an audience, journalism would lack the critical feedback and engagement that helps to ensure that it is serving its intended purpose of providing accurate, timely and useful information to the public.

The essence of journalism lies in the intersection between information, the entities that disseminate it, and the audience that consumes it. A media company is an organized entity primarily engaged in the production and dissemination of news, information, or entertainment to a broad audience. These entities can manifest in various forms, spanning from traditional avenues such as newspapers, radio, and television to modern, digital-first platforms like websites, podcasts, and streaming services. Aligning them with news organizations, we find that both share foundational objectives: to research, gather, package, and distribute news to their respective audiences. News organizations are a subset of media companies with a pointed focus on delivering current events, analyses, and commentaries that inform the public about ongoing developments in society, politics, economics, and other areas of interest.

For the scope of this work, we will use the terms media company and news organization interchangeably, emphasizing the role these entities play in the production and dissemination of news. This approach acknowledges the evolving nature of media in the digital age, where the

boundaries between different types of media outlets have blurred. As news has become a primary content category for many media entities, the distinction between a general media company and a specialized news organization has become less pronounced. Thus, we consider that, by treating them as synonymous, we also reflect the contemporary landscape where both play pivotal roles in the ecosystem of information dissemination.

1.2 Public vs. Audience: The “User” Conundrum

In the online media environment, traditional distinctions between professional journalists and amateur contributors, news organizations and social media platforms, and audiences and participants are becoming increasingly difficult to define –the boundaries of journalism blur (Deuze, 2019). In this context, the complexity of the concepts of public and audience, in online journalism can make it challenging to determine when a user is considered part of the audience and when he is part of the public.

The terms public and audience often intertwine, sometimes used interchangeably, even if they carry distinct connotations that shape the *ethos* and operations of media organizations. While both terms refer to the recipients of journalistic content, they encapsulate different roles, expectations, and imperatives. The public embodies the democratic spirit and societal role that journalism aspires to serve, whereas the audience represents the real-world consumers, whose preferences and behaviors have tangible impacts on the media landscape. To delineate these concepts and their implications for journalism, Table 1 provides a comparative breakdown of both terms. This table helps to synthesize the nuances between public and audience.

Table 1 – Aspects of the Concepts of Public and Audience.

ASPECT	PUBLIC	AUDIENCE
Definition	Refers to the broader societal body that journalism serves in a democratic context.	Refers to the consumers of journalistic content, who might engage with news for entertainment, information, or other personal interests.
Representation	Represents an ideal or normative concept that journalism ought to serve, emphasizing the importance of public interest.	Represents the empirical or real-world group that interacts with and consumes media, often driven by personal preferences, interests, or habits.

Interests	The public is seen as the greater good, bearing democratic values and the importance of informed citizenship.	Is more closely tied to the commercial interests of journalistic enterprises. Pleasing the audience is directly linked to profitability, viewership, and readership metrics.
Interpretation/Perception	The interpretation of who the public is can be subjective, depending on how media organizations perceive their relationship with society.	In the digital age, the audience becomes an entity to be retained, measured, and frequently monetized. Their behaviors, preferences, and feedback hold significant value for the financial sustainability of media organizations.
Participation	While the public interacts with news and might also be consumers of it, their primary interest in journalism is to be informed and enabled to participate in democratic society.	While the audience may have a participatory role in modern journalism, especially in the digital age, their participation is often controlled and limited by media organizations.
Differentiation	Public typically relates to the idealistic notion of serving the broader societal interest.	Audience refers more to the group of consumers that interact with media content.

In the intricate domain of journalism and media studies, the distinction and interplay between public and audience offer both insights and challenges. Historically, these concepts were clearly delineated, with the public signifying the broader societal body and the audience referring to the specific consumers of media content. However, these lines have increasingly blurred in the digital age, and understanding this shift necessitates an exploration of their nuanced meanings and implications.

The public is often seen as an abstract embodiment of the broader social system that communicates through a myriad of channels (Dahlgren, 2009). It is a realm characterized by more diffuse and indirect forms of communication, with individuals participating passively by reading, watching, or listening to media (Couldry, 2010). The very essence of the public is rooted in the democratic ideals of informed citizenship and collective good.

Contrastingly, the audience symbolizes a more tangible entity. These are individuals who are directly present, either physically or virtually, to receive media messages (Dahlgren, 2009). Their

engagement is characterized by a heightened level of interactivity, enabling them to directly respond to and even shape the message being conveyed (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012).

However, the proliferation of online journalism has added layers of complexity to these definitions. With multiple platforms enabling news consumption and dissemination, the boundaries demarcating the audience from the public are now fluid and ever evolving. No longer is the audience merely a passive consumer group; they've transformed into active participants in the news ecosystem. This dynamism disrupts the historical view of the public as active citizens and the audience as passive consumers.

The implications of this blurring are profound. Media organizations today grapple with an environment where the lines between addressing the public and catering to an audience have become less distinct. The digital terrain allows for the formation of diverse publics based on shared interests, which can fluidly evolve. This necessitates a recalibration of how media entities perceive their communicative roles. Chadwick and Howard (2018) argue that in this tangled landscape, media organizations must re-evaluate their communicative strategies, ensuring they remain attuned to their audiences while preserving their core journalistic values.

Deuze (2019) encapsulates the heart of this transformation, suggesting that the digital age has not only blurred the lines between public and audience but has also reshaped the dynamics between media organizations and users. Empowered by digital tools, users now significantly influence media content. Yet, this burgeoning power of users presents a double-edged sword for media institutions. While it demands greater responsiveness, it also brings challenges like managing online communities and addressing issues like online hate speech (Deuze, 2019).

Siapera (2019) delves into these challenges, urging media organizations to adopt a more critical stance, ensuring diverse and inclusive engagement. Contrarily, Couldry (2018) cautions against an over-enthusiastic embrace of this newfound participatory *ethos*. He posits that despite the rise of User-Generated Content and the democratization of media, traditional media organizations still wield considerable power. They still influence what's deemed newsworthy and frame narratives. This power, amplified by digital data collection and targeted algorithms, means that while the distinction between public and audience is becoming nebulous, the underlying power dynamics might remain more constant than we think (Couldry, 2018).

As the digital age continues to redefine the landscapes of media engagement, the dichotomies of public and audience challenge us to think critically. Both about the changing nature of media consumption and about the foundational principles that guide journalistic endeavors. From this broader, theoretical landscape, with pivot to understand how this duality plays out in an empirical academic and practical context.

In academic and theoretical discussions, the distinction between public and audience is recognized as having intricate nuances, with each term carrying its specific weight and connotations. We understand that the term public often connotes a broader societal group with a more civic or democratic orientation, while audience refers to the actual consumers of media, who interact with content for a variety of reasons. However, the practical realities of modern journalism, especially in the digital era, blur these distinctions.

Media organizations, grappling with the pressures of the digital landscape, often use public and audience interchangeably, reflecting both their duty to serve societal interests and the commercial imperatives of attracting and retaining viewers, listeners, readers. Recognizing the potential for confusion and the practical conflation of these terms in everyday media operations, we opted to use the term *user* in this thesis (just as viewer once was specific to television, listener to radio, and reader to newspapers).

The term user is broad and all-encompassing, suitable for the digital age where people consume content across multiple platforms. For the purpose of this work, we define user as an individual or group that actively engages with media content, whether by consuming, sharing, or even producing content in collaborative digital environments. This term reflects the interactive nature of digital media and recognizes the dynamic role of modern audiences who are not just passive recipients but active participants in the media ecosystem (Jenkins, 2006).

Given the objective of this thesis, we believe it is more productive to recognize, but sidestep the intricate debate between the concepts of public and audience in journalism; and, in turn, focus on the tangible relationship between media companies and the people who engage with their content in the online news ecosystem. This allows for a more streamlined discussion, especially when the primary concern isn't the theoretical nuances but the practical realities and dynamics of media consumption in the digital age.

2. The News Ecosystem

In an epoch where digital platforms serve as conduits for instantaneous dissemination of information across international boundaries, it is imperative to comprehend the intricacies of the online news ecosystem. The concept of a news ecosystem captures the intricate web of elements that collectively shape the production, distribution, and consumption of news and information. It signifies the interplay between various entities, technologies, practices, and societal norms that together contribute to the functioning of the modern media landscape. This ecosystem is not static, but rather a dynamic entity that constantly evolves due to the emergence of new technologies, shifts in practices, and the introduction of new players.

A news ecosystem encapsulates an intricate tapestry woven from individuals, technologies, norms, and practices, all converging to configure the manner in which news and information are born and disseminated. This ever evolving and interconnected landscape is molded by the emergence of technologies, the evolution of norms, and the intricate connections among assorted players. The comprehension of this intricate fabric is indispensable for unlocking the intricate dimensions of contemporary journalism and media (Harcup, 2019). We consider that this ecosystem, a cornerstone of contemporary information flow, is profoundly influenced by overarching paradigms of modernity, globalization, and the capitalist milieu. Though these forces possess an encompassing global character, their manifestations are distinct, often variegated across nations and regions, thereby creating a nuanced tapestry of media engagements.

The notion of a news ecosystem embodies a complex and interdependent network of various elements, each working in tandem to shape the intricate processes of news creation, distribution, and consumption (Dahlgren, 2018). This multifaceted concept delves into the intricate interplay among a plethora of entities, technologies, practices, and societal norms that synergistically contribute to the operation of the modern media landscape. This dynamic ecosystem is far from stagnant; rather, it embodies a fluid entity that perpetually evolves due to the advent of novel technologies, shifts in established practices, and the introduction of novel actors into the scene (Anderson and Domingos, 2019).

At the nucleus of this news ecosystem are the individuals and organizations that together craft the narrative fabric of news. These encompass a myriad of actors ranging from seasoned journalists like Christiane Amanpour, diligent news reporters, meticulous editors, visionary publishers like Jeff Bezos acquiring The Washington Post, to media organizations of varying scales, be it renowned giants like The New York Times and BBC or more localized outlets like smaller community newspapers (McChesney and Nichols, 2010).

Closely intertwined with these entities are the platforms and technologies that underpin the dissemination, creation, and absorption of news content. These platforms span the digital realm and encompass tools that empower the flow of information, including the ubiquitous social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Additionally, online news portals and websites like HuffPost and BuzzFeed also serve as integral cogs within this complex machinery, facilitating the widespread diffusion of news (Bruns and Highfield, 2016).

Underpinning the coherence of this ecosystem are the norms and practices that guide its functioning. Ethical standards, journalistic integrity, and societal norms collectively sculpt the character of the news ecosystem. Notably, the rigorous practice of fact-checking, impartial reporting, and responsible journalism, as seen in the exposés by The Guardian on the Snowden

leaks, substantially contributes to the credibility of the sources and information presented within this ecosystem (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017).

The integration of data analytics and audience engagement mechanisms constitutes another vital dimension. Through the adept utilization of data analytics, news organizations acquire the ability to decipher audience inclinations and tailor their content offerings accordingly. Metrics like page views, social shares, and engagement rates serve as guiding markers, facilitating the refinement of strategies for enhanced outreach and resonance (Nelson-Field et al., 2013).

Intrinsic to this ecosystem is the establishment of mechanisms that nurture trust between news sources and their audiences. This entails fostering transparency, rectifying errors promptly, and upholding ethical benchmarks. To foster this trust, news entities often provide explicit sources, references, and citations, as exemplified by The Associated Press' rigorous sourcing standards, augmenting the credibility and authenticity of the information relayed (AP Stylebook, 2021).

The dynamic nature of the news ecosystem owes itself to the rapid strides of emerging technologies. The migration from traditional print media to online platforms, the ascent of video-based content as observed in the rise of YouTube news channels, and the assimilation of augmented reality within storytelling, as explored by The New York Times' AR-enhanced features, are but a few instances that spotlight the transformative influence of technology on news production and consumption (Gutsche, 2018).

Notably, the news ecosystem is far from monolithic; it exhibits regional variations that mirror the diversities across nations and territories. Factors such as distinct media ownership structures, regulatory frameworks, and cultural norms collectively shape the news landscape. In regions endowed with robust press freedoms, the ecosystem may thrive with diversity and competitiveness, whereas in other locales, governmental control may constrain the breadth of perspectives presented (Hallin and Mancini, 2004).

Central to understanding this ecosystem is recognizing the intricate interconnectedness and contextual dependencies. No news entity operates in isolation; rather, each is enmeshed within a broader context molded by other components of the ecosystem. Alterations in one facet of the ecosystem can reverberate across its entirety. For instance, a consequential modification in the algorithm of a major social media platform like the Facebook News Feed can exert substantial influence on the visibility and reach of news articles and narratives (Pariser, 2011).

2.1 The Online News Ecosystem under Global Forces

In an epoch where digital platforms serve as conduits for instantaneous dissemination of information across international boundaries, it is imperative to comprehend the intricacies of the

online news ecosystem. This ecosystem, a cornerstone of contemporary information flow, is profoundly influenced by overarching paradigms of modernity, globalization, and the capitalist milieu. Though these forces possess an encompassing global character, their manifestations are distinct, often variegated across nations and regions, thereby creating a nuanced tapestry of media engagements. In this context, our analytical lens predominantly fixates upon the manifestations of modernity within Western socio-political contexts, which are the focus of this thesis.

The news ecosystem has undergone a remarkable transformation, historically shifting from traditional newspapers and broadcasts to an expansive digital landscape. As technology advanced in the embrace of modernity, the immediacy of the internet and digital communication tools began to redefine how news was produced and consumed (McLuhan and Fiore 2001; McLuhan, 2016). This online news ecosystem is an intricate network characterized by the creation, curation, and dissemination of news across digital platforms, ranging from mainstream websites to personal blogs and social media channels (Benkler, 2006).

Within this digital realm, the lines between local and global news have blurred. As globalization took hold, stories from one corner of the world found eager audiences thousands of miles away, connecting diverse populations through shared narratives (Castells, 2008). However, this interconnectedness also meant that local nuances were sometimes sacrificed for more universally digestible narratives (Chalaby, 2009).

The underlying capitalist *ethos* has had a pronounced impact on the way news is presented and consumed online. In the race for clicks and advertising revenue, sensationalism often overshadows depth, with headlines crafted for algorithmic appeal rather than journalistic rigor (Wu, 2016). This emphasis on profit has also facilitated the rise of powerful media conglomerates with the capability to shape global news agendas (Bagdikian, 2004).

Yet, the digital age has also democratized the process of news creation. The barriers that once defined who could produce news have lowered, leading to a surge in diverse voices and perspectives (Shirky, 2008). But this proliferation brings its own challenges. In a vast ocean of information, credibility becomes a rare commodity, making it crucial for consumers to navigate with discernment (Tandoc et al., 2018).

Algorithms, the silent gatekeepers of the online world, further complicate the ecosystem. Designed to maximize user engagement, they often create echo chambers, limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints and emphasizing content that aligns with pre-existing beliefs (Pariser, 2011).

The challenges posed by the nexus of modernity, globalization, and capitalism have been keenly felt by traditional journalism. Many established newsrooms grapple with adapting to this new digital reality (Pavlik, 2001), facing financial strains and evolving reader expectations.

However, amidst these challenges, opportunities have emerged. The digital realm has seen a resurgence of citizen journalism and innovative storytelling methods (Gillmor, 2004), leveraging the global connectivity of the modern age.

In this ever-evolving news landscape, the onus falls on both producers and consumers to ensure that news remains a beacon of truth, relevance, and insight (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2010), even as the dynamics shift beneath our feet.

2.2 The Media-User Relationships in the Online News Ecosystem

The relationship between media companies and users is a foundational pillar in the architecture of modern journalism. For the purpose of this work, we consider a “relationship” in the media studies context as the multifaceted interplay and connection between media entities and their audiences, encompassing trust, engagement, feedback, and the iterative exchange of value (McQuail, 2010).

From a journalistic mission standpoint, media companies exist to serve the public interest. They play a cardinal role in informing the public, shaping opinions, and fostering an informed democracy. Users, or the audience, are the recipients of this mission, and their trust, engagement, and feedback directly influence the relevance and effectiveness of journalistic content. A disconnected or distrustful audience can render even the most well-intentioned journalistic endeavor ineffectual.

Furthermore, the symbiosis between media and users extends beyond just the delivery and reception of news. The feedback loop—wherein users interact, critique, and influence media narratives—is essential for the media to remain adaptive, relevant, and responsible. A media organization that doesn’t attune itself to its users’ needs and perspectives risks becoming obsolete or, worse, perceived as biased or untrustworthy.

From a financial sustainability perspective, the equation is straightforward yet profound. Media companies, in most models, rely significantly on revenue streams directly tied to their users. Whether it is through direct subscriptions, advertising revenues (which are higher with greater user engagement), or even ancillary revenue streams like events or branded content, the financial health of a media organization is inexorably linked to its relationship with its users. A strong, engaged user base can mean the difference between a thriving media organization and one on the brink of financial insolvency.

In an age where information is abundant, and attention spans are fragmented, media organizations face an uphill battle in capturing and retaining user interest. Those that understand, value, and nurture their relationship with users stand a better chance of not just surviving but

thriving in this challenging landscape. In essence, the media-user relationship is not just a component of the news ecosystem; it is the very lifeblood that determines the health, relevance, and viability of news organizations.

CHAPTER 5

RESEARCH DESIGN: METHODOLOGY AND *CORPUS* OF STUDY

In this chapter, having set our definitional bearings straight, we now transition into the mechanics of our empirical study. First, we will present our mixed methods, chosen with care and precision, to conduct our empirical analysis. We will also outline the procedure undertaken to select a *corpus* of study. To understand the intricate web of media landscapes across different countries, we need first to establish a robust empirical foundation. It is not *just* about gathering data, but about gathering the *right* data. In the field of media studies, the choices we make in building our research *corpus* significantly influence our insights and conclusions. Recognizing this, our empirical framework was crafted to not only capture a snapshot of the current media environment but to provide a comprehensive analysis of news sites across various nations. This also meant selecting a representative sample of media outlets that reflect each country's media landscape. As such, through a conscious decision process, we selected eight countries to compose our *corpus* (USA, UK, Spain, France, Netherlands, Germany, Brazil, and Argentina), and 10 news sites – and their equivalent media companies – from each of them, for a total of 80 news sites.

1. Mixed-methods approach

The use of mixed methods (Creswell and Clark, 2017) in media studies is increasingly recognized as valuable for providing a holistic understanding of complex research questions. Given our specific research interest in understanding the factors affecting the relationship between media companies and users in an online news ecosystem, the mixed methods approach is particularly suited as it allows for the integration of quantitative data with qualitative insights (Johnson et al., 2007). We opted for a mixed methods methodology, drawing from both qualitative and quantitative data, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of our subject matter to examine the *corpus* constituted by 80 news sites – 10 from each country: the UK, US, Brazil, Argentina, France, Spain, Germany, and the Netherlands. Each of these western nations has a distinct national media setting, making it essential to adopt an integrated methodology for a nuanced interpretation.

The study was designed as comparative research, aiming to contrast various macro-level units, in this case countries, over time (Esser and Vliegenthart, 2017). Comparative communication studies should involve multiple macro-level cases, where at least one is pivotal to the broader research domain, as the objective is not just to analyze isolated cases but to understand the similarities and differences in context (Esser and Hanitzsch, 2012; Esser and Vliegenthart, 2017). Consequently, this study sought to depict factors that affect the relationship between users and

media companies through a cross-national approach, utilizing contextual descriptions of the media settings in each country of our *corpus* as a foundational step for our comparative research.

Our mixed methods approach was conducted through the perspective as case studies, as multiple methodologies can integrate them, especially within the context of media studies. Case studies have often been understood through a dichotomic perspective, considering they could be either (1) empirical entities existing independently or (2) theoretical constructs crafted by researchers (Ragin, 2009; Schwandt and Gates, 2018). However, contemporary perspectives, contend that the nature of reality blends these perspectives, given the intricate and often blurred situations researchers often encounter (Byrne and Callaghan, 2013). This nuanced perspective resonates with the viewpoint of this research, particularly as it encapsulates the multifaceted complexities of the online news ecosystem and the relationships established between news organizations and users in this environment.

Case studies are not strictly tools for data gathering or analysis, but represent a comprehensive methodology, integrating diverse methods to deeply explore the intricacies of specific phenomena from multiple vantage points (Micova, 2019; Schwandt and Gates, 2018). Case studies are in-depth probes into contemporary events or phenomena within their natural contexts, especially when the distinction between the subject and its environment is ambiguous. This means that case studies serve as a strategic means to delimit our research subject, permitting a multidisciplinary approach employing mixed methods, which is invaluable for dissecting multifaceted social systems and phenomena (Yin, 2018).

By nature, case delve deep into specific instances or scenarios to extract insights and patterns (Yin and Davis, 2007). Incorporating various methods enriches the case study by offering multiple lenses of examination. The combination ensures that the research is both broad in its understanding and deep in its analysis. We outline in the table (Table 2) below the four methods that became the pillars for our case studies.

Table 2 – Outline of our Multiple Methods used for this Research.

METHODOLOGY	APPLICATION IN CASE STUDIES
Desk Research	Provides foundational background by reviewing existing literature, historical data, and previous studies. Identifies broader context and research gaps.

Platform Analysis & Data Collection from News Sites	Evaluates media platforms and websites. Investigates user interfaces, features, and content layout. Provides understanding of media narratives and portrayals. Investigates narrative structure, prejudice, and depiction. Monitors the evolution of strategies for user engagement on media platforms over time.
Content Analysis	Systematically dissects content for recurring themes, representation patterns, or narratives.
Exchanges (Initial and Supplementary)	Engages with stakeholders for qualitative depth. Reveals insights into media practices and decision-making processes.

Once quantitative and qualitative data was gathered, we opted to use triangulation, a convergent and explanatory mixed methods design to integrate and make sense of our findings. The methodological approach of triangulation is essential for mixed-methods and case studies, as it seeks to bolster the validity of research by incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data. The convergence of different methodologies studying a singular phenomenon, ensures a robust and comprehensive understanding of the subject (Denzin, 2017; Creswell and Clark, 2017; Flick, 2018).

We recognize that, in research, timing often plays an imperative role, serving not only as a chronological map but also as an indicator of the evolving contexts and paradigms within which the research unfolds. As such, we specify the time frame of our mixed methods protocol in Table 3, providing a foundation upon which the multifaceted methodologies employed can be understood in their temporal and contextual richness.

Table 3 – Temporal structure of research methodology.

METHODOLOGY	DATA RANGE
Desk Research	July 2019 – July 2023
Platform Analysis	January 2020 – October 2022
Data Collection from News Sites	January 2020 – October 2022
Final News Site Observations	July 2023
Content Analysis	January 2020 – January 2023
Exchanges (Initial)	January 2020 – January 2022
Exchanges (Supplementary)	January 2023 – July 2023

The time period of our desk research, from July 2019 to July 2023, provides a global context marked by transformative socio-political events, technological advancements, and shifts in the media landscape. The focused period for platform analysis and data collection from January 2020 to October 2022 ensures contemporaneity in evaluating user engagement tools. Additionally, an observational study in July 2023 allowed us to ascertain if news sites maintained their primary tools for engagement - comment sections, newsletters, and share buttons. Furthermore, this observation examined potential impactful changes, like website closures or the introduction of novel user engagement spaces, particularly those supporting User-Generated Content.

Our analytical lens on the textual content from webpages, wherein organizations discuss themselves and their relationships with users, employed content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002; Bardin, 1977) and considered information that was online in January 2020 to content that was published up to January 2023. Lastly, our exchanges – not to be mistaken for traditional interviews due to their varying natures and modalities – with members of news organizations and journalists primarily occurred between January 2020 and January 2022. However, supplementary exchanges were undertaken from January to July 2023, shedding light on recent pivotal changes within specific news organizations of our *corpus*. Some members initially unreachable became available for these conversations, enriching our research insights.

This intricate blend of methods granted depth, context, and dynamism to our study, ensuring a holistic exploration of the media's ever-evolving landscape. In the next sections we will delve into each of the methods we chose for this approach: (1) Desk Research; (2) Platform Analysis; Content Analysis; and (4) Exchanges with members of media companies/journalists.

1.1 Desk Research

Desk research refers to the systematic investigation and analysis of existing information sources, both published (bibliographical) and unpublished (documentary), to gather relevant data and insights about a particular subject or research question (Pickard 2012; Yin, 2017). It involves the collection and analysis of existing information, it is a crucial stage in the research process that leverages previously published data to provide a foundational understanding of a studied topic, and it encompasses both bibliographical and documentary research. Amongst the advantages of desk research is that it can provide a wide perspective on phenomena, covering long timespans or large datasets that is impractical and often impossible for individual researchers to collect on their own.

Bibliographical research involves examining published materials to extract relevant information. Sources can include: (1) books and journals (academic, professional, or popular

publications that discuss the topic at hand); (2) conference proceedings (collections of academic papers presented at professional conferences); (3) theses and dissertations (research studies undertaken for the award of a degree or professional qualification); and online databases (electronic repositories that host a myriad of academic and professional publications). This type of research provides a panorama of the State of the Art of research in our topic of study, and it is the basis in which the theoretical framework of our thesis is built.

Documentary research delves into unpublished or original documents, either contemporary or historical, to retrieve data. Common sources include: (1) government reports (often packed with statistics and insights, these are valuable for understanding demographic shifts, economic trends, and more); (2) company annual reports (useful for understanding a company's financial health, strategic direction, and market position); (3) archives (historical documents, letters, diaries, and other materials preserved over time can provide insights into past events or trends); (4) media archives (old newspaper clippings, television broadcasts, and radio recordings can provide contextual information about specific events or periods); (5) online repositories (websites, blogs, and forums can provide insights into contemporary views and reactions to events). For our work, documentary research was essential and invaluable, as it served to give a contextual perspective of our empirical objects and allowed us to gather information, collect data and gain insights into the media companies and news sites of our *corpus*.

We conducted an exhaustive desk research (documental and bibliographical review) specifically regarding our *corpus*. The bibliographical research involved going through academic articles and books that feature the selected outlets as case studies or examples, allowing us to check what previous investigations understood about their journalistic endeavors. The documental research implied (1) analyzing their sites to find out what the organization says about itself, (2) searching and reading any materials the organization has made available about itself, and (3) searching and reading any interviews and news stories about the organization.

1.2 Platform Analysis: The Design for News Sites Examinations & Data Collection

Platform analysis refers to the systematic investigation and study of digital platforms, particularly news sites and other online environments, to collect data, observe online behaviors, trends, and changes over time. This approach aims to understand the dynamics, functionalities, and impacts of digital platforms on content dissemination, user interaction, and the broader digital ecosystem.

1.2.1 Defining Platforms: how News Sites fit in

Platform is a term that has been employed in various contexts and disciplines, and its definition often shifts based on its application. In Table 4 we provide diverse definitions for the term platform, considering that it can be conceptualized differently based on the context.

Table 4 – Definitions of the term Platform.

PLATFORMS	
General Definition	A platform is a base upon which multiple processes or systems are developed or built.
Digital Context	Platforms are digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact. They also set governance conditions for those interactions (Srnicsek, 2017).
Media Studies Context	Platforms are sites and services that host public-facing expression; they organize and circulate user-generated content alongside commercially produced content (Gillespie, 2010).
Business Model Perspective	Platforms are businesses that create value by facilitating direct interactions between two (or more) distinct types of affiliated consumers in multi-sided markets (Parker, van Alstyne, and Choudary, 2016).
Computing Context	In computing, a platform can be an underlying computer system on which application programs can run, or it might be the operating system and computer hardware combined (Tanenbaum, and Woodhull, 1997).
Social Media Perspective	Social media platforms are web-based technologies that allow the creation, sharing, and exchange of information, ideas, career interests, and other forms of expression through virtual communities and networks (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).
Innovation Perspective	Platforms in the context of innovation are foundational services, technologies, or products upon which other processes, methods, tools, services, or technologies are built (Gawer, and Cusumano, 2008).

Our study aligns with the media studies definition (Gillespie, 2010), but we understand that framing news sites as platforms requires an understanding of their multifunctional role in the digital ecosystem, not just as distributors of news but also as interactive spaces that foster user engagement, house multimedia content, and integrate various sources and types of information. At their core, modern news sites foster interaction and user engagement. Moreover, these sites have embraced the role of aggregators, curating content from varied sources such as wire services, independent contributors, and syndicated columns. And, mirroring the personal touch of social media platforms, many news sites have adopted algorithmic personalization. These algorithms curate articles tailored to individual user preferences and reading histories, offering a bespoke browsing experience that rivals the personalized feeds of social media giants. The multimedia-rich nature of current news sites further cements their status as platforms. They don't just house written content but encompass videos, podcasts, and interactive infographics. In essence, news sites have metamorphosed from singular, one-directional information channels to dynamic, multi-stakeholder platforms. Their evolution mirrors the broader shift in the digital realm, where adaptability, interactivity, and integration are not just desired but essential.

1.2.2 Our Platform Analysis

To conduct our platforms analysis and study news sites, we delved into their intricate framework to elucidate the particulars of audience engagement and participation. It is paramount to recognize that our study, while comprehensive, represents a singular facet within the broader domain of media research. Thus, our findings should be situated within a larger scholarly discourse, enriched by multifaceted academic endeavors that span the spectrum of media studies. To conduct our research, we have performed an extensive platform research of the selected websites of our *corpus*, exploring thoroughly their interface and site map to locate the elements enabling user experience through all its sections.

Desktop observations were conducted using an ASUS ZenBook Pro Notebook, with Google Chrome as the browser. In mobile observations, an iPhone 12 with Google Chrome was used, and the availability of mobile applications for each news organization was checked in both the AppStore (Apple) and Google Play Store for Android phones. Apps were downloaded via the AppStore and studied using an iPhone 12. The observation was conducted from France, Spain, and the United Kingdom, two of which are members of the European Union, and therefore, regional data policies influenced the navigation process. Consent to the terms and conditions, in compliance with the data policy, was provided each time the homepage of a news site was accessed, without exception.

1.2.2.1 Evaluating Access

As an initial step analyzing our *corpus*, we evaluated the levels of openness for navigation, which pertain to the accessibility of the website and its stories. The first level of access pertains to technological access and involves two components: (1) physical access to an internet-ready computer or mobile device (Bucy and Newhagen, 2004), and (2) system access to an internet network (Couldry and Mejias, 2019). The second level of access pertains to content access and involves different spheres, including knowledge and skills required to use a computer and navigate a web page. However, for the purpose of this study, we focused on what is required for a user to access a news story on a website, i.e., having the technology and ability to use it to read news on specific sites.

The aspect of accessibility played a crucial role in shaping our methodology for observing news sites. It is commonplace for websites to incorporate multiple means of accessing news stories (Table 5). For instance, in cases where a user is required to log in, the website may provide the option to do so through a social network or by creating an account on the site. If there is a limit on the number of stories that can be accessed per login or without it, the website may offer a subscription service that provides unlimited and unrestricted access to the site.

Table 5 – What do you need to access a news site.

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO ACCESS A NEWS SITE?	NOTHING	Without limitations	
		With a limit of stories per period – identified by IP address	
	LOGIN	Created on the website	Without limit
			With a limit of stories per period – identified by the user’s login
		With a social network	Without limit
			With a limit of stories per period – identified by the user’s login
	SUBSCRIPTION/MEMBERSHIP (paywall – firm or porous)		

The present study involved a systematic observation of a diverse range of news sites, with varying levels of openness. This was achieved by conducting two rounds of observations for each site: (1) Logged in as a user and subscriber if the site was paywalled; and (2) in anonymous mode, without any form of connection to the site. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the full range of user experiences, with and without login or payment. To ensure accuracy, the AdBlock extension was disabled during observations to determine the presence and nature of advertisements and pop-ups.

1.2.2.2 Systematic Observation

To explore the *corpus* of news sites, we established five distinct levels of observation (as shown in Table 6), considering access via desktop and mobile devices. This approach enabled us to scrutinize design interface elements that may indicate potential for user engagement, as well as the news sites' self-representation and their interaction with the audience.

Table 6 – Levels of observation of news sites.

Level 1	Homepage/Main screen	Areas such as heading, menu (sections) etc.
Level 2	Stories	Three news stories located on the front page.
Level 3	About/Who are we	Section that talks about the news organization, its history, and policies, etc.
Level 4	Reader Area (if existent)	Section dedicated to the reader.
Level 5	Area designed to become member/subscriber/supporter (if existent)	Section dedicated to offer the reader an opportunity to become a member/subscriber/etc.

A research protocol was designed to ensure proper data acquisition. The protocol consisted of three stages focused on platform analysis: (1) analysis of the website's homepage and elements of their design interface that show some kind of possibility of user participation or engagement, such as share buttons (Krumsvik, 2018) and comment sections (Singer and Ashman, 2009); (2) observation of the sessions of the news sites and whether any were specifically directed toward user participation; and (3) performance of actions such as clicking, reading, and interacting with three articles on the homepage to determine if and how the user is invited to engage

Such methodology allowed the acquisition of quantitative data that helped in understanding how participation is occurring in the context of digital journalism. This data also enabled the development and discussion of hypotheses about why participation is occurring based on practical information gathered about the organizations that host those spaces, such as their

nature, brief history, business model, stated journalistic mission, as well as their national context and particular professional culture of the different regions.

1.2.2.3 Timeframe of Platform Analysis

The five levels of observation and three stages of our platform analysis guided our systematic observation of the 80 news sites in our *corpus* in the period of January 2020 to October 2022. The process was conducted every two months – in January 2020, April 2020, July 2020, October 2020, January 2021, April 2021, July 2021, October 2021, January 2022, April 2022, July 2022, and October 2022. As such, over the course of three years, we conducted a cumulative year-long study, focusing on four specific months each year, resulting in a total of 12 months of in-depth platform analysis of the news sites in our *corpus*.

The technique we used to determine the period for platform analysis is called strategic sampling, which refers to the selection of specific time intervals within a broader timeframe for in-depth analysis. Rather than continuously monitoring or analyzing data over the entire period, researchers choose certain periods that they believe will provide the most relevant insights. For the objective of our research, the selected periods were representative of the broader phenomena under study and allowed us to delve deeper into the selected periods to gain insights without the need for continuous, exhaustive monitoring.

It should be noted that even though an extensive review of documents and bibliography pertaining to the strategies and history of the selected news sites, the observation was limited to a strict period. We recognize that a longer period of study might have yielded more insights regarding how they establish participation. Nonetheless, pertinent conclusions can be drawn about the forms of engagement and participation offered by leading online media.

1.3 Content Analysis

This exploration is driven by a fundamental quest to understand how news sites perceive and articulate their relationships with users. Our assertion is that *the place of the user* acts as an internal factor within media organizations, significantly influencing the relationships they establish with their users. Given the intricacy of this context, determining the exact place of the user becomes a challenging endeavor. Grounded in the methodological foundations laid by pioneers like Neuendorf (2002) and Bardin (2011) and armed with the analytical depth and breadth that content analysis offers, our research endeavors to unravel the multifaceted concept of the place of the user within online journalistic landscapes. By meticulously navigating the vast expanse of digital content, and through a keen understanding of how news sites perceive, articulate, and nurture their

relationships with users, we aim to cast light on this intricate dance between platforms and their audiences.

Neuendorf (2002) characterizes content analysis (CA) as a method that necessitates a preliminary structural design, emphasizing objectivity, reliability, validity, generalization, replicability, and hypothesis testing. Bardin (2011), on the other hand, suggests that CA can be both quantitative and qualitative, focusing on systematic procedures for describing content, allowing for inferences to be drawn. This investigation integrates both the quantitative approach by Neuendorf (2002) and the qualitative perspective as presented by Bardin (2011). Such a blended approach ensures rigorous, systematic analysis while also allowing for deeper insights into specific content categories. However, like any research technique, CA has its limitations. It inherently focuses on summarization, potentially neglecting intricate details or the broader socio-historical contexts of the messages. In this research, these challenges are addressed by integrating contextual information and considering content analysis as a complementary methodological resource.

The exploration of the place of the user within the journalistic context of online news ecosystems is paramount. A key aspect of this exploration centers around how news sites perceive and describe their relationships with their users. Given the intricate nature of the topic, the data collection process proved to be extremely challenging: the 80 news sites from our *corpus* are diverse. They offer different navigational experiences for their user and diverse sectional organizations; some provide charters that describe their missions, ethical standards and views on participation; some provide information about the new organization in a separate webpage from the news sites; some are verbose in discussing their journalistic practices, while others opt their journalism ‘speak for itself’. Given this context, our sample of content is varied amongst the news sites. Content analysis emerged as a primary methodological choice for addressing this challenge, as its merits are multi-fold:

- **Objectivity and Systematic Approach:** Content analysis offers a systematic and objective means to evaluate large amounts of textual and visual content. This structured approach is invaluable in an online news ecosystem teeming with diverse articles, commentaries, and statements.
- **Quantitative and Qualitative Insights:** Building on the insights of Neuendorf (2002) and Bardin (2011), content analysis facilitates both quantitative and qualitative exploration. While the quantitative aspect provides measurable data, the qualitative side delves into nuanced portrayals, capturing underlying sentiments or ideologies.

- **Consistency and Replicability:** With a robust coding scheme, content analysis ensures consistent analysis across various content pieces. This methodology's replicable nature also offers benchmarks for future studies or differing contexts.
- **Contextual Understanding:** Although content-focused, when paired with complementary research, content analysis can elucidate broader socio-cultural or organizational contexts. This dual understanding becomes vital in online journalism.
- **Handling Volume and Diversity:** The sheer magnitude and diversity of news site content necessitates a method adept at extensive analysis without sacrificing depth. Content analysis fits this bill perfectly.
- **Capturing Evolving Narratives:** The fluid nature of online news ecosystems means narratives can shift, mirroring evolving journalistic values or socio-political contexts. Content analysis chronicles these changes, providing a historical lens on user perception evolution.

A sample of 583 texts was sourced from news sites and webpages of their media when those existed. These texts spanned various contents, and had different lengths, from short paragraphs to 10-page documents, which included, but is not exclusive to, “about” pages, “mission” statements, and charters that discussed journalistic processes, ethical considerations, and user participation. We considered content that had been online from January 2020, when we began our platform analysis, up to content published until January 2023. We were thorough and meticulous in our approach to content analysis of these texts to ensure reliability, grounding the research in theory, balancing depth with feasibility, and ensuring that the findings could be integrated with other data.

Initially, we aimed to analyze 5 samples from each news company, totaling 480 pieces. However, the style of news organizations varies. Some are expansive, detailing their journalistic approach, mission, and user relationship, while others lack even a basic “about” section. In extreme cases, some news sites only offer terms and conditions in fine print, outlining the user’s agreement with the company. Consequently, there was an imbalance in the samples collected from each news outlet. We consistently analyzed 5 samples from each, but in some cases, we delved deeper, especially with organizations that were more forthcoming about their vision and their views on engagement and participation.

To conduct our content analysis, we constructed a two coding sheets (Appendix 1). The development of the analysis grid, essential for guiding the content analysis, was an iterative process. This grid was formulated to capture concepts pertinent to understanding the user’s place in the

news organizations studied. The process took several months and involved continuous refinement to ensure that the grid was both theoretically grounded and feasible given practical constraints. The ultimate coding sheet synthesized the objectives, theoretical foundation, and feasibility concerns of the research, all while remaining adaptable to the nuances of the content.

Our first coding sheet, “Portrayal of Users in News Content,” (Appendix 1) aimed to dissect and categorize the multifaceted roles ascribed to users. Through systematic analysis, we endeavor to shed light on whether users are merely passive consumers or if they are increasingly being acknowledged as valuable contributors to the news ecosystem. Our second coding sheet, “Portrayal of Users in News Content Based on Their Relationship with the News Site,” (Appendix 1) delved into the different relational categories’ users might occupy. Through this analytical lens, we aim to capture the breadth and depth of user relationships, emphasizing their financial, ideological, and community-driven connections to news platforms. The coding sheets presented aimed to explore and quantify the portrayal of users on news sites. Both sheets and their respective categories are meticulously crafted to capture the multi-dimensional relationship between users and news platforms in the current digital journalism landscape.

Our content analysis focused on how media companies portray themselves and their users, especially within their official online spaces. While we provide an introductory perspective on this internal dimension of media companies through this content analysis, our thesis’s essence revolves around the evolving relationship between media companies and their users. This dynamic concept will be a recurrent theme throughout our empirical analysis. It’s important to clarify that this method was supplementary. Our goal was to systematically determine the user’s relationship with media companies in the online news ecosystem, particularly from the viewpoint of news organizations. Using the data from our content analysis, we highlight examples that capture key terminologies, concepts, and contexts. This showcases how media outlets, whether legacy or digital-native, with varied business models and journalistic objectives, perceive and describe their users in unique ways.

In our quest to understand the portrayal of users across news platforms and to ensure comprehensive content analysis, we encountered several multilingual sites. Language proficiency was an essential aspect of ensuring the integrity and precision of our content analysis. I am fluent in Portuguese, Spanish, and English, which facilitated our comprehension and analysis of news sites in these languages. However, for news sites in French, Dutch, and German, our approach was twofold. Firstly, we utilized translation applications to get an initial grasp of the content. Following that, to guarantee accuracy and depth of understanding, we sought the assistance of native speakers fluent in these languages. This dual approach - assessing the content in its original

language and its translated version - was a conscious decision to maximize the accuracy of our analysis, especially given the inherent limitations and nuances that come with automated translations. It is essential to acknowledge that while our reliance on translation tools and native speakers is a potential limitation, we made diligent efforts to counterbalance this limitation. By cross-referencing translations and consulting with native speakers, we believe we've been able to adjust around this constraint. Consequently, we feel confident in the research we've conducted and the results we've proposed, though readers should bear this methodology in mind when interpreting our findings.

Continuing from this methodological foundation, our research approach also incorporates a spectrum of other methods. Chapters 8 and 9 further delve into strategies news sites employ for engagement, such as tools, participation spaces, and User-Generated Content (UGC). These facets, coupled with our content analysis findings, collectively illuminate the envisaged place of the user within journalism. Our findings will culminate in the final chapter, titled, “A Cross-National Understanding of the User-Media Company Relationship in the Online News Ecosystems”, where we will present a holistic view of how the user’s place is crafted within our analyzed news organizations.

1.4 Exchanges

As part of our mixed methods approach, with the aim to complement our findings on the factors that affect the relationship between the user and media companies, we initially intended to conduct semi-structured interviews with representatives from 16 news organizations from our *corpus* (two from each country), to enrich our research. Interviews have been extensively used in qualitative research, as a way of drawing out the experience and the perspective of the participants (Yin, 2013) and have been employed to great success in studies versing on participatory journalism (Domingo and Le Cam 2014; Zeller and Hermida 2015; Shapiro et al. 2013; Brandtzaeg et al. 2015; Aitamurto 2016).

The selection of candidates aimed to bring two contrasting perspectives from each country, while respecting the constraints we faced on time and resources. However, we faced several practical challenges in reaching members of news organizations who were available and willing to participate in an academic research project. Amongst the challenges were (1) language barriers; (2) internal policies from the organizations that did not allow interviews for graduate projects; (3) failure to reach the candidates, or their negative to participate/engage in interviews, either due to the academic nature of the work, or due non-disclosure clauses; and (4) the effect of the COVID-

19 pandemic, which forced us to conduct our work online for an extensive period of time, and magnified the difficulty to reach members from the news organizations.

We drew from the instrumental technique of semi-structured interviews, where pre-determined questions guide the conversation, but there's room for spontaneous follow-up queries (Rubin and Rubin, 2012) to conduct our exchanges. We designed a pre-established template of questions (Appendix B) but adopted a flexible format to adapt to the needs of the respondents, handling multiple mediums such as collaborative documents, email, audio, video calls, message exchanges in mobile applications and presential conversations. As such, we chose to refer to this set of empirical data as “exchanges”, instead of interviews. In a way, this is a conceptual shift: the term exchanges emphasize the idea of mutual sharing and dialogue rather than the traditional interviewer-interviewee dynamic. The researcher isn't just extracting information, but is also contributing, learning, and evolving through the conversation.

Given the challenges to reach members of media organizations to contribute to our research, our study decided to consider the participants comfort and accessibility. By using various mediums like collaborative documents, email, audio, video calls, etc., we could ensure each participant could communicate in the manner they were most comfortable with. The flexibility in format made participation more convenient, which lead to higher response rates, and our ability to have exchanges as part of our mixed methods approach, enriching our qualitative research. It also provides us with temporal flexibility. Different mediums allow for interactions at different times, as email exchanges and participation via Google Docs can happen asynchronously over days. We recognize that this multi-modal approach to the exchanges also demands meticulous planning, and a robust analytical framework to handle the complexities of multi-modal data, especially in terms of analysis, as the process of examining a text message might is not the same as that of analyzing an audio recording or considering the insights from a presential conversations.

As shown in Table 7, the set of exchanges was composed by 27 members of 15 media companies. From the eight countries in our *corpus*, all had two new organizations represented, except for the Netherlands, which only had one. Although 15 media companies constitute a small sample given our *corpus* of 80 organizations, we believe that the representativeness of the participants was sufficient for this study, as the diversity of their perspectives and experiences enriched our ability to explore our research questions. Moreover, they worked as good examples for furthering our understanding of the spaces created and hosted by media organizations to engage the user, their uses of User-Generated Content (or not) and the different strategies employed by news sites to create a relationship with their users given their contexts.

From our 27 exchanges, we had seven people who asked to remain anonymous. As such, when/if we refer to them in our text via their title and the company they represented. We consider that ensuring participant anonymity is not merely a logistical consideration but a foundational ethical imperative. The commitment to uphold anonymity embodies a dedication to safeguarding participant rights and dignity significantly fosters trust, establishing an environment wherein participants feel secure, facilitating more genuine exchanges. In certain cases, disclosing personal views, experiences, or information might jeopardize a person's job or professional relationships, especially if they are discussing matters related to their workplace or industry. Also, in the digital age, where information can be widely shared and remains accessible for a long time, participants might be concerned about their privacy. They might not want their views or personal experiences to be traceable back to them, fearing misuse of the information in the future.

Table 7 – Overview of the conducted interviews and exchanges with the name, professional title, outlet, and format.

Name	Title	Media Company	Format	Period of Initial & Final Contact ¹¹
Nicole Taylor	Director for External Communications	The New York Times (USA)	Email	March 2021 – June 2022
Elda Cantú	Senior News Editor for Latin America		Google Docs	April 2021
Sona Patel	Director of UGC and Community		Google Docs	April 2021
<i>Anonymous</i>	(Former) Managing Editor	BuzzFeed News (USA)	Email	February 2021 – July 2023
<i>Anonymous</i>	(Former) Journalist		Email	July 2023
<i>Anonymous</i>	(Former) Lead of Research and Development Department	BBC (UK)	Presential and email	February 2020 – April 2022

¹¹ We indicated the month/year of initial contact for all members of a news organization we conversed with. There were cases in which we had more than one exchange, via email for example, but they were all conducted within the same month. For those we had conversations with over a larger period of time, or had two punctual exchanges at different months/years, we indicated the month/year of first and last exchange.

<i>Anonymous</i>	Senior Member of Research and Development Department		Presential	October 2020 – July 2023
<i>Anonymous</i>	Lead of Research and Development Department		Email	November 2022
Drew Rose	(Former) Editor-in-Chief	The Canary (UK)	Email	April 2021
Anais Ferrer	Journalist in charge of moderation and user management	Mediapart (France)	Presential and Email	February 2020 – July 2023
Livia Garrigue	Journalist in charge of section Le Club		Presential and Email	February 2020 – July 2023
Gilles vanKote	Director of Reader Relations	Le Monde (France)	Video call	February 2021
Carlos Yárnoz	Advocate for the Reader	El Pais (Spain)	Google Docs	December 2020
Esther Alonso	Director of Marketing and Development	eldiario.es (Spain)	Video call	February 2021
Nabeelah Shabbir	Conversations Editor	The Correspondent (Netherlands)	Video call	October 2021 – December 2021
Imogen Champagne	Engagement Editor		Email	October 2021 – January 2022
<i>Anonymous</i>	Journalist/General Newsroom	Krautreporter (Germany)	Email	November 2022 – April 2023
<i>Anonymous</i>	Colaborator/General Newsroom	Corretiv (Germany)	Email	January 2023
Marianna Araujo	(Former) Director of Communications	The Intercept (Brasil)	Google Docs	February 2021

Samanta do Carmo	(Former) Newsroom coordinator		Google Docs	March 2021
Silvia Lisboa	(Former) Vozes Section Editor		Email	October 2020
Leandro Demori	(Former) Chief Editor		Telegram (texts)	July 2023
Ygor Mendonça Sakkes	Distribution and Social Media Editor	Folha de S. Paulo (Brasil)	Google Docs	Abril 2021
Luiz Tedesco	Responsible for the Section “The Reader’s Panel”		Google Docs	Abril 2021
Belén Quellet	Community and Participation Publisher	Red/Accion (Argentina)	Google Docs	February 2021
Ariana Budasoff	Journalist		WhatsApp (audio)	January 2021
Adrian Bono	(Former) Owner and Editor	The Bubble (Argentina)	Email	May 2023

We consider that our exchanges were akin to expert interviews. The aims of expert interviews can vary, as they might explore new domains, structure understanding, generate hypotheses, collect supplementary information, or build typologies and theories about particular subjects (Bogner and Menz, 2009). For our research, we consider that our exchanges, had a pivotal role, targeting organizational personnel with distinct roles (Flick, 2014). Our exchanges unraveled varied expertise: technical knowledge about rules and operations (Bogner and Menz, 2009), practical process knowledge related to actions and interactions, and contextual knowledge encapsulating the professional environment (Flick, 2014).

Within our research framework, it is imperative to elucidate the nuanced role played by the data derived from specific interviews. While not all the interviews were directly quoted within the main body of our text, they served a pivotal function in enhancing our contextual comprehension of the media companies encompassed in our *corpus*. This enriched understanding provided invaluable insights into the foundational principles governing user relationships within these companies. The absence of direct quotations from these interviews in no way diminishes their significance. Rather, the information gathered was synthesized and amalgamated into our broader

analytical framework, shaping our perspectives and conclusions. The decision to not quote directly was rooted in methodological considerations, ensuring clarity and coherence in the presentation of our findings.

We note that, despite asking about the same topic, each exchange had a different length and type of information as they are in fact different – in history, tradition, financial support, and commercial strategies, in the purpose they seek to achieve, and how they apply their view of journalism to their practices. Nevertheless, the nuanced understanding each one of them offered was instrumental in shaping the depth and breadth of our analysis, and they played an indispensable role in guiding us to our final conclusions.

2. *Corpus* Selection: Countries

In the vast and intricate landscape of global media, understanding the dynamics between users and media companies necessitates a judicious selection of countries to study. Such a choice is more than just a matter of geographic representation; it is about capturing the breadth of media ecosystems, from established Western bastions of press freedom to emerging powerhouses in the global south. Our country selection aims to balance these considerations, providing a rich tapestry of media experiences and user interactions that reflect the diversity and complexity of the online news ecosystem. In this section, we will delve into the rationale behind our chosen countries, elucidating the criteria and considerations that informed our decisions and set the stage for the study's empirical exploration.

2.1 Contextual Foundation

We recognize that in a globalized age, there are profound similarities for cross-national contexts, specifically in research focused on Western nations. Nonetheless, acquiring a homogeneous *corpus* of study with exact parity poses a formidable challenge, given the reality of the media market that changes according to cultural, political, economic, and social contexts, that changes from country to country. Technological progress, cultural dynamics, and economic inequalities intricately weave together, forming the tapestry of diverse media landscapes worldwide. The interplay of these factors creates distinct types of media consumption, production, and representation across the globe.

The media landscape is in perpetual flux, constantly reshaped by the interplay of cultural, political, economic, and social contexts. This ever-evolving nature of the media market has become a defining characteristic of our age, profoundly impacting both the creators and consumers of media. Technological progress is at the forefront of these changes. As new technologies emerge,

they redefine the ways we produce, distribute, and consume media. For instance, the rise of streaming platforms and the democratization of content creation through social media have revolutionized the entertainment industry. This has led to a dramatic increase in the volume and variety of content available, as well as a shift in control from traditional gatekeepers to more decentralized content creators.

Cultural shifts, spurred by globalization and increased connectivity, have also left indelible marks on the media landscape. Audiences today have a broader worldview and are exposed to diverse perspectives, leading to a demand for more inclusive and representative media. This shift has been both a challenge and an opportunity for media producers, who must cater to a more global and discerning audience.

Economic disparities, on the other hand, have created bifurcations in media consumption. While some audiences have unfettered access to a plethora of content, others face barriers, be it due to affordability or regional restrictions. These disparities often mirror larger societal inequalities and influence the type and quality of media that different populations consume.

As the broader media market undergoes transformation, the news media market faces its own set of challenges. One of the most pressing issues is the growing concentration of ownership and standardization. This double-sided trend has led to a few major corporations controlling a significant portion of the news market. The implication is profound: a homogenization of news content, reduced diversity in perspectives, and potential threats to journalistic independence.

Legacy media, which includes traditional newspapers, radio, and television outlets, are grappling with their own survival in this dynamic environment. As audiences migrate to digital platforms, these institutions face declining revenues and dwindling readership. The challenge is not merely financial; it is existential. How can they adapt and maintain relevance in the digital age? Complicating the landscape further is the meteoric rise of tech giants, like Google, Facebook, and Apple. These companies, by virtue of their vast resources and control over digital distribution channels, have a disproportionate influence on the news ecosystem. They dictate the algorithms that determine what news is seen, who sees it, and when. This has raised valid concerns about power dynamics and the marginalization of smaller, independent news outlets.

Finally, the instability in the journalism profession cannot be overlooked. As newsrooms shrink, and the demand for click-worthy content rises, journalists often find themselves caught between the pressures of commercial viability and the *ethos* of journalistic integrity. The precarious nature of their profession, combined with the challenges of fake news and misinformation, makes for a turbulent time for journalism.

In reflecting upon the myriad intricacies and nuances of the modern media landscape, it becomes evident that our globalized age presents both converging trends and divergent challenges. While the tapestry of media is woven with shared threads like technological advancements and cultural shifts, the fabric's patterns differ remarkably across various regions, reflecting unique cultural, political, and economic narratives. The monumental transformation that the media market undergoes, intertwined with factors like tech giants' dominance and the evolving role of journalists, underscores the need for a continuous, critical examination. We consider that understanding this contextual panorama and embracing this complexity while acknowledging its challenges is essential for selecting the countries that will compose our *corpus* of study.

2.2 Through the scope of media systems

The concept of media systems from Hallin and Mancini (2004)¹² was the baseline for the country selection of our *corpus*, as they consider differences in state laws and regulations, links between media and political parties, journalistic professional traditions, and the structure of audience and advertising markets. Moreover, we consider media systems influence the establishment of news outlets, their organization and, consequently, how public participation and engagement is managed. Hallin and Mancini (2004) analyzed 18 democracies from Europe and North America and identified three models of media systems: *Liberal*, *Democratic Corporatist* and *Polarized Pluralist*.

The *Liberal model* (Great Britain, Ireland, the United States and Canada) is defined by four characteristics: lively commercial news market, limited state intervention, high degree of journalistic professionalism, and weak political parallelism (Hallin and Mancini 2004). The *Democratic*

¹² We note that Hallin and Mancini's "Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics" (2004) has long been a foundational touchstone in media system studies. We recognize that there have been several works inspired by their idea, that have expanded on their theories, while others criticized their perceptions and considered them to be limited. Hallin and Mancini's work, primarily Western-focused models, have spurred researchers to examine media structures beyond this scope. For example, Voltmer (2006) explored the intricacies of media systems in new democracies, while Thussu (2009) analyzed the rise and influence of BRICS media systems. As the digital media landscape underwent a transformation, new theoretical considerations emerged. Couldry and Hepp (2017) delved into deep mediatization and its implications, offering a fresh perspective on digital media dynamics. Concurrently, scholars like Becker and Vlad (2009) mapped the relationship between media systems and press freedom, highlighting varying degrees of media freedom globally. In terms of model expansions and refinements, Brüggemann et al. (2014) posited a distinction between the polarized pluralist model of Hallin and Mancini and their polarized populist model, adding nuance to media system classifications. Simultaneously, critiques such as those from Couldry (2008) challenged the limitations of the traditional framework, advocating for broader inclusivity. Curran (2011) also examined Hallin and Mancini's models, drawing attention to complexities that challenge some of the original classifications. Lastly, the symbiosis between media systems and political landscapes remains a pivotal area of exploration, with contributions from researchers like Esser and Strömbäck (2014) focusing on media, politics, and political communication interplays. These works, among others, reflect the dynamic continuum of media system research, with Hallin and Mancini's seminal text serving as a foundational springboard for further inquiry. They have been considered for our thesis and for our country selection, even if not directly mentioned.

Corporatist model (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland) encompasses media systems from northern and central European democracies. Media systems from this model are marked by historical, cultural, political, and market forces that have resulted in the coexistence of strong commercial media and politically linked media, along with a manner of state intervention that allowed for a high degree of journalistic professionalism to develop (Hallin and Mancini 2004). Finally, the *Pluralist model* (Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, and Greece) is found in Mediterranean countries, marked by an interventionist state and high political parallelism, and, unlike the other systems, journalistic professionalism is not deeply rooted (Hallin and Mancini 2004). While their model itself does not explicitly address the relationship between media outlets and their readers, it does provide a useful framework for understanding the broader context in which media operates, including the political and economic structures that shape the media systems.

Hallin and Mancini (2004) framework was deemed most suitable for this study because we considered it to be a comprehensive analysis, that offers a multifaceted exploration of the media landscape, ensuring any countries chosen based on this model provide a well-rounded understanding of their media environments. We also consider the comparative strength of their work, as, by surveying 18 democracies from Europe and North America, the framework offers a categorization into three distinct models – Liberal, Democratic Corporatist, and Polarized Pluralist – that aids in systematic and balanced country selection, facilitating nuanced cross-country comparisons. Also, beyond theoretical classifications, the framework also sheds light on the real-world implications of these media systems. Particularly, it elucidates how these systems influence the practicalities of news outlet establishments and organizations, providing insights into the management of public participation in varied contexts.

The framework presented by Hallin and Mancini in 2004 offers a foundational lens to understand media systems in various democracies, especially those of Europe and North America. As with any theoretical model, though, it is essential to recognize its limitations. Over the years since its introduction, the media landscape has undergone seismic shifts. Despite the prediction by the authors that globalization and commercialization of the media would encourage convergence of the selected models, several constraints limit this conclusion.

For instance, they exclude countries from Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. Hallin and Mancini's (2004) geographical focus primarily hovered over Western democracies, potentially sidelining the unique media ecosystems emerging in non-Western regions. These environments, colored by different socio-political and cultural backdrops, offer insights that might not be wholly captured by a Eurocentric or North American-centric model. Their method of clustering countries

into overarching categories—such as Liberal or Polarized Pluralist—also warrants a pause. While useful for high-level analyses, it risks oversimplifying the individual intricacies and idiosyncrasies each nation brings to the table. This generalization could inadvertently obscure the subtle, yet crucial, distinctions between countries grouped under a single umbrella.

Although their framework was groundbreaking at the time, the rapid ascent of digital media, spearheaded by tech behemoths and the increasing influence of AI in content creation and distribution, has reshaped the media arena in ways that could outpace the scope of a 2004 paradigm. The landscape today is nuanced by a global digital evolution, with platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Google standing as giants influencing news consumption and dissemination.

Nonetheless, we consider that Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) framework remains a cornerstone in media studies and, for the purpose of our selection, their outline of media systems is sufficient to aid in discerning the samples of our *corpus*. We analyzed the media systems cross-matching data of their countries with the Digital News Reports 2019, 2020 and 2021 by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Newman et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2021). We aimed to interpret the evolution of the models in the time of this study under certain parameters, including socioeconomical variables such as population, internet penetration, Press Freedom Ranking (Freedom House, n.d.-b; World Press Freedom Index – Journalism Threatened by Fake Content Industry, n.d.) and proportion of news sources online; and variables modelling the user engagement such as trust on news, total of users sharing online news, and users paying for a subscription.

Table 7 presents a socioeconomic analysis, mapping key metrics like Population Size, Internet Penetration, Press Freedom Ranking, and the propensity towards Online News Consumption across various countries. Distilled from the 2021 report, this analysis is further contrasted with data from the 2019 report to reveal trends and shifts over the years. Whether it is the high digital connectivity observed in nations like the UK and USA or the intriguing press freedom fluctuations in Spain and France, these insights illuminate the complex interplay of societal infrastructures, freedoms, and evolving media consumption habits.

Table 8 – Socioeconomical analysis for the countries of each media system with indicators on Population (Pop.), Internet Penetration (IP), Press Freedom Ranking (PFR) and sources of news online (Online). Data from 2021 report and variation with respect 2019 report.

Country	Model	Pop. [M]	IP [%]	PFR	Online [%]
UK	Liberal	67	95	78.71 (+0.94)	73 (-2)
Ireland		4.8	92	88.30 (+3.30)	83 (-1)

USA		327	96	72.74 (-1.57)	67 (-5)
Canada		37	90	81.74 (-2.57)	77 (+1)
Denmark	Democratic Corporatist	5.8	98	90.27 (+0.14)	80 (± 0)
Finland		5.6	94	88.42 (-3.68)	89 (+4)
Norway		5.4	98	92.65 (+0.47)	85 (+1)
Sweden		10.1	96	88.84 (-2.85)	86 (+2)
Netherlands		17	96	77.93 (-13.40)	77 (-1)
Belgium		11.6	94	78.86 (-9.07)	77 (-2)
Germany		82	96	82.04 (-3.36)	68 (-4)
Austria		9	88	76.744 (-7.93)	76 (+1)
Switzerland		8.6	94	82.72 (-6.76)	80 (-3)
Portugal	Polarized Pluralist	10.3	78	87.07 (-0.30)	79 (-2)
Spain		46	93	76.71 (-1.30)	79 (-1)
France		65	92	78.53 (+0.74)	69 (-2)
Italy		59	93	68.16 (-6.86)	75 (-3)
Greece		11.1	73	55.52 (-15.40)	90 (-2)
Argentina	Peripheral	44	93	77.28 (+6.18)	84 (-2)
Brazil		211	71	55.36 (-11.90)	83 (-4)

Table 8 elucidates the infrastructure, freedom, and online news consumption habits of each country. Several interpretations can be made, such as:

- **Internet Penetration:** Almost all the countries have high internet penetration, with the UK, USA, Denmark, Norway, Netherlands, and Germany all exceeding 95%. This indicates a digitally connected populace, making these countries ripe for an analysis of online news media dynamics. The robust internet penetration in the UK, USA, Germany, Netherlands, France, and Spain not only highlights their

technologically advanced infrastructures but also emphasizes the shift of news consumption to digital platforms. This deep digital connectivity, contrasted with the strong online news consumption patterns in emerging media markets like Argentina and Brazil, underscores the comprehensive scope of our analysis.

- **Press Freedom Ranking:** This ranking offers insights into the media environment. The UK, USA, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Netherlands all have relatively high scores, indicating a generally free press. However, the shifts over two years (both positive and negative) suggest evolving dynamics in press freedom, which can impact user-media relationships. Press freedom, a pivotal indicator of a country's media environment, presents a diverse spectrum across our chosen countries. The fluctuating rankings in nations like Spain, France, and the USA provide insights into the evolving interplay of media freedoms, regulations, and political landscapes. Such variations have profound implications for public perceptions, shaping user trust and, in turn, influencing the user-media dynamic.
- **Online News Consumption:** This indicator shows the percentage of people accessing their news online. The UK, Ireland, Canada, and the Scandinavian countries have high online news consumption rates. Argentina and Brazil, from South America, also have robust online news access, strengthening their inclusion.

Table 9 brings user engagement with the media—be it trust, sharing habits, or the willingness to pay—into sharp focus, offering a deep dive into metrics as gauged by the Reuters News Report indicators. By juxtaposing the 2021 findings with those from the 2019 report, this table lays bare the ebbs and flows of public sentiment and behavior towards the media over the years. From the exemplary willingness of Norwegians to pay for news to the contrasting trust levels across European and North American nations, this analysis teases out patterns that can be pivotal for media organizations, policymakers, and researchers alike.

Table 9 – Users engagement analysis evaluating Reuters indicators on trust on news (Trust), users sharing news (Sharing) and users paying for a subscription (Paying). Data from 2021 report and variation with respect 2019 report.

Country	Model	Trust [%]	Sharing [%]	Paying [%]
UK	Liberal	34 (-6)	21 (-6)	7 (± 0)
Ireland		52 (+4)	38 (+2)	12 (+4)
USA		26 (-6)	30 (-7)	20 (+3)

Canada		42 (-10)	-	13 (+6)
Denmark	Democratic Corporatist	58 (+1)	15 (-4)	17 (+3)
Finland		69 (+10)	29 (+2)	19 (+3)
Norway		56 (+10)	25 (± 0)	42 (+7)
Sweden		50 (+11)	27 (± 0)	27 (+6)
Netherlands		56 (+3)	25 (+3)	14 (+6)
Belgium		51 (+2)	-	12 (+8)
Germany		50 (+3)	22 (± 0)	10 (+6)
Austria		41 (+2)	30 (-3)	11 (+5)
Switzerland		46 (± 0)	-	13 (+7)
Portugal	Polarized Pluralist	61 (+3)	48 (-1)	10 (+5)
Spain		32 (-11)	49 (-3)	12 (+2)
France		29 (+5)	30 (± 0)	10 (+2)
Italy		35 (-5)	36 (-5)	10 (+3)
Greece		27 (± 0)	42 (-4)	11 (+4)
Argentina	Peripheral	35 (-4)	46 (-10)	11 (+2)
Brazil		48 (± 0)	46 (-12)	27 (-4)

Table 9, on engagement analysis, offers a snapshot of the public's trust in media, their habits in sharing news, and their willingness to pay for online news. This has interesting inferences, for example:

- **Trust in News:** There's a varying degree of trust in news across countries. While Finland, Norway, and Denmark display high trust levels, the UK and the USA show a decline, which is crucial to analyze given their media's global influence. Trust in media emerges as a critical metric, with patterns ranging from higher trust levels in Spain and Brazil to more skeptical audiences in the UK and the USA. The shifts in these metrics over the years raise pressing questions: What internal and external

factors are driving changes in trust? How are media practices and wider societal shifts contributing to these patterns?

- **Sharing Habits:** Countries like Spain, Greece, Argentina, and Brazil have high rates of news-sharing, suggesting a proactive user interaction with media. The decline or rise in these percentages over two years can shed light on changing user behaviors and their implications for media companies.
- **Paying for News:** Norway's outstanding 42% rate of users paying for news is intriguing and contrasts sharply with other countries. Brazil, with 27%, also shows a significant willingness to pay, especially given its lower internet penetration compared to European nations.

When we evaluate different media systems based on select socioeconomic indicators, it is evident that certain patterns emerge. These patterns underscore the importance of considering both the broader media model and the individual nuances of each country. As shown in Figure 2 the models are proven to be invariant when clustering their countries and can effectively reveal patterns and tendencies based on the analyzed parameters. The values in the figure are obtained by averaging the scores from all its countries. For the sake of completeness, Table 8 and Table 9 provide a more fine-grained overview in a country basis, showing the deviations to the computed averages.

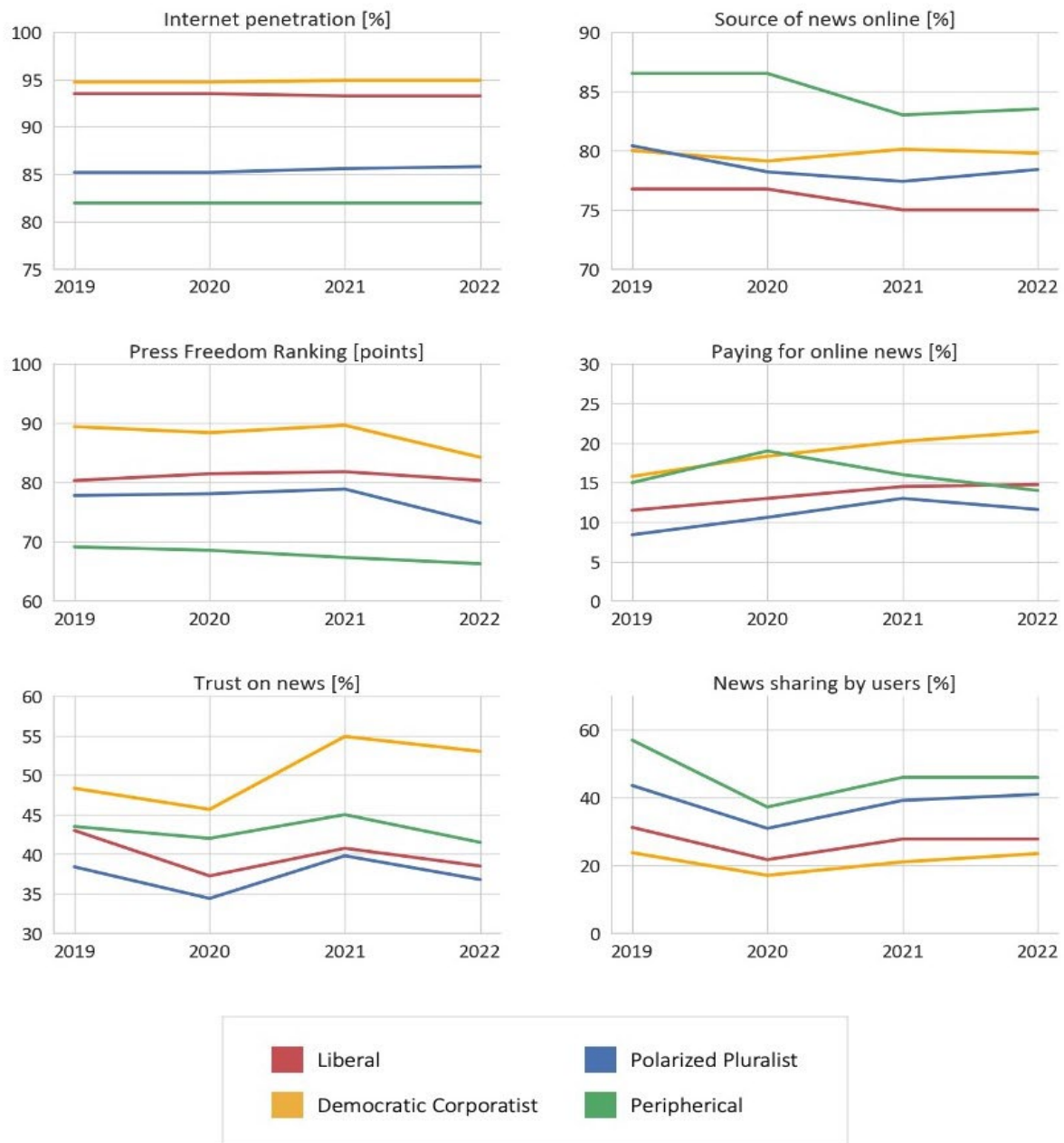


Figure 2 – Evolution of the media systems in the time of this study. Data from Reuter's Digital News Reports.

In Figure 2, the presented models are obtained by identifying clusters of countries that have similar behaviors or patterns. They are based on the parameters Internet Penetration (IP), Press Freedom Ranking (PFR), and sources of news online (Online) from Table 8 and also the three pivotal indicators – Trust in News, News-Sharing Habits, and Willingness to Pay for online news – from Table 9.

These indicators not only provide insights into public sentiment towards media but also indicate potential revenue streams and user behaviors. The country-by-country breakdown of

these tables, combined with the visual aid of Figure 2, accentuate the unique media landscape of each country, while also offering an overarching perspective of global trends:

- **Internet Penetration (IP):** The percentage of IP reveals how much of the population has access to online media. Higher percentages, like in Denmark and Norway, show a high adoption of online media, suggesting that these populations are more digitally integrated. On the other hand, a lower percentage, as seen in Brazil, indicates a potential barrier to accessing online news sources, making traditional media more influential.
- **Press Freedom Ranking (PFR):** This metric offers insights into the freedom and independence of the press in each country. The variances from 2019 to 2021 suggest shifting political or social climates. For instance, the notable decrease in PFR for the Netherlands or Greece indicates potential concerns about press freedom, while Argentina's increase might suggest improvements in journalistic independence.
- **Sources of News Online (Online):** This indicates the percentage of the population that prefers online news sources. The decrease in certain countries like the USA or Brazil might suggest a possible shift in trust or reliance on traditional media, while the increase in countries like Finland indicates a growing preference for digital news.
- **Trust in News:** Trust is the cornerstone of any media system. The varying levels across countries indicate the public's confidence or skepticism in the narratives presented to them. The sharp drop in trust in countries like the UK and USA is alarming, especially considering their influential global media presence. Conversely, the Nordic countries, such as Finland, Norway, and Denmark, have retained or even boosted their trust levels, underscoring a healthier relationship between their media and public.
- **Sharing Habits:** Sharing news is an indicator of user engagement and reflects a proactive behavior in disseminating information. The high sharing rates in Spain, Greece, Argentina, and Brazil highlight a culture of active media consumption. Yet, observing the shift in these habits over two years provides a dynamic view of evolving user-media relationships. A decline might suggest news fatigue, skepticism, or a change in platform preferences, while an increase could signify an event of significant public interest or heightened media engagement.

- **Paying for News:** The willingness to pay for news offers insights into the perceived value of news content and the potential revenue model for media companies. Norway, with a staggering 42%, demonstrates a strong value proposition by its media outlets, or perhaps a deeply ingrained culture of paying for quality journalism. Brazil's 27% is notable too, showcasing a sizeable segment of its population that sees value in paid news content, even amidst a comparatively lower internet penetration.

By computing averages for each model (Liberal, Democratic Corporatist, Polarized Pluralist, and Peripheral), we obtain a general idea of how countries within each model behave. However, individual deviations, as provided in Table 8 and Table 9, underscore that while models can generalize, individual countries often have their own unique media landscapes influenced by regional, political, or cultural factors. In essence, the table serves as a detailed lens, allowing us to dissect the nuances of each country's media landscape, while Figure 2 offers a bird's-eye view, enabling us to discern broader trends and patterns across different media systems.

To comprehend the nuances of global media interactions and attempt to interpret and identify relationships between the users and their socioeconomical contexts, Figure 3 computes the correlation matrix of the analyzed parameters. Through this matrix, we can discern the intricate relationships that exist between user behaviors and their respective socioeconomic environments, revealing patterns that may otherwise remain obscured.



Figure 3 – Correlation matrix of the analyzed parameters by averaging the values for each variable across the years of observation.

One of the standout correlations observed is between Press Freedom Ranking (PFR) and internet penetration. This suggests that as nations grow more digitally connected, they simultaneously seem to witness an enhancement in press freedom. This could be due to the inherent democratizing potential of the internet, where information flows are less restrained, and censorship is more challenging. Furthermore, the relationship between PFR and users' willingness to pay for subscriptions adds another layer of insight. It appears that in countries where the press operates with greater freedom, users are more inclined to invest in news. This could be interpreted as a direct reflection of the value users place on credible, unfiltered information. They're not just seeking news; they are searching for news they can trust.

However, the relationship between the total users sharing news, the country's population, and the proportion of news sources online proves to be equally fascinating. The positive correlation might suggest that in populous countries, online platforms play a pivotal role in disseminating news, possibly due to the scale of reach these platforms offer. On the flip side, this mass dissemination could amplify the risks associated with the spread of misinformation. Trust in news presents another intricate web of correlations. Its association with PFR and paid subscriptions reinforces the idea that credibility is paramount for users. When trust is high, not only do users believe in the content they consume, but they are also willing to financially support its production.

While Figure 3 lays down these relationships starkly, it is essential to remember that correlation doesn't necessarily equate to causation. These patterns provide starting points for deeper investigations and discussions, offering avenues to explore how diverse factors coalesce to shape global media dynamics. Nevertheless, this data provides, alongside the framework of media systems, the contextual panorama to decide the countries to compose our *corpus* of research. To do this selection, we also considered practical considerations, which included familiarity and proximity with the countries (physical and cultural) and material available to build a reasonably comparable set of cases.

First we mapped potential countries against the three media system models, incorporating the framework by Hallin and Macini (2004). Second, we analyzed each country's media landscape depth, considering their regulatory environment, media-political affiliations and journalistic traditions to ensure a robust and representative selection, allowing our research to benefit from both the breadth and depth of diverse media systems. Third, we crossreference the countries studied by Hallin and Macini (2004) with the data from the Digital News Reports from 2019, 2020 and 2021 (Newman et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2021), presented and analyzed through Table 8 and Table 9, and Figure 2 and Figure 3.

Our meticulously chosen countries provide a rich and varied landscape of user-media interactions and allow us to unravel the nuances of the online news ecosystem. As such, the countries from our *corpus* were designed to represent distinct media ecosystems, offering unique perspectives for an empirical and comparative cross-national analysis. We selected in total eight countries – two countries from each media system model (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) and added two countries from a peripheral media system: (1) **United States of America** and (2) **United Kingdom** (*Liberal model*), (3) **France** and (4) **Spain** (*Polarized Pluralist Model*), (5) **Netherlands** and (6) **Germany** (*Democratic Corporatist Model*); (7) **Brazil** and (8) **Argentina** (*Peripheral Media Systems*).

2.3 The Eight Countries

In the rapidly evolving online news ecosystem, understanding the intricate relationship between users and media companies necessitates a global perspective. To gain holistic insight, a nuanced exploration requires into a diverse range of perspectives, thus, by focusing on the media landscapes of the UK, US, France, Spain, Germany, Netherlands, Brazil, and Argentina, this research taps into a rich array of histories, economic backgrounds, and cultural contexts.

As we weave together these countries' narratives, this research embarks on a journey through varied media funding models, diverse ownership structures, and a plethora of regulatory environments. From the streets of Buenos Aires to the bustling avenues of Berlin, from the digital forums of São Paulo to the newsrooms of Paris, this study promises a rounded view. It is not just about understanding media; it is about decoding its relationship with users across a spectrum of histories, economies, and cultures. While in Chapter 6 of this thesis we will offer an overview of each of the countries national settings and online news ecosystem, in this section we aimed to demonstrate why each of these eight countries was selected for our *corpus*, as we consider that each offers a unique historical, socio-economic, and media system context.

The United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA) are two giants of the English-speaking world and command attention for multiple reasons. First and foremost, English language media, due to its vast global reach, has undeniably left its mark on global narratives. By exploring the UK and US, we gain invaluable insights into this sphere, one which has evolved tremendously in the digital age. Moreover, these countries showcase a vibrant range of media models offering us a multifaceted lens through which we can observe diverse media dynamics.

The **UK** stands as a cornerstone of the Liberal model, boasting an influential English-language media landscape. With entities ranging from the globally revered BBC to emerging digital platforms, the UK reflects a blend of tradition and innovation. Its rich history in journalism provides a foundational understanding of the symbiotic relationship between users and media

entities in a commercially driven, yet diversified media environment. The **US** echoes the UK's liberal model. With its vast digital media landscape, the country exemplifies the interplay between users and large media conglomerates in the digital age. It represents the evolution of user relationships amidst the challenges and opportunities of free-market dynamics in the online realm.

As we venture into continental Europe, our gaze turns towards France and Spain. Aside from representing southern European perspectives, the global outreach of Spanish and French media is vast, catering to myriad audiences across Africa, Latin America, and certain Asian pockets. A deep dive into these nations also allows us to unpack the layered historical dynamics of their media, which have been significantly influenced by colonial legacies and the post-colonial reconfigurations that followed.

Spain is the embodiment of the Polarized Pluralist model and offers insights into a media landscape shaped by historical political shifts. From the days of dictatorship to its democratic evolution, Spain serves as a testament to how media systems mature and adapt. Its media-user relationship is a tapestry of political, cultural, and technological threads, making it a pivotal study in understanding user trust and engagement in volatile political climates. On the other hand, **France** straddles the Democratic Corporatist and Polarized Pluralist models, and provides a nuanced European perspective. Its media environment, influenced by historical state interventions and a rich colonial past, reveals the intricacies of user engagement in an ecosystem balancing between public interest and commercial pursuits.

The **Netherlands** is an exemplar of the Democratic Corporatist model, that has been an epicenter of media innovations. Historically characterized by pillarization, it showcases a unique dynamic between users and media entities, catering to segmented audiences. Its adeptness in a multilingual media environment further highlights the complexities of user-media interactions in a globalized world. **Germany**, from the same model, is characterized by its unique dual broadcasting system, unravels a cooperative dynamic between public and private media entities. As Europe's economic powerhouse, Germany demonstrates how robust economic structures influence media consumption patterns and user trust in a diverse media landscape.

Venturing into Latin America, **Brazil** has dynamic media industry reflects the challenges and transformations typical of burgeoning economies. With its vast landscape marked by media conglomerates and emerging digital platforms, Brazil becomes a focal point in discerning user-media relationships in developing economies, encompassing issues from media literacy to digital adaptation. **Argentina's** media landscape, historically intertwined with political narratives, serves as a crucible for understanding media's role in shaping democratic *ethos*. Its tumultuous journey

through democratic shifts offers rich insights into the resilience and adaptability of user-media interactions amidst political challenges.

While Brazil and Argentina are geographically located in the Western Hemisphere, they can also be considered as representative of the Global South in many aspects. The term “Global South” historically referred to the “Third World,” encompassing countries not aligned with either the NATO bloc or the Communist bloc during the Cold War. Today, the term is more indicative of developmental, economic, and historical trajectories than mere geography. In this context, both Brazil and Argentina, despite being in the Americas, offer valuable insights into news media in the Global South.

The two countries have faced challenges typical to developing nations, including economic volatility, disparities in wealth distribution, and issues related to infrastructure. The way their media covers these issues provides a window into the concerns of many Global South nations. Like many countries in the Global South, Brazil and Argentina have colonial histories—Brazil under the Portuguese and Argentina under the Spanish. The legacy of colonization has lasting effects on politics, society, and culture, which is often reflected in media narratives. While Brazil and Argentina can be approached from a Western perspective due to their geographical and cultural ties, they undoubtedly provide insights and narratives that resonate with broader themes of the Global South, making them invaluable in a comprehensive study of global media landscapes.

Together, these eight countries of our *corpus*, each with its unique media ecosystem, provide a comprehensive tapestry to decode the intricate dance between users and media. Through these countries, our research encapsulates a broad spectrum of the online news ecosystem, considering (1) **Historical and Cultural Diversity** – from colonial legacies to democratic transitions, these countries provide diverse historical and cultural contexts; (2) **Economic Spectrum**: from the world’s largest economies (US, Germany) to emerging markets (Brazil, Argentina), there’s a wide economic spectrum covered; (3) **Media Models**: the mix of countries allows for studying various media funding models, ownership structures, and regulatory environments; and (4) **User Dynamics**: given the diverse user base across these countries, the research can delve into a range of user-media interactions, from trust dynamics to subscription models. Our country selection ensures a comprehensive understanding of both internal and external factors affecting user-media company relationships in the digital age.

2.4 Limitations

While developing this thesis, a deliberate decision was made to focus on Western countries as the primary subject of investigation. This choice was driven by several interrelated reasons.

Firstly, the historical significance of Western nations in the trajectory of modern journalism cannot be understated. It is within these countries that many foundational journalistic practices and ideologies evolved. This historical backdrop offers an invaluable context for understanding the present and future directions of journalism. Moreover, the comparative cohesiveness of Western countries, given their shared cultural, historical, and sometimes political influences, presents a more streamlined environment for analysis. This similarity also extends to the media landscape. Although each Western nation exhibits its unique media characteristics, there's a detectable homogeneity in aspects like media ownership, business models, and audience engagement strategies.

Data availability also played a crucial role in this decision. Western countries maintain rich archives related to media and journalism, ensuring a consistent and comprehensive data acquisition process for research purposes. Coupled with the region's longstanding tradition of professionalized journalism, studying Western countries provides a lens into established norms, ethics, and institutional structures of journalism. From a practical standpoint, limiting the scope of the thesis to Western countries ensured both depth and feasibility. A narrower focus permits a deeper dive into the intricacies of the subject matter, ensuring thoroughness. Given the substantial amount of pre-existing research on non-Western countries and potential gaps in understanding Western media practices, the focus on Western nations also builds upon or fills the gaps in the prevailing literature. Furthermore, personal expertise and linguistic proficiency in Western contexts enriched the interpretative quality of this research. And while this thesis centers on Western countries, it simultaneously lays the groundwork for future comparative research that could juxtapose Western and non-Western journalistic practices.

Yet, it is essential to recognize that focusing exclusively on Western countries presents a limitation to this work. By not incorporating non-Western perspectives, we miss capturing the full global diversity of journalistic practices and ideologies. Such a limitation underscores the vastness of the topic and the challenges associated with encompassing every aspect within a single study. It also serves as a reminder of the importance of continued research and exploration into the ever-evolving world of journalism across diverse geographies and cultures.

Also, while our research provides a comprehensive exploration of diverse Western media landscapes, we acknowledge the decision to omit of the Nordic countries from our *corpus* as a limitation. The media systems of nations like Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Norway are often regarded as archetypal in scholarly literature, given their unique typology characterized by high levels of press freedom, public trust in media, and robust public service broadcasting. These countries frequently serve as benchmarks in media studies due to their high standards and

distinctive characteristics. However, it is worth noting that the decision to exclude the Nordic countries was deliberate, as there is already an extensive body of research focusing on these countries. Nonetheless, future studies could indeed benefit from juxtaposing our findings with those from the Nordic countries, potentially yielding a more holistic view of the relationship between users and media companies across diverse media typologies.

2.4.1 The Need for Non-Western Perspectives in a Western-Centric Analysis

In our thesis, the primary focus remains on the examination and understanding of Western news outlets, anchored in the context of countries such as the UK, US, Brazil, Argentina, Spain, France, Netherlands, and Germany. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the media landscape is not confined within the boundaries of these nations, nor are the narratives they produce. To provide a holistic understanding and to paint a complete picture of the topics under discussion, we often find it necessary to step outside the confines of our main *corpus*.

On several occasions, even within our Western-centric lens, we venture beyond these eight countries to bring in illustrative examples. This allows us to highlight specific points, contrast media narratives, or emphasize particular trends that might not be as evident when restricted to our primary countries of focus. Such explorations are not diversions; instead, they serve to enrich our analysis, providing a more nuanced and comprehensive view of the Western media ecosystem.

By occasionally drawing from sources outside our primary selection, we acknowledge the interconnected nature of global media and the importance of diverse voices in shaping our understanding of events, issues, and narratives. This approach underscores the significance of context in media studies, reaffirming that while our primary focus remains rooted in certain nations, the broader world of media often demands a more expansive view for a complete understanding. A comprehensive understanding of the media landscape requires a nuanced analysis that is not confined strictly to a Western-centric viewpoint. Several reasons underscore the importance of occasionally referencing non-Western countries and news organizations, such as the Middle Eastern Al Jazeera:

- **Broadening the Analytical Horizon:** By examining news outlets outside the Western realm, we introduce diversity in the sample. This diversity enriches our understanding and allows for a comprehensive analysis of global media dynamics.
- **Contrasting Cross-National Perspectives:** Al Jazeera, as an example, offers a distinct lens through which global events are perceived and portrayed. By comparing its coverage with Western outlets, we can discern the differences in framing, focus,

and narratives. This not only enriches our understanding but also highlights the multifaceted nature of news.

- **Empirical Richness:** From a research standpoint, a broader sample base that includes non-Western outlets can bring forth unique empirical data. This data, in turn, provides insights into factors that affect the relationship between users and media companies globally, not just in the West.
- **Unearthing Implicit Biases:** Western media, much like any other regional media, operates within its own set of biases, both conscious and unconscious. By introducing a non-Western perspective, we can better identify and understand these biases, allowing for a more balanced and critical analysis.
- **Globalization and Media:** In an age of globalization, media outlets influence and are influenced by happenings far beyond their regional boundaries. As such, a purely Western-centric analysis might miss out on global trends and shifts that are best understood by incorporating diverse perspectives.

While our thesis primarily focuses on the analysis of Western media outlets, we've made a conscious decision to tangentially include non-Western perspectives like that of Al Jazeera, especially in contexts that necessitate a broader viewpoint. Since its establishment in Qatar in 1996, Al Jazeera has carved a distinctive space in the global media landscape, serving as a counterpoint to dominant Western news narratives. Unlike many Western outlets that often frame the Middle East through particular lenses, Al Jazeera emerged with a commitment to offering an in-depth, nuanced view of Arab stories. This commitment to journalistic independence, though anchored in the Middle East, resonates with a diverse global audience. Its English Channel and robust digital platforms amplify voices that bridge Eastern and Western viewpoints.

It is essential to underline that such an inclusion is selective and purposeful, ensuring we do not deviate from the central scope of our research. Yet, even this tangential incorporation demonstrates the rich academic potential of adopting a more expansive cross-national perspective in future studies, moving beyond a strictly Western lens. Nonetheless, even a cursory examination of Al Jazeera against the backdrop of Western media outlets offers more than a mere East versus West analysis. It unravels the intricate tapestry of how cultural, political, and historical contexts influence the crafting and perception of news narratives on a global stage. This underlines the promise of a broader comparative media study in the future, suggesting that venturing beyond Western perspectives could yield invaluable insights into the complex interplay of factors that shape our global media narrative.

3. *Corpus* Selection: Media Company & News Site

For our study, we meticulously selected news outlets from specific countries to ensure a representative sample that captures varied perspectives (Yin, 2013; Cresswell, 2013). For sampling, it is necessary to conduct a purposive selection, integrating both extreme and typical cases to ensure maximum sample variation (Patton, 2002). Our primary aim was to achieve diversity in the *corpus*. Recognizing the unequal availability of news sites across countries, our selection incorporated both traditional (legacy) and digital-native media. Furthermore, we encompassed a wide array of hosting and participation practices, acknowledging that user engagement varies greatly based on an organization's nature and its technical capabilities (Domingo et al. 2008; Hermida and Thurman 2008; Ornebring 2008; Singer and Ashman, 2009).

Practical challenges, such as access restrictions to certain websites from outside their home countries, also influenced our selection process. Given the absence of a standardized ranking system for news outlets within each country, our approach was research-intensive. We collated data from multiple sources, including Similaweb¹³, academic articles, studies from research institutions for journalism¹⁴, and specialized directories¹⁵. Outlets that frequently emerged across these sources were further analyzed, leading us to select 10 prominent organizations per country. An overview of our chosen *corpus*, including insights on its weekly reach and brand trust, is detailed in Table 10, referencing Reuters' Digital News Reports (2019 – 2021). However, it is vital to highlight that our selection doesn't uniformly represent all parameters like coverage, audience, or editorial stance. While a homogenous sample often simplifies research analysis, we prioritized a diverse *corpus* as it more accurately mirrors the range of online news sites today.

A significant number of our selected outlets rely on third-party services for features like comment sections. We therefore explored platforms as The Coral Project¹⁶ and Jigsaw¹⁷, as well as companies such as Spot.im, OpenWeb¹⁸, Netino¹⁹ and Viafoura²⁰; and the use of the external plug-ins for comment sections from Facebook²¹ and Disqus²². Our *corpus*, albeit selective, offers a

¹³ Source: <https://similarweb.com/> in November 2020.

¹⁴ Resources from research institutions for journalism included the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas, the Pew Research Center, and the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

¹⁵ Resources from specialized directories included the Membership Puzzle (source: <https://membershippuzzle.org/>), Sembra Media (source: <https://sebramedia.org/>) and The Google News Initiative (source: <https://newsinitiative.withgoogle.com/>).

¹⁶ Source: <https://coralproject.net/>

¹⁷ Source: <https://jigsaw.google.com/>.

¹⁸ Source: <https://www.openweb.com/>

¹⁹ Source: <https://netino.fr/en/>

²⁰ Source: <https://viafoura.com/>

²¹ Source: <https://developers.facebook.com/docs/plugins/comments/>

²² Source: <https://help.disqus.com/en/>

snapshot of each country’s media landscape, considering the vastness of online news platforms during our study period. We believe it provides valuable insights into audience engagement spaces and the integration of User-Generated Content (UGC) into news narratives. Our overarching goal is to decipher user engagement on a global scale, emphasizing the importance of cross-national analyses, even if our primary lens is on Western nations.

Table 10 – Selected outlets per country and model. Weekly reach online (Reach) and brand trust (Trust) extracted from Reuter’s Digital News Report 2022 and compared with 2019, to evaluate the evolution during the time of observation.

Outlet	Country	Model	Reach [%]	Trust [%]
Wall Street Journal	USA	Liberal	-	43
New York Times			12 (-5)	41
Washington Post			10 (-5)	39
CNN.com			14 (-5)	39
FoxNews.com			14 (-5)	36
HuffPost			8 (-10)	32
BuzzFeed News			9 (-6)	26
Los Angeles Times			-	-
Politico			-	-
Vice			-	-
BBC.com	UK		43 (-7)	55
The Guardian			18 (+3)	48
Sky News			13 (-1)	45
The Independent			5 (-1)	42
The Telegraph			6 (-1)	36
Daily Mail			12 (-4)	23
The Mirror			5 (-4)	22
The Sun			5 (-4)	12

Metro.uk			5 (-1)	-		
The Canary			-	-		
NOS.nl	Netherlands	Democratic Corporatist	30 (+3)	77		
RTL News			18 (+1)	71		
AD.nl			28 (+1)	70		
NU.nl			42 (-1)	69		
De Volkskrant			9 (+2)	69		
De Telegraaf			22 (-1)	58		
Metro NL			6 (+1)	56		
DutchNews.nl			-	-		
NL Times			-	-		
The Correspondent			-	-		
Zeit Online			Germany		7 (-1)	58
DER Spiegel					13	57
Welt	9 (\pm 0)	56				
Focus	12 (-2)	55				
Stern	6 (-1)	52				
Bild	13 (\pm 0)	21				
Krautreporter	-	-				
Corretiv	-	-				
TAZ	-	-				
DW	-	-				
El País	Spain	Polarized Pluralist			18 (-6)	42
La vanguardia					9 (-4)	38

ABC			9 (-1)	37
20 minutos			13 (-2)	36
Eldiario.es			12 (-6)	36
El Confidencial			12 (-2)	33
La Voz de Galicia			-	-
Público			-	-
El Español			8	-
OK diario			13 (+1)	-
Le Monde	France		-	49
Mediapart			8 (+1)	44
Le Figaro			-	42
20 minutes			17 (+1)	40
Le Parisien			10	39
Liberation			-	-
Brut			-	-
Lintern@ute			6 (± 0)	-
Les Jours			-	-
France 24			-	-
Infobae	Argentina	Peripheral	40 (-2)	48
La Nación			19 (-3)	44
Clarín			21 (-9)	41
Página 12			10 (+1)	36
La Voz			9 (± 0)	35
Crónica			9	-

The Bubble			-	-
Red/Acción			-	-
La Prensa			-	-
Diario Popular			-	-
Uol Notícias	Brazil		41 (-3)	57
G1			44 (+5)	56
O Globo			27 (-4)	55
Folha de S. Paulo			14 (-7)	54
GaúchaZH			-	-
Correio Braziliense			-	-
Estadão			-	-
Agência Pública			-	-
Intercept Brasil			-	-
Nexo			-	-

Navigating the intricate domain of digital journalism necessitates a well-thought-out *corpus* selection strategy. Our methodology wasn't about filling gaps, but about building upon existing studies. We aim to make a meaningful contribution to the media studies field, offering an innovative cross-national analysis. Our choices reflect this ambition, striving for a delicate balance between seeking representativeness and capturing the dynamism of user engagement in the current online news ecosystem. Our *corpus* selection strategy was based upon:

I. Diversity and Representativeness:

- **Broad Perspective:** Following Yin (2013) and Cresswell (2013), the importance of diverse representation in research sampling can't be overemphasized. A broader perspective not only allows for multiple viewpoints but also promotes a more holistic understanding of a phenomenon, reducing bias.

- **Legacy vs. Digital-native Outlets:** By considering both traditional news sources and newer, digital-native ones, we captured the full spectrum of current news landscapes. This is crucial, especially in today's era where digital transformation has revolutionized news consumption (Pavlik and McIntosh, 2014).
- **Hosting & Participation Practices:** It is a known fact that user interaction varies significantly with the type of organization and its supporting technical infrastructure. Domingo et al. (2008) and Hermida and Thurman (2008) highlight these variances, and our *corpus*, by encompassing this diversity, captures the essence of user participation in its entirety.

II. Investigative Approach for Selection:

- **Unified Ranking Challenge:** Absence of a unified ranking presented a challenge, but also an opportunity to develop a more encompassing strategy. We leveraged multiple sources, reducing reliance on a single metric and potentially leading to a more unbiased selection.
- **Multi-source Consultation:** Platforms like Similaweb have been lauded for their insights on website traffic and reach (Chaffey, 2018). By cross-referencing this data with academic and professional studies, our *corpus* selection rests on a firm foundation of both quantitative and qualitative metrics.
- **Outlets Analysis:** The meticulous evaluation of each news outlet before final selection ensures that each participant in the *corpus* carries significant relevance to the study, ruling out outliers or less influential platforms.

III. Practical Constraints:

- **Geographic Accessibility:** Recognizing and addressing geo-restrictions on news websites is pivotal. As Napoli (2012) mentions, accessibility can influence content analysis, and by acknowledging this, we've tried to ensure the study's validity isn't compromised.

IV. Inclusion of External Services:

- **External Moderation and Participation Platforms:** It is no longer just about the news platform but also the third-party services they employ. Brands like Disqus have become central to user interactions on many websites (Reagle and Rhue, 2011). By

taking these into account, our *corpus* presents a fuller picture of user engagement landscapes.

V. Acknowledgment of Limitations:

- **Diverse yet Disparate:** While we have strived for diversity, this comes with its own challenges. But as Lottridge et al. (2012) highlight, there's often a trade-off between depth and breadth in sampling. Our *corpus*, although potentially lacking depth in specific parameters, captures the breadth essential for our objectives.
- **Snapshot of a Vast Landscape:** Digital news is a vast domain, and our *corpus* represents but a sliver. However, the principle of parsimony in research (Smith, 2018) supports our decision, suggesting that a well-chosen subset can adequately represent a larger whole.

VI. Value of Cross-national Comparison:

- **Western Focus with Global Implications:** While our focus remains on Western nations, the insights derived could have broader implications. Western media often sets global trends (Waisbord, 2004), making this study's results potentially applicable beyond the immediate geographic scope.

Our *corpus* selection, although marked by limitations, is comprehensive, grounded in methodical research, and poised to provide valuable insights into user engagement across news platforms. Each choice was backed by research principles and practical necessities, ensuring relevance and validity.

3.1 Limitations and Challenges

When conducting research, the size and diversity of the data set or *corpus* play a pivotal role in the credibility and generalization of the findings. In our study, we faced the challenge of a limited *corpus* size. This restriction not only limits the extent to which our findings can be broadly applied but also raises a concern about potential biases in our statistical analysis of quantitative data from our platform analysis. Specifically, if we were to adjust or normalize our results based on the entirety of our sample, outliers or rare occurrences might disproportionately skew our conclusions, leading to potential inaccuracies. Such normalization, when derived from a limited data set, can magnify deviations, creating a possibly misleading representation.

In a bid to uphold transparency and provide a comprehensive understanding of our results, we've opted for a two-pronged presentation strategy. Firstly, we present our findings in their raw

form as absolute values. These figures represent the actual, unadjusted numbers derived directly from our data, offering a straightforward depiction. However, understanding that context is key, we also provide relative numbers expressed as percentages. This method conveys how the absolute numbers relate to the total, but it is essential to note that these percentages are specifically tailored to our study's sample size, cautioning against direct comparisons with larger or different samples. In essence, our dual presentation approach ensures a balanced and transparent portrayal of our findings, acknowledging the inherent limitations stemming from our sample size while also providing a clear, unambiguous view of the data.

It should also be considered that our focus on engagement and participation on news sites is just one of many possible angles within media studies. We provide insights into this specific area, but other angles might shed light on different facets of the user experience or the dynamics of media consumption. While we believe our findings contribute valuable insights to the discourse, it is important to acknowledge the inherent constraints and limitations, such as empirical subjectivity. All empirical studies, including ours, come with a degree of subjectivity. The interpretation of data, particularly in media studies, is influenced by our perceptions, background, and theoretical orientation. We bring our unique perspective to the study. Despite our best efforts to remain objective, personal biases and perspectives can influence the framing of research questions, data interpretation, and conclusions drawn.

Our work was also conducted within a specific time frame and with limited resources. The digital media landscape is continuously evolving and what is relevant and true today might shift in a few months or years due to technological advances, changes in user behavior, or broader socio-political dynamics. With these considerations, we note our work was marked by what Chun (2008) describes as the ephemerality of digital media, as the internet may be available all the time, but specific content may not be: "Digital media is not always there. We suffer daily frustrations with digital sources that simply disappear. Digital media is degenerative, forgettable, and erasable" (Chun, 2008, p. 160).

Three news sites from our *corpus* closed during the period of our research. While The Correspondent (Netherlands) and BuzzFeed News (US) can still be accessed, even though they are no longer updated, The Bubble (Argentina) has been completely taken offline. Thankfully, the capacity to store information in the digital environment is surprising, as digital media can remain ephemera that last; though they are always on the verge of obsolescence or breakage, we can, in general, preserve it beyond the durability of their supports, considering that digital memories can be shared, copied, and sent (Chun, 2008). This is what allowed us to continue to study news sites that were closed and or taken offline. However, the time frame for the platform analysis, the data

collection from news sites and the final observation conducted of these news sites was different from the other media companies in our *corpus*.

In 2021, The Bubble, a once-prominent news platform, mysteriously vanished from the digital landscape. Despite exhaustive attempts to glean insights from stagnant social media channels and the vast web of search engines, the reasons for its sudden disappearance remained elusive. This unpredictability of digital presence underpins the core of our investigation. We managed to delve deep into the operational paradigms of The Bubble, unraveling its unique tools and audience participation strategies, given we had records of our observation, in the form of notes, data tables and print screens²³ of the webpage, conducted from January 2020 to December 2020 (in 2021 the website stopped being updated and then went offline).

The Correspondent and the BuzzFeed news continued online even after closing, allowing us to revisit the webpages and its content if necessary. For the Correspondent, the platform analysis, the data collection from the webpage and the final observation of the page was conducted up to January 2021, the month after the news site ended. As for BuzzFeed news, which closed May 2023, only the final observation was affected considering the time frame of our research, being conducted on the month the stopped being updated.

In many ways, our endeavor serves as a reflection of the larger challenges faced by researchers in the online realm. The digital world offers a trove of data, ripe for exploration, but it also demands resilience, adaptability, and sometimes, the acceptance of unresolved mysteries. In the context, it is possible to consider the implications for the online news ecosystem and empirical research conducted in this digital environment:

- **Ephemeral Nature of Online News:** The fact that online news platforms such as The Bubble can disappear entirely, while others like The Correspondent and BuzzFeed News might remain accessible but stagnant, underscores the volatile nature of the digital news landscape. News websites, unlike their print counterparts, don't have a physical presence, making them susceptible to vanishing overnight. This impermanence complicates research efforts, as sources can disappear before they've been thoroughly studied or cited.

²³ Print screen refers to a key function Source most computer keyboards, often labeled as "PrtScn" or similar variants. When pressed, it captures an image of the current display, essentially taking a screenshot. This image can then be pasted into various applications, such as image editors or document processors, for viewing, editing, or saving. Over time, modern operating systems and software have enhanced this basic function, allowing users to capture specific portions of the screen or include/exclude interface elements like the mouse cursor.

- **Digital Preservation vs. Technological Evolution:** As Chun (2008) mentions, the digital realm boasts a vast capacity to store information yet is constantly threatened by technological obsolescence. The software and hardware required to access specific digital content may become outdated, making it difficult, if not impossible, to access certain older digital archives. For empirical researchers, this means that while the digital age provides ample opportunities to gather and analyze data, it also demands a proactive approach to data preservation, ensuring that sources remain available for future study.
- **Impacts on Data Integrity and Longevity:** The notion that “digital media is degenerative, forgettable, and erasable” highlights concern for researchers who rely on digital sources for longitudinal studies. This inherent volatility requires additional efforts in data validation, as information might be altered or lost over time. It also emphasizes the importance of creating backup copies or even transitioning critical digital content to more durable mediums.
- **Potential for Wide Dissemination:** On a positive note, the ease with which digital content can be shared, copied, and sent means that even ephemeral news stories can leave lasting impressions, influencing public opinion and policy. This very characteristic can also aid researchers in gathering data from multiple sources, allowing for a broader, more comprehensive view of a topic. However, it also means that researchers must be vigilant about verifying the authenticity of shared or copied content.
- **Research Methodologies:** Given the ever-evolving online news landscape, researchers must adapt their methodologies to address the challenges posed by digital ephemerality. This might involve employing web archiving tools, collaborating with institutions dedicated to preserving digital history, and developing innovative strategies to verify and safeguard data.

While the dynamic nature of the online news ecosystem offers vast research opportunities, it also presents challenges that demand evolving strategies to ensure data integrity, authenticity, and longevity. Chun’s (2008) observations provide a critical lens through which researchers can approach and navigate this digital terrain.

CHAPTER 6

MEDIA LANDSCAPES: A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF COUNTRY-SPECIFIC SETTINGS

In a globalized world, it is paramount to acknowledge that media systems are not isolated entities. Their evolution is interwoven with technological advancements, cultural shifts, and economic dynamics. The convergence of these elements' crafts unique media landscapes across countries, each reflecting the socio-cultural *ethos* of its region. Thus, understanding this dynamic interplay becomes crucial for comprehending the broader context in which news organizations operate, further influencing their content, reach, and impact on the global audience.

While countries can find commonalities within media systems, such as France and Spain (*Polarized Pluralist* model), in which both private sector and public service legacy media were already relatively less robust before the rise of digital media and where there has been a high number of new digital-born news media organizations launched in recent years (Bruno and Nielsen, 2012); often countries from different classifications find more commonalities with organizations in other media systems, such as Germany (*Democratic Corporatist* model), and the UK (*Liberal* model), in which both private sector and public service legacy media have historically been stronger and where fewer digital-born news media organizations have been launched.

As such, national settings can still have an impact on news organizations. National differences matter when it comes to news organizations because each country has its own unique cultural, social, and political context. News organizations that are aware of and understand these differences are better able to provide news and information that is relevant and meaningful to their audience. They affect the way news is reported, regulated, and consumed. Understanding these differences can help news organizations to provide relevant and meaningful news and information to their audience, and to navigate the legal and regulatory environment in which they operate.

National media settings refer to the way in which media (such as television, newspapers, and radio) is controlled and regulated by a country's government or other national authority. This can include things like censorship laws, ownership regulations, and guidelines for the reporting of news and information. The specific national media settings can vary greatly from country to country, depending on the government's ideology, political climate, and cultural values. One way that national settings can affect news organizations is through laws and regulations related to freedom of the press and media ownership.

For example, in countries with strong protections for freedom of the press, news organizations may be able to operate more independently and report on sensitive issues without

fear of government censorship or retaliation. In contrast, in countries with weaker protections for press freedom, news organizations may face more restrictions on what they can report and may be subject to more government control. Another is that national settings can affect news organizations through cultural differences. Different cultures may have different expectations and attitudes towards the role of the media, and news organizations may need to adapt their reporting and storytelling to appeal to different audiences. Finally, economic conditions and market competition can also vary greatly between countries, which can affect the way news organizations operate and the resources they have available to them. For example, in countries with a strong economy and high level of market competition, news organizations may be able to invest more in digital infrastructure and new technologies to reach their audience. But in countries with a weaker economy or less competition, news organizations may have fewer resources available to them.

Overall, national settings play a role in shaping the way news organizations operate and interact with their audience in a globalized world. This is essential as national media settings can change how news organizations create a relationship with their audience. Different countries have different laws and regulations regarding media, which can affect how news organizations operate and how they interact with their audience. Additionally, cultural differences can also play a role in shaping the relationship between news organizations and their audience.

For the comprehensive exploration of online journalism across the eight selected countries – USA, UK, Spain, France, Netherlands, Germany, Brazil, and Argentina – it is imperative to first provide a systematic backdrop against which our subsequent analyses will unfold. This includes a brief overview of the current media landscape in each country and a deeper understanding of the multifaceted factors, both internal and external, that have shaped and continue to influence their media practices. As such, we delve deep into the myriad of factors considered during the selection of each country. These factors, both internal and external, play a pivotal role in shaping media practices and perspectives. From cultural norms deeply rooted in history to global economic trends sweeping across nations, our researched process attempted to ensure that our cross-national *corpus* encompassed a wide range of diverse and contrasting viewpoints, offering a rich tapestry of insights.

We consider as internal factors those that originate within the boundaries of the entity. For a country, these elements spring from its geographical, cultural, and political makeup. They are facets over which the country has direct or indirect control, deeply ingrained in its history, culture, or structure. Cultural norms and values, for instance, evolve over centuries and become intrinsic to a country's identity. On the other hand, factors such as historical context, political systems, and

legal frameworks are all shaped by decisions made within the country and, thus, are considered internal. For each country, we systematized and looked at **six principal internal factors**:

- **Historical Context:** Previous events, whether they be conflicts, revolutions, or other significant milestones, have lasting impacts on the present media landscape, influencing public perception and media's role in society.
- **Cultural Norms and Values:** Each nation carries its own set of beliefs, traditions, and practices. These deep-rooted cultural norms significantly influence media consumption, production, and interpretation.
- **Political Systems:** The governance framework, be it democratic, autocratic, or another system, plays a pivotal role in dictating the freedom, nature, and scope of media operations within a country.
- **Economic Systems:** Economic dynamics, driven by policies, market structures, and industrialization levels, can often influence the media industry's growth, financial health, and direction.
- **Education and Literacy:** The nature of a country's educational system shapes its media literacy, determining how media is consumed, understood, and critiqued.
- **Legal and Regulatory Frameworks:** The media's boundaries and freedoms are often dictated by the country's laws and regulations, ensuring media's adherence to rights, responsibilities, and ethical standards.

Contrastingly, external factors are those that come from outside the entity's boundaries, originating from the broader environment in which the entity functions. These elements typically lie beyond the direct control of the entity in question. While it is possible for the entity to adapt or respond to these influences, it cannot unilaterally alter or dictate them. For example, global economic trends, technological diffusion, and geopolitical influences are factors that emerge from global events or decisions made by a collective of countries. A single country might adapt to these trends, but it cannot single-handedly control or alter them. We outlined **six principal external factors**:

- **Geopolitical Influences:** A country's global alignments, relationships, and conflicts can shape its media narrative, especially in terms of international news coverage and perspectives.

- **Global Economic Trends:** International economic shifts can have ripple effects on national media industries, influencing factors like advertising revenues, subscription models, and more.
- **Technological Diffusion:** The adoption rate and the way in which global technological advancements are integrated can have a significant impact on the media landscape, influencing everything from news dissemination channels to audience engagement methods.
- **Migration and Diaspora:** As people move across borders, they bring with them new perspectives, cultures, and stories, influencing the media narrative and introducing diverse voices to the discourse.
- **Environmental Factors:** Issues like global climate change not only become central media narratives but also impact how countries, based on their geographical vulnerabilities, prioritize, and present such news.
- **Global Media and Cultural Exports:** The pervasive reach of global media influences local cultures. International movies, music, series, and other cultural exports can shape public opinion, trends, and even news narratives.

Each of the selected factors, both internal and external, profoundly impacts the media landscape. Their relevance is not only because they shape the media directly, such as through direct regulation, but also because they exert indirect influences like cultural norms. The richness of this selection stems from its comprehensive nature, ensuring that every aspect of the media environment is considered. While it might seem that factors like economic systems and global economic trends are alike, in truth, they provide distinct lenses into the media landscape. The former delves into a country's financial policies, while the latter scans the horizon of global financial movements. We recognize the interconnectedness of these factors. For instance, a country's political system invariably influences its legal stances, especially concerning media. By examining this web of relationships, we obtain a clearer picture of the forces shaping media narratives and operations.

This choice of factors values the diversity of elements influencing the media, ranging from the overtly political to the subtly cultural. Its flexibility is another commendable trait, ensuring that while the framework remains universally applicable, it can be tailored to individual country contexts. Considering the rapid evolution of the media in the 21st century, the factors also reflect contemporary changes. Aspects like technological diffusion and global media exports cater to both

traditional media forms and their newer, digital counterparts. Ultimately, this comprehensive approach allows for a nuanced interpretation of the intricate and multifaceted influences on the media today.

By delving into these factors, we aim to present a holistic view of the media ecosystem in each country. This foundational understanding ensures that our analysis and findings are contextualized, offering richer insights and more nuanced interpretations. We note that the examples we provide for each country provide are but a snapshot of the diverse ways in which internal and external factors have affected/been affecting their media practices in the recent past and have the intention only to contextualize and paint a general picture of the country's media ecosystem.

1. United States of America²⁴

The United States media landscape is multifaceted, having evolved through a unique blend of historical, political, cultural, and economic influences. As we venture to understand the intricate interplay of factors molding its narrative, it is pivotal to highlight the country's rich journalistic heritage. This heritage has not only shaped the professional ideals of the Western world but has also echoed the principles of a democratic society valuing freedom of expression and accountability.

The country's media landscape has consistently mirrored and shaped its society, featuring a diverse mix of commercial, public, and alternative media. Throughout its history, the U.S. has upheld a free press system, prioritized limited government intervention and embracing market forces (Hallin, 2019). This dynamic media environment has not only responded to technological advancements but has frequently led the way, pioneering innovations from the printing press era to the digital age. Central to the American media *ethos* is its historical formation of journalism.

The U.S. concept of journalism has been instrumental in shaping Western societal views on the role of the press. The ideals of objective reporting, accuracy, fairness, and serving the public interest, albeit debated and nuanced, have their roots in the U.S. and have been largely exported to and adapted by Western societies (Schudson, 2001). The muckrakers of the early 20th century, for instance, played a pivotal role in marrying investigative journalism with social reform, setting a precedent for the watchdog function of the media (Aucoin, 2007).

²⁴ While we aim to provide a comprehensive overview of media systems across all countries, the U.S. receives greater attention due to its significant global influence in geopolitics, economics, and culture. Its pivotal role in shaping Western culture, globalization, and modern capitalism has generated extensive research, analysis, and reporting. Additionally, the U.S.'s involvement in key global events, trends, and technological advancements has naturally led to more extensive documentation and analysis of its internal dynamics.

Currently, media companies are navigating an age of digitization, facing both challenges and opportunities. The decline of traditional print circulation contrasts with the rise of online news consumption. This shift to digital has democratized news dissemination, but it is also ushered in challenges like the proliferation of misinformation, altered revenue models, and the monopolistic rise of tech giants (Newman et al., 2020).

1.1 Internal Factors Shaping the U.S. Media Practices

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the U.S. media landscape, it is essential to delve into the multifaceted factors that have played pivotal roles in shaping its development and current state. These diverse factors encompass historical events, legal and regulatory frameworks, and cultural norms, each leaving a distinct imprint on the media industry and its practices. They provide the foundation for understanding the complex landscape of American media.

Table 11 – Internal Factors Shaping the U.S. Media Practices.

FACTOR	DESCRIPTION
Historical Context	The U.S. media landscape has been influenced by key historical events, including: First Amendment to the Constitution, Zenger Trial (1735), WWII: Edward R. Murrow’s broadcasts, Watergate scandal, and 9/11: CNN round-the-clock coverage.
Cultural Norms and Values	The U.S. embodies a cultural mosaic, a reflection evident in its media landscape. Notable instances encompass media outlets like Telemundo and Univision, the NPR podcast <i>This American Life</i> , and features like <i>American Dream</i> in Forbes, alongside popular shows like <i>Shark Tank</i> .
Political Systems	The democratic framework of the U.S. exerts a profound influence on media freedoms and presents unique challenges. Illustrative cases include the emergence of partisan media outlets such as Fox News and MSNBC, as well as the dynamics of the 2016 Presidential Debates.
Economic Systems	The capitalist system influences media revenue and consolidation, with notable examples including digital giants like Google and Facebook, digital paywalls exemplified by The New York Times, and media consolidation as seen with the Sinclair Broadcast Group.
Education and Literacy	The development of media literacy is significantly influenced by the educational system. Notable examples illustrating this influence include the Center for Media Literacy (CML) and the comprehensive study conducted by the Stanford History Education Group in 2016.

Legal and Regulatory Frameworks	While the First Amendment is foundational, media and communication are also subject to regulations. Notable examples include the Pentagon Papers case (1971), libel and defamation laws, the FCC's Fairness Doctrine, and Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act.
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As summarized in Table 11, the internal factors that contribute to shaping the U.S media landscape include:

- Historical Context:** The U.S. media landscape has been shaped by numerous historical events, creating a rich tapestry of journalistic traditions and norms. The country's founding, steeped in the fight against tyranny, enshrined freedom of the press in the First Amendment to the Constitution, reflecting the founders' beliefs in the necessity of an informed public for a successful democracy. For example, the Zenger Trial in 1735 helped lay the groundwork for freedom of the press, as John Peter Zenger was acquitted of printing criticisms of the colonial governor. During World War II, American journalism, exemplified by the likes of Edward R. Murrow's radio broadcasts, played a vital role in maintaining public morale and support for the war effort. Meanwhile, the Watergate scandal of the 1970s, where investigative journalists like Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of The Washington Post exposed presidential misconduct, solidified the media's role as the "Fourth Estate." More recently, the attacks on September 11, 2001, saw news outlets such as CNN offering round-the-clock coverage, setting a precedent for how breaking news events would be covered in the 21st century.
- Cultural Norms and Values:** The U.S. is a melting pot of cultures, each bringing its own unique set of beliefs, traditions, and practices. This diversity is evident in media outlets like Telemundo and Univision, which cater to the Hispanic community, reflecting the nation's multicultural fabric. American values of individualism and freedom are deeply rooted in culture, translating to a media that often emphasizes personal stories, as seen in programs like NPR's "This American Life." The idea of the "American Dream" has influenced narratives of success, aspiration, and perseverance, evident in iconic publications like Forbes or popular TV shows like "Shark Tank."
- Political Systems:** The U.S., as a federal democratic republic, offers considerable freedoms to its media entities. This democratic system emphasizes checks and balances, with the media traditionally playing a role in holding power to account.

However, the relationship between media and politics has always been complex. The rise of partisan media outlets, particularly in the cable news landscape, is exemplified by networks like Fox News and MSNBC. During election cycles, events like the 2016 Presidential Debates become pivotal media spectacles that shape public opinion, leading to debates around bias, misinformation, and the responsibility of media in a democratic setup.

- **Economic Systems:** The U.S.'s capitalist economic system has profound implications for its media industry. With the advent of the digital age, media giants like Google and Facebook have redefined advertising dynamics, leading to significant revenue shifts. The private ownership model means that profit margins, advertising revenues, and market shares play a critical role, seen in the rise of digital paywalls by outlets like The New York Times. Challenges, such as the decline of local newspapers, are evident in the closure of papers like the Youngstown Vindicator in Ohio. Media consolidation is illustrated by corporations like Sinclair Broadcast Group, which owns a significant number of local TV stations across the U.S., stirring concerns about diversity of voice.
- **Education and Literacy:** In the United States, the educational system plays an influential role in shaping media literacy. It has been widely accepted that a democracy requires an informed citizenry to function effectively. This means that citizens must have the tools to understand, interpret, and critically analyze the media they consume. For instance, the Center for Media Literacy (CML) has been at the forefront of advancing media literacy education since the 1980s, providing resources, training, and support to educators across the country. Over the past decades, American educational institutions have introduced media literacy courses aimed at enhancing students' ability to dissect and understand media content. These courses often explore themes such as identifying bias, understanding journalistic standards, and discerning the difference between credible sources and misinformation. The rise of digital media and the Internet has only intensified the need for such education, given the proliferation of fake news and echo chambers in the digital space. An illuminating example is the study by the Stanford History Education Group in 2016, which found that many students struggled to differentiate between real and fake news. Yet, despite these educational endeavors, challenges persist. Numerous studies have indicated that a significant portion of Americans struggle to differentiate between real and fake news, underscoring the need for more robust media literacy initiatives.

- **Legal and Regulatory Frameworks:** The legal landscape governing media in the U.S. is rooted in the First Amendment to the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of the press. This foundational principle ensures that journalists can operate without fear of government intervention, enabling them to hold power to account and serve as the fourth estate. An emblematic instance showcasing this principle in action was during the Pentagon Papers case in 1971. The Nixon administration attempted to prevent The New York Times and The Washington Post from publishing a top-secret Department of Defense study. However, the Supreme Court upheld the media's right to publish, reaffirming the First Amendment's protections. However, the media landscape isn't entirely unregulated. Laws related to libel, defamation, and obscenity set boundaries on what can be published. Additionally, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulates interstate and international communications by radio, television, wire, satellite, and cable. The Fairness Doctrine, instituted by the FCC in 1949 and deemed unconstitutional in 1987, is a testament to the evolving regulatory frameworks surrounding media. In recent years, with the emergence of social media platforms as dominant sources of information, debates around content moderation, misinformation, and the role of these platforms in shaping public discourse have come to the forefront. Discussions around Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which provides protections for online platforms against liabilities for user-generated content, exemplify the complexities and challenges of modern media regulations.

The multifaceted influences on the U.S. media landscape, from historical events to current regulatory challenges, underscore the complexity and dynamism of the nation's media practices. Each factor, be it cultural, political, economic, educational, or legal, intertwines with the others, weaving a rich tapestry that captures the essence of American media. Understanding these intricacies is pivotal not just for those within the industry, but for anyone looking to comprehend the broader American socio-political environment. As we reflect on the role and nature of media in the U.S., it becomes evident that the past, present, and future of this landscape is shaped by a confluence of internal factors, each echoing the evolving *ethos* of American society.

1.2 External Factors Shaping the U.S. Media Practices

The U.S. media landscape is a dynamic interplay of both domestic factors and global influences. While internal events and dynamics play a significant role, broader global events, trends, and developments equally shape the nation's media narratives. The following table (Table 12)

delineates key global factors shaping U.S. media discourse, highlighting the intricate relationship between domestic narratives and international events.

Table 12 – External Factors Shaping the U.S. Media Practices.

FACTOR	DESCRIPTION
Geopolitical Influences	The U.S., as a major world power, consistently covers international events and conflicts in its media. Topics like the Syrian Civil War, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and trade tensions with China often mirror the nation's diplomatic positions.
Global Economic Trends	Events such as the 2008 financial crisis and the rise of China as an economic powerhouse deeply influence U.S. media narratives, showcasing the interconnectedness of global economies.
Technological Diffusion	With platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube originating from the U.S., global user bases have altered both the distribution and consumption of news. Global events related to these platforms, like the Cambridge Analytica scandal, also become central to U.S. news.
Migration and Diaspora	Being a nation of immigrants, the U.S. media showcases diverse cultures and experiences from around the globe. Topics like the Syrian refugee crisis and the stories of Dreamers have significant influence on both media and political landscapes.
Environmental Factors	The U.S. media's portrayal of international environmental events, such as the Australian bushfires or the Paris Agreement, affects national policies and the public's perception of global environmental challenges.
Global Media and Cultural Exports	While the U.S. is a significant cultural exporter through Hollywood, it also absorbs international media influences. The popularity of global phenomena like BTS or <i>Money Heist</i> and platforms like Netflix underline the mutual cultural exchange.

The intricate relationship between U.S. media and external factors epitomizes a globalized world where information and narratives effortlessly transcend borders. In this era of globalization, national media systems no longer exist in isolation but engage in constant dialogue with global events, trends, and discourses. A multitude of influences, spanning geopolitical dynamics, shifting global economies, technological advancements, and human migration patterns, collectively shape the intricate tapestry of American media. This dynamic landscape places journalists, editors, and media organizations in a pivotal and demanding role. They must adeptly navigate these influences,

discerning the significance of global events and understanding their nuanced implications for domestic audiences. Furthermore, as these factors continually evolve, they present the U.S. media with both opportunities and challenges. Opportunities to leverage global stories, diverse perspectives, and innovative technologies for enhanced storytelling, yet also challenges in confronting biases, misinformation, and the complex geopolitics often underlying global events.

As summarized in Table 12, these factors encompass:

- **Geopolitical Influences:** The United States' role as a major world power implies that its media frequently covers international events and conflicts. The U.S. media's narrative on the Syrian Civil War or the Russia-Ukraine conflict, for instance, often reflects the country's diplomatic stances and geopolitical interests. Additionally, ongoing trade tensions with China, as seen during the Trump administration, dominated headlines, shaping public opinion about international economic and political relations.
- **Global Economic Trends:** The 2008 global financial crisis, originating from the U.S. housing market collapse, showcased how intertwined the world's economies have become. U.S. media outlets extensively reported on ripple effects felt across the world, from the European debt crisis to economic slowdowns in Asia. Moreover, the rise of China as an economic superpower has continually influenced narratives on global trade, manufacturing, and technology sectors.
- **Technological Diffusion:** The rapid global diffusion of internet technologies has transformed the U.S. media landscape. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, which originated in the U.S., have global user bases, influencing not only how news is disseminated but also how it is consumed. The global nature of these platforms means that events like the Cambridge Analytica scandal or debates on global digital privacy regulations become pertinent news topics in the U.S.
- **Migration and Diaspora:** The U.S., being a nation of immigrants, has a rich tapestry of cultures and stories from around the world. The Syrian refugee crisis, or the stories of Dreamers (young immigrants brought to the U.S. as children), have become central narratives, often influencing political discourse and policy decisions. Media outlets like Telemundo and Univision highlight the Latinx experience, showing the intricate relationship between migration patterns and media representation.

- **Environmental Factors:** The U.S. media's coverage of global environmental issues, such as the Paris Agreement, has implications for national policies and public sentiment. Events like the Australian bushfires or the Amazon rainforest fires become international focal points, highlighting the interconnectedness of global environmental challenges and U.S. media's role in covering them.
- **Global Media and Cultural Exports:** While Hollywood remains a dominant cultural exporter, the U.S. media landscape is also influenced by international media. The meteoric rise of the Korean pop band BTS, or the global acclaim for Spanish series like "Money Heist", demonstrates the two-way street of cultural exchange. Additionally, platforms like Netflix have globalized entertainment, bringing international content to U.S. audiences, and exporting U.S. content worldwide.

The intricacies of the U.S. media landscape, stemming from its rich history and its interplay with various internal and external factors, have profound implications for news sites and journalism in the online ecosystem. In the digital age, the fluidity of news dissemination and consumption has redefined journalistic norms, prompting ethical debates and innovations in storytelling (Bell, 2016). With increasing digital fragmentation, the onus is on media entities to maintain audience trust, all while combating issues like echo chambers and misinformation (Pew Research Center, 2018).

The U.S., with its pioneering role in globalization and modernity trends, casts a significant shadow. As global media practices often mirror or react to those in the U.S., the implications are not just domestic. The American media's approach to digitization, business models, representation, and content creation often becomes a blueprint or a cautionary tale for media industries worldwide (Thussu, 2007). Given this, understanding the complex U.S. media landscape becomes crucial. As it continues to adapt to digital disruptions, its trajectory will offer insights into the future of journalism, the relationship between media entities and audiences, and the broader implications for global media dynamics.

In essence, the multifaceted influences on the U.S. media underscore its pivotal role in an era marked by rapid globalization, digital transformation, and the redefinition of traditional boundaries – be they geographic, cultural, or political. The U.S. media, in turn, becomes not just a mirror reflecting global dynamics but an active participant in shaping and interpreting these narratives for its audience.

1.3 The U.S. Online News Ecosystem

The U.S. media, historically renowned for its foundational journalistic ideals, stands as a beacon for Western society with principles such as objectivity, freedom of the press, and public accountability shaping its operations (Schudson, 1978). As we delve deeper into the digital age, marked by the rise of technological advancements and evolving societal norms, U.S. journalism's storied legacy intertwines with the forces of modernity, globalization, and capitalism, especially in the realm of online news sites and apps. Platforms like CNN, The New York Times, or Fox News apps have swiftly adapted to the modern age, becoming mainstays for an American audience keen on instant, multimedia-rich content. As the world becomes more interconnected, these digital frontiers navigate a maze of global narratives. Political upheavals in distant lands or environmental calamities across the globe can quickly dominate U.S. digital headlines. This intricate global tapestry is further underscored by the significant presence of international news entities like BBC or Al Jazeera in the American online media space, reflecting an audience with a burgeoning global consciousness (Pew Research Center, 2018).

The capitalist *ethos*, so intrinsically American, casts its shadow over the online news ecosystem. In the face of dwindling traditional print sales, digital news platforms, responding to the imperatives of market dynamics, are exploring diverse monetization strategies. The rise of paywalls in esteemed outlets such as The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal testifies to this trend. However, the relentless chase for profit occasionally propels these platforms towards sensationalism, igniting debates around media ethics and journalistic integrity in the era of 'clickbait' (Newman et al., 2020). Moreover, with global events, technological innovations, and shifting economic scenarios reshaping the media landscape, platforms are in a constant dance of adaptation, discerning the implications of such shifts for their domestic audiences.

In essence, the U.S. online news ecosystem is not merely an information conduit but a mirror reflecting the dynamic interplay of history, culture, politics, economics, and global forces. Its intricacies, challenges, and evolutions offer invaluable insights into the continually transforming relationship between journalism and its audience.

2. United Kingdom

The UK's media stands intricately weaves together the threads of its historic traditions with the innovations of contemporary evolution (Firmstone, 2019). Central to this rich landscape is a blend of a robustly funded broadcasting sector, a spirited national press, and an emerging digital forefront. As with many nations, the UK has seen its media evolve and adapt, yet what sets

it apart is its unique relationship with both its storied past and an ever-evolving present (Firmstone, 2019).

Historically, the British media system has been marked by its robust journalistic integrity, grounded in a framework that balances freedom with its societal and monarchical underpinnings. The inception of the printing press marked the dawn of a new era, positioning the UK as a significant influencer in the global media arena. Through the epochs of its development, the UK's media has chronicled the nation's evolution while also setting benchmarks for journalistic standards worldwide (Thurman, Cornia, & Kunert, 2016). This rich tradition, characterized by rigorous investigative standards and a distinct tabloid culture, reflects both a reverence for history and a relentless pursuit of truth (Mayhew, 2018).

An integral pillar of this landscape is the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Established in 1922, the BBC has consistently endeavored to inform, educate, and entertain its audience, reinforcing the nation's commitment to unbiased news dissemination (Ofcom, 2017). While financed primarily through the TV license fee, shielding it from many commercial pressures, the BBC grapples with contemporary debates surrounding its role and relevance in the digital age.

Despite the resilience of institutions like the BBC, the UK's media realm isn't without challenges. The national press, once a cornerstone of British daily life, has seen a decline in readership and circulation, echoing a global trend favoring digital news outlets (Audit Bureau of Circulations, n.d.; Mayhew, 2018). Legacy media organizations have responded by integrating the internet into their strategies, launching dedicated platforms and applications (Local Media Works, 2018). Yet, even as online readerships for some outstrip their print counterparts, navigating the digital realm profitably remains elusive.

One defining characteristic of the British press is its pronounced 'press parallelism' (Firmstone, 2019). Unlike many of its global peers, UK journalism, while devoted to distinguishing factual news from opinion, often reflects political leanings. This inclination towards mirroring political party divisions, despite the absence of formal affiliations, is often more apparent in tabloids. It is no surprise, then, that readers frequently gravitate towards newspapers that echo their own political sentiments. However, the realm of media consumption in the UK has witnessed a significant shift. As per Reuters' Digital Report from 2017 (Newman et al., 2017), a tipping point was reached wherein individuals sourcing news from online platforms (74%) outnumbered those relying on traditional mediums like television (69%) and print (41%).

The British media is a multifaceted entity, deeply interwoven with the country's rich history, societal values, and intricate political, economic, and educational structures. From the historical milestones that set foundational principles to the contemporary challenges posed by

market dynamics and the pervasive influence of tabloid culture (Firmstone, 2019), the UK’s media landscape is a testament to its resilience and adaptability.

At its core, the UK online news ecosystem stands not just as a distributor of information, but as a kaleidoscope, reflecting the vibrant interplay of history, culture, politics, society, and international dynamics. Its nuances, hurdles, and metamorphoses provide profound lessons about the ever-evolving bond between journalism and its diverse readership (Thurman, Cornia, & Kunert, 2016).

As the UK forges ahead in the digital era, it faces challenges inherent to this transformation—navigating misinformation, evolving revenue models, and addressing tech monopolies. Yet, in the face of these challenges, the UK’s media, with its dual character of honoring tradition while embracing change, offers invaluable lessons and insights. The journey of British media serves as both a testament to its rich heritage and a beacon for its future trajectory.

2.1 Internal Factors Shaping the UK Media Practices

The UK possesses a distinctive media landscape, characterized by its rich history and diverse cultural influences. The evolution from a colonial power to its current democratic status has been significantly shaped by a myriad of factors that continue to exert a profound influence on its media practices. As we delve into these influential factors, we embark on an exploration of the intricate tapestry that constitutes the UK’s media landscape. By categorizing key elements that have played a pivotal role throughout its history and into contemporary times, we aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the forces that have left an indelible mark on the nation’s media practices.

Table 13 – Internal Factors Shaping the UK Media Practices.

FACTOR	DESCRIPTION
Historical Context	The UK’s media has been shaped by its colonial past and key historical events, including the Magna Carta in 1215, the establishment of the BBC, and the 1960s and 70s pop culture explosion, which introduced color television.
Cultural Norms and Values	The reflection of British values and the nation’s multicultural legacy is evident in its media, with notable examples including programs like <i>Have I Got News for You</i> and <i>Downton Abbey</i> , as well as multicultural outlets like Channel 4

Political Systems	The UK's parliamentary monarchy defines its relationship with the media and underscores the media's role in significant political events, such as the Brexit referendum and The Leveson Inquiry.
Economic Systems	The UK's media landscape is influenced by its capitalist origins and contemporary market dynamics, as exemplified by the rise of digital giants like Google, the decline of local newspapers, and the prominence of the Murdoch media empire.
Education and Literacy	British institutions promote media literacy through prestigious journalism programs at institutions like Oxford and Cambridge, alongside a strong emphasis on critical thinking in the curriculum.
Legal and Regulatory Frameworks	While valuing media freedom, the UK maintains regulations to uphold responsibility and fairness, including oversight by regulatory bodies like Ofcom, laws regarding libel and privacy, and ongoing debates about tabloid culture.

As summarized in Table 13, the internal factors that contribute to shaping the UK media landscape include:

- **Historical Context:** The UK's colonial history, its global expansion, and the subsequent decline of its empire have all informed its media landscape. Iconic events, such as the Magna Carta's signing in 1215, laid down principles that would later inspire discussions about rights and freedoms, indirectly influencing the press. The BBC's establishment as a public service broadcaster was pivotal in setting a tone of impartiality and integrity in reporting. The 1960s and 70s, marked by an explosion of pop culture and changing societal norms, brought forth an invigorated media landscape, exemplified by the launch of colour television.
- **Cultural Norms and Values:** British media often reflects the country's values of fairness, humour, and understatement. This is evident in programs ranging from satirical news shows like "Have I Got News for You" to period dramas such as "Downton Abbey." The legacy of the empire has led to a multicultural British society, influencing media outlets like Channel 4 that cater to diverse audiences.
- **Political Systems:** The UK, with its parliamentary monarchy, has a complex relationship between its media and the state. Media played pivotal roles in events like the Brexit referendum, highlighting its influence in shaping public opinion. The

Leveson Inquiry, which investigated the ethics of the British press, underscored the intricate balance between media freedom and responsibility.

- **Economic Systems:** Historically rooted in capitalism, UK's media is influenced by market dynamics. The rise of digital giants, such as Google, has disrupted traditional revenue streams. Concerns like the decline of local newspapers or the Murdoch media empire's vast influence reflect challenges in maintaining a diverse media landscape.
- **Education and Literacy:** Britain's educational institutions have been instrumental in fostering a culture of media literacy. Universities such as Oxford and Cambridge have journalism programs that shape the next generation of media professionals. The emphasis on critical thinking and source evaluation in the British curriculum, especially with the rise of digital media, prepares citizens for a media-saturated world.
- **Legal and Regulatory Frameworks:** The UK's media regulations, while promoting freedom, also enforce responsibility. Bodies like Ofcom ensure media outlets maintain standards of fairness and impartiality. Laws concerning libel and privacy have often been at the center of debates, especially with the tabloid culture.

The British media is a multifaceted entity, deeply interwoven with the country's rich history, societal values, and intricate political, economic, and educational structures. From the historical milestones that set foundational principles to the contemporary challenges posed by market dynamics and the pervasive influence of tabloid culture, the UK's media landscape is a testament to its resilience and adaptability. Legal and regulatory frameworks ensure accountability, with particular emphasis given to the sensationalism and ethics of tabloid journalism. Meanwhile, the nation's emphasis on education reinforces media literacy, equipping its populace to navigate an ever-evolving media realm. The intertwined tapestry of these elements creates a media culture that is uniquely and unmistakably British.

2.1.1 A note on Tabloid Culture

In the context of the UK's national media landscape, it is essential to consider the country's tabloid culture, which has wielded significant influence and generated substantial controversy over the years. The term *tabloid* originally referred to the size of the newspaper, which is smaller than the traditional broadsheet. Over time, however, the term has become synonymous with a particular style of journalism that tends to emphasize sensationalism, celebrity news, and sometimes, a certain political bias. Some of the most well-known tabloid newspapers in the UK include *The Sun*, *The*

Daily Mail, The Mirror, and The Express. These papers have large circulations and have been influential in shaping public opinion.

UK tabloids are distinct in their use of captivating headlines, abundant photographic content, and an emphasis on celebrity news. They sometimes prioritize emotionally charged or sensational stories over deeper, analytical content. A glaring testament to their controversial nature was the phone hacking incident in the 2010s involving “The News of the World.” This scandal, uncovering the unethical practices of tapping into voicemails of celebrities, royals, and even victims of crime, led to profound public backlash, the paper’s shutdown, and the inception of the Leveson Inquiry to examine press ethics. Furthermore, these publications have garnered criticism for their representations of various segments of society, such as women, immigrants, and minority groups. They are often viewed as magnifiers of societal issues, with tendencies to sensationalize rather than provide objective narratives. Their influence was particularly evident in political events like the Brexit campaign, where they played an instrumental role in guiding public opinion. The digital revolution has not left this sector untouched. Traditional tabloids have pivoted to the online realm, with sites like “Daily Mail Online” ranking amongst the world’s most frequented news portals. Though riddled with critiques, tabloid culture in the UK remains a formidable force in the media spectrum, both reflecting and influencing the many facets of British society.

2.2 External Factors Shaping the UK Media Practices

The UK’s media landscape reflects its dynamic interplay with global events, economic trends, and cultural shifts. Rooted in its colonial history and modern geopolitical role, the British media provides comprehensive coverage on a wide range of topics that span from environmental concerns to technological advancements.

Table 14 – External Factors Shaping the UK Media Practices.

FACTOR	DESCRIPTION
Geopolitical Influences	British media delves deep into global dynamics with detailed coverage on major events like the Iraq War, escalating South China Sea tensions, and ever-evolving post-Brexit relationships with the EU.
Global Economic Trends	Economic stories have been largely influenced by milestone events such as the 2008 financial crisis. Additionally, shifts like India’s booming IT sector, a former colony, also find emphasis in the British media landscape.

Technological Diffusion	Digital platforms, notably Facebook and Twitter, greatly influence public discourse in the UK. Events like the introduction of GDPR regulations spotlight the digital policies' international reach on the UK.
Migration and Diaspora	The UK's rich colonial history and diverse populace manifest in media narratives, with prominent stories about the Windrush generation and ongoing discussions centered on multiculturalism.
Environmental Factors	British media underscores global environmental milestones and challenges, from the pivotal Paris Agreement to urgent topics like plastic pollution in oceans and global forest fires.
Global Media and Cultural Exports	The UK is both a major cultural exporter, with giants like the BBC, and an avid consumer, evidenced by the soaring popularity of K-pop and American TV series within the country.

As summarized in Table 14, external factors that shape the UK media landscape within the context of global events, trends, and shifts include:

- **Geopolitical Influences:** The UK's prominent role on the global stage means its media dedicates extensive coverage to world events. This spans from the complexities of the Iraq War to ongoing South China Sea tensions and the nuanced post-Brexit relationships with EU nations.
- **Global Economic Trends:** Economic narratives in British media have pivoted around significant global occurrences. The aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis brought austerity discussions to the forefront, while economic transformations in former colonies, like India's IT surge, are also keenly observed.
- **Technological Diffusion:** In an era dominated by digital communication, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have become mainstays in public dialogue. The establishment of GDPR regulations further exemplifies how international digital standards impact the UK.
- **Migration and Diaspora:** With its roots entwined in colonial history, the UK's media frequently delves into stories of its diverse communities, be it the historical journeys of the Windrush generation or the broader, contemporary discourse on multiculturalism.

- **Environmental Factors:** British media has a firm commitment to spotlighting global environmental issues and initiatives. The nation's alignment with global measures like the Paris Agreement is evident, as is its dedication to raising awareness on challenges like oceanic pollution or forest blazes.
- **Global Media and Cultural Exports:** The UK thrives in a reciprocal global media environment, exporting revered content via entities like the BBC, while also embracing international cultural waves, including the rise of K-pop or the widespread allure of American television shows.

The British media setting stands as a microcosm of the wider global information landscape, demonstrating how localized reporting and perspectives are invariably linked to larger global phenomena. Whether reacting to geopolitical developments, adapting to technological trends, or showcasing the multi-faceted tapestry of its diaspora, the UK media remains attuned to the world's pulse. In the interplay of domestic and international narratives, what emerges is a media system that not only informs its populace about the world but also positions the UK within the broader global context, testifying to the power of globalization in shaping public discourse.

2.3 The UK Online News Ecosystem

The UK's media, with its storied traditions and standards of impartiality, serves as a cornerstone for global journalism, with foundational principles like accuracy, the public's right to know, and an emphasis on balance characterizing its operations (Curran, 2002). In today's rapidly digitizing world, marked by technological innovation and changing cultural mores, British journalism entwines its rich heritage with the currents of modernity, digitalization, and globalization, especially evident within the realm of online news portals and apps.

Platforms such as BBC News, The Guardian, or The Telegraph apps have seamlessly transitioned into the digital era, becoming primary sources for a British audience hungry for immediate, multimedia-intensive content. As the boundaries between nations blur, these digital hubs weave narratives from both local and global events. An election in a European neighbor or a natural disaster in Asia can promptly rise to the forefront of UK's digital news. The interlacing of global events in the British digital news sphere is accentuated by the conspicuous role of international media entities like CNN or DW, underlining a readership with an expanding global perspective.

The quintessential British commitment to public service, embodied by entities like the BBC, brings its own nuances to the online news ecosystem. While the digital domain does witness

market-driven outlets, the sense of duty to public knowledge often tempers the commercial pursuits. Nevertheless, the challenge of sustaining digital journalism has led several outlets, like The Times, to introduce paywalls. This quest for sustainability sometimes flirts with the boundaries of sensationalism, kindling discussions on media standards and journalistic values in the age of viral content (Newman et al., 2021). With the tidal waves of international events, digital breakthroughs, and evolving economic models influencing the media sector, these platforms are perpetually recalibrating, understanding what such tides mean for their national and global readers.

At its core, the UK online news ecosystem stands not just as a distributor of information, but as a kaleidoscope, reflecting the vibrant interplay of history, culture, politics, society, and international dynamics. Its nuances, hurdles, and metamorphoses provide profound lessons about the ever-evolving bond between journalism and its diverse readership.

3. Spain

Spain's media environment is a tapestry, rich in history, reflecting distinct regional identities and influenced by dynamic socio-political shifts. Understanding the nation's media landscape is tantamount to recognizing its deep-seated journalistic heritage—a heritage that has paralleled Spain's democratic journey and firmly rooted the principles of free speech and public accountability (Salaverría, 2007). Historically, Spanish journalism has left an indelible mark on European media paradigms, emphasizing the importance of objective reporting and public service (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The media, during the pivotal "Transition Period" following Franco's demise, played a cardinal role in molding Spain's nascent democratic identity (Salaverría & Barrera, 2009). Moving from a stifling Francoist regime to embracing a democratic *ethos*, Spain's commitment to upholding the freedom of the press echoed European democratic values (Medina & Ojer Goñi, 2010).

The media landscape has seen an eclectic blend of public, private, and regional outlets, offering a variety of perspectives (Almirón, 2009). However, the contemporary media system, which crystallized in the 1980s and continued predominantly unchanged for decades, has started exhibiting signs of fatigue (Arce Media, 2016). Economic strains, technological shifts, and changing socio-political dynamics have paved the way for a renewed media ecosystem, introducing fresh players and diverse information avenues (Manfredi & Artero, 2014). A salient feature of Spain's media today is the juxtaposition of large and small private communication firms with public broadcasters (Díaz Nosty, 2011). This landscape, unfortunately, has been marked by diminishing newspaper circulations—a trend exacerbated by the internet's ubiquity and the 2008 economic downturn (AEDE, 2016). Furthermore, there's a perceptible tilt in Spanish journalism towards

commentary over mere information dissemination, as evidenced by the proliferation of political talk shows (APM, 2015). Despite the media's significant role, professionalization remains tepid, with journalists often grappling with subpar working conditions and a dominant state presence in media (Pérez-Serrano, Rodríguez-Barba, & Rodríguez-Pallares, 2015). The 2008 economic crisis threw Spain into tumult, severely impacting its longstanding media model. As traditional media sales plummeted and advertising revenues waned, many newspapers plunged into significant debt (PR Noticias, 2017). This financial turbulence, coupled with a shifting focus towards digital consumption, led to the stagnation of traditional media, fueling a surge in digital publications (Masip, 2015).

Spanning just over two decades, Spain's internet media evolution has been phenomenal. Beginning with the inaugural online publication of *El Temps* in 1994, followed closely by pioneers like *El Periódico de Catalunya* and *El Mundo*, digital media's footprint in Spain grew rapidly (Salaverría, 2005). After the first ten years, a survey showed 1,274 active internet media in Spain (Salaverría, 2005). The subsequent decade saw a boom in digital-native media, with Spain emerging as a global front-runner, as noted by Nicholls et al in 2016. Intriguingly, digital media's meteoric rise was synchronous with the Great Recession (2008–2014)—a period that witnessed traditional media institutions slashing jobs and digital startups mushrooming across the country (Contreras, Hellín, O'Connor, & Terrence, 2016).

However, while these digital-first organizations have carved a niche for themselves in Spain's media panorama, their long-term sustainability remains an open question (Nicholls, Shabbir, & Nielsen, 2016). The challenge ahead lies in navigating the balance between heritage and innovation, ensuring that Spain's storied media legacy evolves in tandem with the digital age's demands (Gómez Mompert & Herrero Subías, 2009).

3.1 Internal Factors Shaping Spanish Media Practices

The media in any country reflects its societal values, history, and multifarious influences that play a role in shaping its narrative. Spain, with its rich tapestry of history, diverse regional identities, and evolving economic and political structures, is no exception (Arrese, Artero, & Herrero-Subías, 2009). To understand the media practices in Spain, it is imperative to delve into the internal factors that have been instrumental in molding it. From the historical shadows of censorship to the modern challenges of maintaining a free press in the digital age, the Spanish media landscape is a vibrant study of resilience, adaptation, and transformation (Llorens, Luzón, & Puertas, 2012).

Table 15 – Internal Factors Shaping Spanish Media Practices.

FACTOR	DESCRIPTION
Historical Context	Spain's media has evolved from stringent censorship during Franco's era to promoting democratic values post-1970s. Key events such as the 2004 Madrid train bombings underscore media's role in shaping national narratives.
Cultural Norms and Values	The nation's diverse regional identities, from Catalonia's TV3 to Basque's EITB, highlight the tapestry of Spanish media. Elements like Flamenco music and 'fiesta' culture permeate various media platforms.
Political Systems	Nested in a parliamentary constitutional monarchy, Spain's media actively delves into topics like Catalonia's independence aspirations and holds the national leadership under scrutiny.
Economic Systems	With a backdrop of a mixed capitalist system, Spain's media navigates shifts like the 2008 economic downturn. Powerful entities like PRISA play central roles, sparking debates on media diversity.
Education and Literacy	Emphasizing media literacy, Spain incorporates media studies in academic curricula. The drive to battle digital misinformation underlines the value of an informed readership.
Legal and Regulatory Frameworks	While generally adhering to European norms, Spain's media regulations such as <i>Ley Mordaza</i> (2015), have prompted discussions on balancing press freedom with regulatory requirements.

As summarized in Table 15, internal factors shaping Spanish media practices include:

- **Historical Context:** Spain's media landscape is deeply influenced by its rich historical tapestry. From a time of intense censorship during the Franco dictatorship to the re-emergence of free press post the 1970s democratic transition, Spanish media has witnessed a transformative journey (Salaverría & Barrera, 2009). Events like the 2004 Madrid train bombings, underline the media's integral role in shaping public opinion and national discourse (Fontes & Menéndez, 2004).
- **Cultural Norms and Values:** Spain's media is a mirror to its rich cultural and regional mosaic. This is evident from the prominence of regional channels such as

Catalonia's TV3 or the Basque Country's EITB (García-Santamaría, 2013). Moreover, intrinsic cultural elements, be it the rhythmic beats of Flamenco or the vibrant fiesta traditions, find representation across various media segments, enriching the national narrative (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

- **Political Systems:** Within the structure of a parliamentary constitutional monarchy, the Spanish media assumes a crucial role in amplifying regional perspectives, examining government activities, and nurturing public discussions concerning matters such as Catalonia's quest for independence.
- **Economic Systems:** Spain's media industry is shaped by its mixed capitalist economic structure. The repercussions of economic events, like the 2008 financial downturn, have manifested in media consumption patterns and advertising dynamics. Corporate giants, such as PRISA, with their expansive reach, invariably bring to the fore debates regarding media concentration and plurality.
- **Education and Literacy:** Grounded in a tradition of academic excellence, Spain emphasizes the importance of media literacy. Educational institutions are proactive in integrating media studies, aiming to nurture a generation of discerning digital consumers. The concerted efforts to counter online misinformation further stress the pivotal role of media literacy.
- **Legal and Regulatory Frameworks:** Adhering to democratic *ethos*, Spain's media laws, however, have occasionally sparked debates. Regulations like *Ley Mordaza* in 2015, criticized for potentially curbing free speech, bring to light the intricate dance between regulatory necessities and journalistic freedom.

The Spanish media landscape is a complex interplay of various internal factors. Each element, be it historical, cultural, or economic, contributes uniquely to the media's portrayal of Spain's multifaceted identity. The challenges faced by the media, whether in the form of economic crises or regulatory frameworks, have only reinforced its importance in upholding democratic values and fostering informed discourse. As Spain continues to navigate its ever-evolving identity amidst global changes, its media stands as a testament to its rich past and a beacon for its promising future.

3.2 External Factors Shaping Spanish Media Practices

In today's rapidly globalizing world, media practices in any country are not just influenced by internal dynamics but also by a host of external forces that shape its content, narrative, and reception. Spanish media, situated in this global matrix, has seen a confluence of external factors playing a pivotal role in its evolution (Nicholls, Shabbir, & Nielsen, 2016). As Spain intertwines its historical legacies with global realities, it offers a unique lens into the multifaceted nature of media influenced by broader geopolitical events, technological advancements, and the ebb and flow of cultural exchange.

Table 16 – External Factors Shaping Spanish Media Practices.

FACTOR	DESCRIPTION
Geopolitical Influences	Spain's media, with outlets like El Pais, integrates its EU position and Latin America ties, covering topics from Brexit to Venezuelan politics, signifying Spain's global standpoints.
Global Economic Trends	The 2008 financial crisis spotlighted Spain's media focus on global economic interdependencies and the influence of its banking sector globally.
Technological Diffusion	The rise of digital outlets such as eldiario.es and El Confidencial marks Spain's swift transition to modern media consumption.
Migration and Diaspora	Spain's strategic location as a Mediterranean entry amplifies its media's coverage of migration tales and integration narratives.
Environmental Factors	With a spotlight on challenges like climate change, Spain's media emphasizes its dedication to worldwide environmental sustainability.
Global Media and Cultural Exports	Spain's dual role as both a consumer and exporter of culture, from <i>La Liga</i> football to <i>La Casa de Papel</i> , exhibits a bilateral cultural dialogue.

As summarized in Table 16, external factors shaping Spanish media practices include:

- **Geopolitical Influences:** In the realm of media narratives, Spain's unique geopolitical position is unmistakable. EU membership and strong historical and linguistic connections to Latin America deeply inform its media coverage (Salaverría, 2007). Events such as Brexit or the intricate political dynamics of Venezuela are extensively covered, reflecting Spain's geopolitical concerns and engagements. Premier news outlets, like El País, not only cater to domestic audiences but have also carved a niche in Latin American countries where Spanish is predominantly spoken.
- **Global Economic Trends:** The global economic fabric is interconnected, and Spain's media provides a window into this intricate web (Sánchez-Tabernero, 2006). The comprehensive coverage of the 2008 financial downturn underscores the interdependency of global economies and also illuminates the pivotal role of Spanish banks and financial institutions in the larger global setting.
- **Technological Diffusion:** In the age of digitization, Spain has been at the forefront of embracing technological advancements. This rapid integration of digital technology is evident in its media landscape. Emergent digital-first news platforms, such as *eldiario.es* and El Confidencial, stand testament to this transformative shift and the evolving preferences of the Spanish audience.
- **Migration and Diaspora:** As a nation that stands as a pivotal Mediterranean gateway, Spain's media narratives are replete with stories of migration. Whether it is the depiction of perilous migrant routes or heartwarming tales of integration, these stories significantly shape public discourse and opinion.
- **Environmental Factors:** The world grapples with environmental challenges, and Spanish media doesn't shy away from these pressing issues. Coverage on pivotal topics like climate change or conservation initiatives underscores Spain's unwavering commitment to global sustainability and environmental well-being.
- **Global Media and Cultural Exports:** Spain enjoys a vibrant cultural milieu, which it generously shares with the world. This is evident from global phenomena like *La Liga* football matches or the international acclaim of series like *La Casa de Papel*. Yet, Spain is also an avid consumer of international media, establishing a dynamic and enriching two-way cultural exchange.

Spain's media landscape vividly exemplifies how external factors can deeply influence a nation's information consumption and dissemination. As it navigates the global arena, Spain

intertwines its unique identity with broader international narratives. Whether embracing technological advancements or highlighting global economic dynamics, Spanish media stands as a symbol of the country's adaptability and keen sense of global awareness. Such rich interplay ensures that the Spanish media remains relevant, resonant, and reflective of the world it operates in, truly exemplifying the interconnected age we live in.

3.3 The Spanish Online News Ecosystem

Spain's media landscape, deeply rooted in its rich cultural and historical tapestry, acts as a testament to European journalism, guided by ideals of truthfulness, transparency, and a commitment to inform (García Avilés, 2007). In the wake of the digital transformation, where technology has rapidly redrawn boundaries, Spanish journalism finds itself at the crossroads of its esteemed past and a future teeming with potential (Salaverría, 2012).

Digital outlets like El País, ABC, or El Mundo have adeptly navigated this digital metamorphosis, securing their spots as trusted go-to sources for a Spanish audience that increasingly demands immediate, enriched multimedia content (Sádaba, 2010). As Spain stands as a pivotal nation in the European framework, its digital news not only covers domestic intricacies but is also interlaced with broader continental narratives (European Commission, 2016).

The Spain online news ecosystem is not merely a distributor but a vibrant canvas that portrays the intricate confluence of history, culture, politics, regional affiliations, and global currents (Sádaba & Salaverría, 2016). Its depth, dilemmas, and evolutions elucidate the unfolding narrative between Spanish journalism and its multifaceted audience (Masip, 2015).

4. France

The French media landscape, a reflection of its rich history and national ethos, intertwines deeply with the nation's commitment to "Liberté, égalité, fraternité" (Albert & Sonnac, 2015). Rooted in these foundational values, France has cultivated a media environment that ardently upholds the freedom of expression, while simultaneously charting its course in a fast-evolving digital age (Charon, 2014). This dynamic landscape comprises a blend of public, private, and regional outlets, all contributing to the vibrant tapestry of French media.

Two dominant trends characterize this landscape. First is the significant and central role of the state (Lardeau, 2017). Second is a high concentration of ownership, encompassing print press, TV, and radio markets (Gabszewicz & Sonnac, 2010). Despite these overarching trends, the French news media remains intellectually robust (Lardeau & Le Floch, 2013). Particularly, the print magazine and online press sectors stand out, making substantial contributions to France's political

and intellectual discourses (Médiamétrie, 2014). Hard-news dailies serve as the cornerstone of French journalism and the broader media sphere (Toussaint-Desmoulin, 2002). However, media consumption patterns have been shifting (Lardeau, 2019.).

Hard-news dailies serve as the cornerstone of French journalism and the broader media sphere. However, media consumption patterns have been shifting. By 2014, daily TV viewership stood at 86.6 percent, with individuals accessing content across multiple devices and spending an average of 3 hours and 41 minutes. The proliferation of devices is evident in households, averaging 6.5 screens, encompassing TVs, computers, mobile phones, and tablets. Concurrently, radio retains its popularity, with daily listenership reaching 43.3 million people. The internet, too, commands a considerable audience: 80 percent of the population, or 43.5 million individuals, are active users, with 23 million dedicating over an hour daily. In contrast, print newspapers have witnessed declining circulation, even as their digital counterparts surge in popularity. From 1945's robust 179 outlets with a daily circulation of 12.1 million, 2014 saw a shrinkage to 76 outlets and an 8.8 million daily circulation (Lardeu, n.d).

The conditions of media consumption and production in France vary across markets (Lardeau, 2017). Digital news media enjoys relative ease in creation and operation. However, the launch of radio or TV channels requires formal, competitive agreements, underscoring the state's influence (Lardeau & Le Floch, 2013). The print sector, while free from stringent launch regulations, grapples with prohibitive printing and circulation costs (Syndicat National des Journalistes, 2011).

Yet, challenges persist. Most national dailies find profitability elusive when relying solely on paid circulation and advertising revenues (Lardeau, 2017). A case in point is *Le Monde*, acquired in 2010 by French billionaires Pierre Bergé, Xavier Niel, and Matthieu Pigasse (Reporters sans Frontières, 2017). In the face of these economic challenges, many print outlets have embraced the digital revolution, launching websites and apps. The business models oscillate between paid and free content access, with a majority favoring the former. The prohibitive costs of print—often constituting about 50 percent of an outlet's budget—have steered publishers towards digital platforms. While some print mediums have migrated online, numerous online news platforms have emerged independently, indicating a future where digital may dominate the French media landscape.

4.1 Internal Factors Shaping French Media Practices

France holds a unique position in the realm of global media practices. With its storied history, cultural richness, and distinct political and economic systems, the nation has crafted a

media landscape deeply influenced by a myriad of internal factors. Delving into these elements offers a comprehensive insight into what makes French media practices distinctly *French*.

Table 17 – Internal Factors Shaping French Media Practices.

FACTOR	DESCRIPTION
Historical Context	France’s media, shaped by early advocates like <i>Voltaire</i> and wartime censorship, bears witness to events like the May 1968 protests, underlining the media’s democratic influence.
Cultural Norms and Values	French media mirrors its rich culture, art, and <i>laïcité</i> , evident from events like the <i>Cannes Film Festival</i> and literature features in <i>Le Monde</i> .
Political Systems	The balance in the <i>Fifth Republic</i> ’s semi-presidential system finds reflection in media narratives, especially during elections, strikes, or policy discussions.
Economic Systems	Dominated by conglomerates like Vivendi and Bouygues, media dynamics in France are closely tied to its capitalist economy, sparking debates on ownership and neutrality.
Education and Literacy	France’s education <i>ethos</i> promotes critical thinking, nurturing a media-literate audience that appreciates quality journalism.
Legal and Regulatory Frameworks	Regulated by entities like the CSA, the French media landscape grapples with laws like the <i>Fake News</i> legislation in 2018, spurring debates on digital freedom and responsibility.

As summarized in Table 17, internal factors shaping French media practices include:

- **Historical Context:** France’s storied past has left an indelible imprint on its media culture. Right from the seminal works of Voltaire that championed the cause of free speech, to stringent media censorship during tumultuous wars, the nation’s history and media are deeply entwined. A poignant example of this relationship is the May 1968 protests, highlighting the indispensable role of media in ushering democratic transitions and shaping societal conversations.

- **Cultural Norms and Values:** French media reflects the nation's rich cultural and artistic tapestry. It amplifies the *ethos* of *laïcité* or secularism, a cornerstone of French society. This cultural resonance is visible in grand events such as the *Cannes Film Festival* or the detailed literary analyses found in newspapers like *Le Monde*, attesting to the nation's deep-rooted appreciation for the arts.
- **Political Systems:** France's unique semi-presidential system, known as the *Fifth Republic*, delineates clear powers between the president and the prime minister. This dynamic is consistently evident in media narratives, especially during politically charged times such as elections, nationwide strikes, or spirited policy debates.
- **Economic Systems:** France's media sphere is largely influenced by its capitalist economic structure. Major conglomerates like Vivendi and Bouygues hold substantial sway over the media, which invariably ignites discussions about media neutrality, advertisement ethics, and concerns over concentrated ownership.
- **Education and Literacy:** The French educational system, rooted in promoting analytical thinking and discernment, has cultivated a populace that values media literacy. This pedagogical approach ensures that the audience is equipped to engage with quality journalism, fostering a healthy media ecosystem.
- **Legal and Regulatory Frameworks:** The media in France is bound by stringent regulatory mechanisms, with entities like the CSA overseeing operations. The introduction of the *Fake News* law in 2018 added a new dimension to the discourse, raising imperative questions about the balancing act between digital freedom, regulation, and societal responsibility.

French media practices represent a complex interplay of historical, cultural, political, economic, educational, and legal factors (Charon, 2014). As the media landscape worldwide continues to shift and evolve, understanding these intricate relationships becomes essential for anyone looking to engage with or understand the French media. Through this lens, one not only understands the media but also gains a deeper insight into the heart of French society and its values.

4.2 External Factors Shaping French Media Practices

As France positions itself on the global stage, its media practices are not solely a reflection of its internal dynamics but also resonate with external factors that sweep across borders. These

external influences range from geopolitical interactions and global economic shifts to technological advancements and environmental concerns. An exploration of these factors reveals the broader canvas upon which the French media paints its narratives, drawing connections that bridge domestic realities with global contexts.

Table 18 – External Factors Shaping French Media Practices.

FACTOR	DESCRIPTION
Geopolitical Influences	France’s media often reflects its key role in the EU and global affairs, touching on subjects from EU policies to events in former colonies.
Global Economic Trends	As a major global economy, French media actively covers international economic dynamics, such as EU trade deals and worldwide economic shifts.
Technological Diffusion	France’s digital media evolution is evident with platforms like Mediapart, but the fight against online misinformation remains.
Migration and Diaspora	France’s media delves into its colonial history and its role as a European hub, discussing migration, multiculturalism, and integration.
Environmental Factors	Being a key player in initiatives like the <i>Paris Agreement</i> , French media prioritizes environmental challenges and sustainability.
Global Media and Cultural Exports	While exporting cultural entities like cinema, France also indulges in global media, promoting a two-way cultural dialogue.

As summarized in Table 18, external factors shaping French media practices include:

- **Geopolitical Influences:** France, being an EU foundational member and an influential entity in worldwide affairs, has its media narratives deeply interwoven with both European and global events. This includes detailed coverage and analyses of EU-centric policies as well as significant events occurring in its former colonies.

- **Global Economic Trends:** As a pivotal player in the global economic scene, France's media engagement with international economic happenings is profound. Their coverage often mirrors the intricate interconnectedness of the world's economies, evident from their detailed reporting on topics like EU trade agreements or the implications of global recessions.
- **Technological Diffusion:** The French media landscape has keenly adopted the digital era, with the rise of online-centric platforms like Mediapart showcasing this trend. Nevertheless, the realm also grapples with contemporary challenges, primarily the propagation of digital misinformation.
- **Migration and Diaspora:** France's intricate colonial history combined with its stature as a leading European destination means that its media narratives are rich with stories focusing on migration patterns, the challenges and successes of integration, and the celebration of multiculturalism.
- **Environmental Factors:** France's commitment to environmental sustainability and its leadership in global climate initiatives like the *Paris Agreement* are highlighted in its media coverage. Narratives focusing on global environmental challenges and the importance of sustainable practices are emphasized.
- **Global Media and Cultural Exports:** France boasts a rich cultural export in areas ranging from cinema to fashion. At the same time, its media landscape is equally receptive to global media content, illustrating a vibrant and mutual cultural exchange with the rest of the world.

France's media landscape, with its rich historical foundations and commitment to democratic values, reflects the nation's dynamic role on the global stage (Albert & Sonnac, 2015). The diverse influences, both internal and external, ensure that the French media remains a key player in shaping societal and global dialogues.

4.3 The French Online News Ecosystem

France's media heritage, deeply entwined with its national identity and revolutionary spirit, stands as a pillar of European journalism, driven by principles of liberty, critical inquiry, and a commitment to public enlightenment (Charon, 2014). As the digital zeitgeist sweeps across industries, French journalism balances on the fulcrum of its illustrious past and an unfolding, tech-driven future, most notably observed within the burgeoning world of online news portals and

apps. Digital vanguards such as Le Monde, Le Figaro, or Libération have gracefully embraced the digital transition, positioning themselves as essential touchpoints for a French audience craving timely, diverse, and immersive multimedia content. As a central actor in the European narrative, France's online news not only sheds light on domestic intricacies but also embraces wider European and global contexts. An election in Germany or a climate summit in Africa can swiftly rise to prominence in France's digital news discourse. This global perspective is accentuated by the active participation of international news platforms like Al Jazeera or the BBC in the French digital milieu, signifying a readership with expanding transnational.

The emblematic French principle of *service public* – the idea of serving the public good – casts a distinctive shade on the online news arena. While the realm is not immune to commercial exigencies, with several French outlets venturing into diversified monetization models, there persists a robust inclination to prioritize public discourse and democratic values. This balancing act is palpable, as ventures into paywalled content, as seen in Mediapart, coexist with the trials of sustaining journalistic depth and avoiding sensationalist pitfalls in the age of digital immediacy. Amidst this backdrop of global flux, tech innovations, and evolving market dynamics, French digital platforms perpetually recalibrate, gauging the implications of such shifts for their national and international readers.

In essence, the France online news ecosystem is more than a mere information channel; it is a vibrant tapestry that showcases the intricate melding of history, culture, socio-politics, regional affiliations, and global influences (Lardeau, 2019). Its layers, challenges, and adaptability offer a compelling lens into the dynamic bond between French journalism and its diverse, globally conscious audience (Albert & Sonnac, 2015).

5. Netherlands

The Dutch media landscape, historically rooted in its commitment to pluralism and public service broadcasting, has evolved significantly over the years (Bakker, 2019). From its foundational pillars system, renowned for its tolerance and representation of various socio-political groups, the country has transitioned into a dynamic media ecosystem that embraces both traditional and digital platforms.

In the early 21st century, the Netherlands epitomized the Democratic Corporatist model, as defined by Hallin and Mancini in 2004 (Bakker, 2019). The nation witnessed high circulation of newspapers and magazines, moderate TV viewership relative to other countries, and a government-protected public broadcasting model. This media environment also bore witness to the cozy relationships between political parties and dominant media entities (Bakker, 2019).

However, as with many global counterparts, the Netherlands has seen a marked shift in its media consumption patterns over recent decades (Wennekers, van Troost, & Wiegman, 2016).

Digital media platforms have now surpassed traditional outlets as the primary source of information for the Dutch populace (Oosterveer, 2017). While the print media industry grapples with declining sales and a weakened stance in the advertising market, there's a silver lining: revenues from dedicated readerships have seen an uptick (Bakker, 2019).

One cannot discuss the Dutch media without acknowledging its rapid digital transformation. Boasting one of Europe's highest internet penetration rates, over 96% of the Dutch population are regular internet users (Oosterveer, 2017). The ubiquity of smartphones has further fueled this digital surge, with most users accessing online content through these devices (Oosterveer, 2017). Social media platforms, notably Facebook and Instagram, enjoy widespread popularity (Oosterveer, 2017). Furthermore, digital news platforms like NU.nl, De Telegraaf, and NOS.nl have emerged as key players in the Netherlands' digital media narrative (Kik, Bakker, Buijs, & Katz, 2012).

This digital ascendance doesn't overshadow the Netherlands' foundational media *ethos*. With a long-standing tradition of upholding freedom of the press, the Dutch media landscape remains a beacon of pluralism. As it strides into the digital age, the Netherlands' media system, with its harmonious blend of public broadcasting, commercial sectors, and burgeoning digital channels, continues to ensure diverse and robust content for its audience.

5.1 Internal Factors Shaping Dutch Media Practices

In the heart of Europe, the Netherlands stands as a beacon of progressive ideals and intricate societal structures. Its media landscape, much like its canals, offers a glimpse into the depth and diversity of its internal currents. As we embark on this exploration, it becomes evident that Dutch media practices are deeply intertwined with the nation's historical, cultural, political, and economic fabric, making it an enlightening study of how internal factors shape a nation's media narratives.

Table 19 – Internal Factors Shaping Dutch Media Practices.

FACTOR	DESCRIPTION
Historical Context	The Netherlands champions free speech, with its <i>pillarized</i> society fostering media diversity through unique religious and social group broadcasts.

Cultural Norms and Values	Dutch media mirrors its societal pragmatism, tolerance, and directness, enabling open discourse on sensitive subjects.
Political Systems	Reflecting its coalition-based parliamentary system, Dutch media often showcases a balanced reporting approach, emphasizing consensus-building.
Economic Systems	Dominated by media giants like De Persgroep and Mediahuis, the Dutch media landscape also offers a significant platform to regional outlets.
Education and Literacy	High literacy rates and a robust education system make Dutch audiences critical and discerning media consumers.
Legal and Regulatory Frameworks	Governed by the <i>Dutch Media Act</i> and bolstered by strong press freedom protections, Dutch media ensures a broad spectrum of voices.

As summarized in Table 19, internal factors shaping Dutch media practices include:

- **Historical Context:** Promoting free speech has been a cornerstone of the Dutch *ethos*. The historical *pillarization* of society, wherein different religious and social groups operated their own media outlets, has been instrumental in fostering the diverse media landscape the Netherlands boasts today.
- **Cultural Norms and Values:** Dutch cultural values, characterized by pragmatism, tolerance, and a penchant for direct communication, are deeply reflected in its media narratives. This cultural backdrop facilitates open and candid discussions on even the most sensitive topics, underlining the country's dedication to freedom of speech.
- **Political Systems:** The coalition-based nature of the Dutch parliamentary system, which necessitates negotiation and consensus-building, mirrors in the media. This is evident in the balanced reporting style, where multiple perspectives are often presented, resonating with the nation's political *ethos*.

- **Economic Systems:** While the Dutch media space sees dominance from large conglomerates like De Persgroep and Mediahuis, it is also noteworthy to mention the enduring presence and influence of regional newspapers and broadcasters, ensuring a comprehensive media representation.
- **Education and Literacy:** With an impressive literacy rate and a thorough education system, Dutch audiences stand as well-informed and critical consumers of media. They approach media content with a discerning eye, appreciating quality journalism and holding media entities accountable.
- **Legal and Regulatory Frameworks:** The regulatory landscape for Dutch media is shaped by the *Dutch Media Act*, which governs public broadcasting to ensure diversity in representation and viewpoints. Coupled with robust freedom of the press protections, the Dutch media environment thrives, championing a plethora of voices and perspectives.

The Dutch media landscape reflects the country's rich history, cultural nuances, and societal structures. From its commitment to free speech rooted in historical practices to the balance in reporting necessitated by its political system, the Netherlands offers a masterclass in how internal dynamics can craft a media that is both reflective and forward-thinking. As the world rapidly evolves, understanding these intrinsic factors becomes crucial in deciphering the stories told and the perspectives shared within the Dutch media spectrum.

5.2 External Factors Shaping Dutch Media Practices

The Netherlands stands not just as a testament to unique national attributes but also as a reflection of the global currents that shape its media outlook. Engaging with the world beyond its dikes and canals, Dutch media practices are inevitably molded by external factors, from the whispers of distant geopolitical arenas to the undeniable ripples of global technological trends.

Table 20 – External Factors Shaping Dutch Media Practices.

FACTOR	DESCRIPTION
Geopolitical Influences	As an EU member, Dutch media routinely delves into European and global affairs, offering insights that underscore the Netherlands' noteworthy geopolitical standing.

Global Economic Trends	As a leading trade nation, Dutch media extensively covers global economic dynamics, showcasing its economic interconnectedness.
Technological Diffusion	Rapidly adopting digital trends, the Netherlands boasts innovative online journalism, with platforms like De Correspondent at the forefront.
Migration and Diaspora	With historical connections to former colonies and a key EU position, Dutch media covers diverse cultural narratives and migration stories.
Environmental Factors	Given its challenges with sea levels, Dutch media places strong emphasis on environmental reporting, especially concerning climate change.
Global Media and Cultural Exports	Serving as both cultural consumer and contributor, the Dutch media landscape features international successes like Dutch DJs while also embracing global content.

As summarized in Table 20, internal factors shaping Dutch media practices include:

- **Geopolitical Influences:** The Netherlands, as an integral member of the European Union and various other international platforms, has media narratives deeply intertwined with European and worldwide affairs. Dutch media consistently provides insights into the nation's role and perspectives in larger geopolitical scenarios, emphasizing its influence and participation in shaping global policies and discussions.
- **Global Economic Trends:** The Netherlands stands as a paramount trade nation. Such a robust economic stature means that the country remains deeply affected by and involved in global economic developments. Dutch media ensures comprehensive coverage of these dynamics, offering perspectives on how international economic shifts impact the nation and vice versa.
- **Technological Diffusion:** Being at the vanguard of digital adoption, the Dutch media scene is replete with innovative online platforms. Leading the charge in this

space is De Correspondent, which exemplifies how cutting-edge journalism can be fused with modern technological platforms to offer insightful content.

- **Migration and Diaspora:** The rich tapestry of the Netherlands' history, particularly its links to former colonies, combined with its pivotal position in the European Union, makes it a melting pot of cultures. Dutch media, recognizing this diversity, actively engages in discussions about migration, integration, and multiculturalism, providing a platform for varied narratives and stories.
- **Environmental Factors:** The unique geographical challenges faced by the Netherlands, especially its ongoing battle with rising sea levels and intricate water management systems, catapult environmental journalism into the limelight. In the era of climate change, Dutch media emphasizes both local and global environmental challenges, underscoring the country's commitment to sustainability.
- **Global Media and Cultural Exports:** The Netherlands enjoys a dual role in the global media ecosystem. On one hand, Dutch cultural exports, from renowned DJs to television formats, find audiences across the globe. Simultaneously, the Dutch media remains open to and appreciative of global content, fostering a rich two-way cultural exchange.

The Dutch media realm, while rooted in local traditions and perspectives, is undeniably woven into the broader tapestry of global dynamics. As it engages with the challenges and celebrations of the wider world, it offers a mirror to how a nation can be both distinctively local and globally attuned, serving as a beacon for adaptive and proactive journalism in the contemporary age.

5.3 The Dutch Online News Ecosystem

The Dutch media landscape, rooted in its unique historical and cultural foundations, remains a vital player in European media, setting standards for press freedom and innovative journalism in the digital era (Bakker, 2019). The media landscape of the Netherlands, informed by its historical ethos of trade, openness, and robust public discourse, holds a distinguished place in European journalistic traditions, anchored by tenets of precision, pluralism, and public responsibility (Bardoel and d'Haenens, 2004; Bakker, 2019).

In the contemporary digital wave, Dutch journalism finds itself at a crossroads, reconciling the richness of its past with the innovative promises of the digital era, especially within the dynamic sphere of online news platforms and apps. Pioneering digital outlets like De Volkskrant, NRC

Handelsblad, or NU.nl have adeptly traversed the digital transition, establishing themselves as primary channels for a Dutch audience hungry for real-time, multifaceted, and multimedia content (Bakker, 2019). As a nexus in the European Union and a key player on the global stage, the Netherlands' online news sphere is as attuned to domestic developments as it is to broader European and worldwide events. A policy change in Brussels or a technological innovation in Silicon Valley can rapidly capture the Dutch digital news spotlight (Kik, Bakker, Buijs, & Katz, 2012).

The signature Dutch principle of *poldermodel* – a model of collaborative decision-making – influences the nation's online news environment (Bakker, 2019). While the allure of commercial gains is undeniable, with several outlets, like De Correspondent, exploring innovative monetization models, there's a strong inclination to maintain a balanced and inclusive journalistic approach. This equilibrium becomes especially challenging in the digital age, where the temptations of click-driven content stand in potential conflict with the depth and nuance for which Dutch journalism is renowned. Amidst a backdrop of global trends, technological disruptions, and shifting economic landscapes, Dutch online platforms are in continuous adaptation, discerning the ramifications of such transformations for their local and international audience.

The Netherlands online news ecosystem is not simply an informational hub; it is a rich mosaic that mirrors the interplay of history, culture, politics, socio-economic dynamics, and international intersections. Its depth, hurdles, and evolutionary pathways illuminate the evolving relationship between Dutch journalism and its informed, globally engaged readership.

6. Germany

The German-speaking media landscape is an influential force in Europe, catering to roughly 100 million people (Thomas & Horz, 2019). Stretching beyond Germany and Austria, this vast media market encompasses significant parts of Switzerland and German-speaking minorities in EU countries, including Belgium, Denmark, and Luxembourg. The market's dynamism is steeped in a rich history, making it one of the most vibrant and multifaceted media environments globally. Germany's media trajectory is deeply intertwined with its past. The Nazi era saw mass media manipulated into a dictatorship tool, but the post-war era ushered in a revitalized media system anchored in democratic ideals. The foundation of this media renaissance was the principle of press freedom, enshrined in the 1949 Basic Law (Germany's constitution). Germany's commitment to the press runs deep, with the first newspapers tracing their origins back approximately 400 years (Beck, 2012). Even in the face of burgeoning competition from broadcasting and digital media, the periodical press remains instrumental in disseminating political

insights, local news, promoting analysis and critique, fostering opinion, and offering education (Beck, 2012).

A defining feature of Germany's media landscape is the high circulation of press, made possible by regional and local subscription papers and bolstered by national titles (Thomas & Horz, 2019). These press enterprises operate as independent entities, primarily funded through advertising and subscription revenues. State intervention in the press is minimal, focusing mainly on ensuring a non-discriminatory media policy, providing fiscal privileges to press enterprises, such as reduced turnover tax and subsidized forwarding costs (Thomas & Horz, 2019). While traditional media, especially linear forms like the press, radio, and television, retains a special place in the hearts of German media consumers, the digital domain has seen exponential growth in recent years (Projektgruppe ARD/ZDF Multimedia, 2016). Established news organizations have ventured into the digital realm, and innovative digital-native platforms have sprung up. Notable among these are Correctiv, a hub for investigative journalism, and Netzpolitik.org, dedicated to the nuanced world of digital rights and online politics (Newman, Fletcher, Levy, & Nielsen, 2016). Recognizing the potential of the digital media scene, the German government established the Federal Agency for Civic Education, supporting various digital media ventures, especially those centered on journalism. However, challenges persist, including concerns over the financial viability of digital news media and the pervasive influence of social media (Röper, 2016).

In essence, Germany's media landscape stands as a beacon of diversity and influence in Europe. Its unwavering commitment to press freedom, coupled with a rich public broadcasting heritage and historical obligations rooted in World War II, has crafted a media ecosystem with distinct characteristics and practices, setting it apart on the European stage.

6.1 Internal Factors Shaping German Media Practices

Germany's media system, steeped in the crossroads of its intricate history and robust democratic values, operates as a pillar of its vibrant democracy. Tracing its lineage through the ruins of war to the pillars of unity, the interplay of various internal factors crafts a media landscape that resonates deeply with its nation's *ethos*.

Table 21 – Internal Factors Shaping German Media Practices.

FACTOR	DESCRIPTION
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Historical Context	Post-WWII transformation emphasized pluralistic media, focusing on diverse representation and decentralizing media power.
Cultural Norms and Values	German media prioritize thoroughness and accuracy, influenced by a sense of responsibility from historical events.
Political Systems	The federal structure and coalition-driven parliament encourage varied viewpoints, impacting public broadcasting across 16 federal states.
Economic Systems	With giants like Axel Springer and Bertelsmann, Germany's robust economy directly shapes its influential media sector.
Education and Literacy	High literacy rates paired with a quality education system ensures that German media caters to an informed, critical audience.
Legal and Regulatory Frameworks	The dual broadcasting system, featuring public entities like ARD and ZDF, operates under guidelines like the Federal State Broadcasting Treaty, funded by household license fees.

As summarized in Table 21, internal factors shaping German media practices include:

- Historical Context:** The German media landscape experienced profound changes in the aftermath of World War II. Recognizing the potential pitfalls of centralized media power, reforms were introduced to ensure a pluralistic approach. This change in trajectory was designed to promote diverse perspectives and prevent any single entity from dominating the discourse.
- Cultural Norms and Values:** German media operates under a guiding principle of meticulousness and accuracy. This *ethos* stems from a deeply rooted sense of responsibility, informed by the nation's historical narrative. Such a commitment ensures that audiences receive trustworthy and in-depth reporting on significant issues.

- **Political Systems:** Germany's unique political structure, which involves a federal system and a coalition-based parliamentary governance, directly influences its media environment. The division of power between the central government and the 16 federal states (Länder) provides an array of voices in public broadcasting, ensuring representation for diverse regional perspectives.
- **Economic Systems:** Germany's formidable economy, marked by the presence of major publishing powerhouses like Axel Springer and Bertelsmann, is instrumental in shaping the media sector. Their influence stretches across various media formats, setting trends and influencing national and international narratives.
- **Education and Literacy:** Germany boasts an impressive literacy rate and an education system that is held in high regard globally. This results in a discerning audience base that anticipates high-quality journalism. German media outlets, recognizing this, strive to provide comprehensive and nuanced analyses of events and issues.
- **Legal and Regulatory Frameworks:** Germany's media operates within a clearly defined legal framework that balances both public and private interests. The dual broadcasting system consists of public broadcasters like ARD and ZDF, which are governed by the Federal State Broadcasting Treaty. These entities are funded through license fees levied on households, ensuring that public broadcasting remains accountable and serves the greater good.

From its commitment to pluralism birthed from past lessons to the thriving publishing giants that dominate the European scene, Germany's media practices are a confluence of internal dynamics. These practices, shaped by history, culture, politics, and law, underscore the nation's pursuit of transparency, quality, and diversity in journalism, serving as a model of resilience and responsibility.

6.2 External Factors Shaping German Media Practices

Germany, a nexus of history and modernity, stands as a beacon of European unity and global influence. As it interacts with the world, its media landscape is inevitably shaped by myriad external factors, casting light on the global intricacies and challenges faced by one of Europe's giants.

Table 22 – External Factors Shaping German Media Practices.

FACTOR	DESCRIPTION
Geopolitical Influences	Germany's EU role is pivotal, evident in its media's coverage of European and international topics.
Global Economic Trends	As an export-driven economy, German media closely scrutinizes global economic shifts.
Technological Diffusion	Rapid tech adoption merges with concerns over data privacy, shaped by Germany's historical narrative.
Migration and Diaspora	Recent events like the Syrian refugee influx have brought migration debates to the media forefront.
Environmental Factors	Germany's thriving <i>Green</i> movement guarantees ongoing media coverage of sustainability and environmental issues.
Global Media and Cultural Exports	Germany engages in a dynamic two-way cultural exchange by both creating and consuming a wide range of media and cultural products.

As summarized in Table 22, external factors shaping German media practices include:

- **Geopolitical Influences:** Germany's integral position within the European Union, especially as its largest economy, amplifies its voice on European matters. Its media naturally mirrors this prominence, dedicating extensive resources to the coverage of both European and broader global affairs.
- **Global Economic Trends:** With a significant portion of its economy reliant on exports, Germany is intrinsically linked to global economic dynamics. This relationship is evident in the detailed attention German media pays to global economic developments, ensuring businesses and the public remain well-informed.

- **Technological Diffusion:** While Germany has been at the forefront of technological advancements, adopting new media platforms and digitalization rapidly, it has also displayed caution. Given its past, there's a heightened sensitivity around data privacy and protection, leading to vigorous media debates and discussions on these subjects.
- **Migration and Diaspora:** Germany's decision to welcome a significant number of Syrian refugees in the mid-2010s has had lasting ramifications on its media discourse. Issues around migration, integration, and national identity have become central themes, with media outlets exploring various facets of these complex debates.
- **Environmental Factors:** Germany's strong *Green* movement, coupled with its history of environmental activism, ensures that topics around sustainability, climate change, and environmental conservation are regularly spotlighted in media narratives.
- **Global Media and Cultural Exports:** German media displays a rich tapestry of cultural exchanges. From exporting world-renowned films, music, and television formats, Germany also remains a significant consumer of international media. Particularly, American films, shows, and music have found a substantial audience in Germany, exemplifying this mutual exchange of culture and ideas.

Germany's media landscape reflects its position as a central European power and its complex history. With a strong tradition of public broadcasting and a commitment to press freedom, German media continues to play an essential role both domestically and internationally, as an embodiment of its global interactions – a reflection of its geopolitical prominence, its economic might, and its cultural depth. As Germany both influences and is influenced by the world, its media becomes a vital avenue for understanding these dynamic exchanges, a testament to the country's intricate dance with globalization.

6.3 The German Online News Ecosystem

Germany's media landscape, deeply interwoven with its storied history of intellectualism, precision, and resilience, plays a foundational role in European journalistic paradigms, championed by values of thoroughness, objectivity, and public commitment (Schütz & Wessler, 2008). Amidst the current digital transformation, German journalism harmoniously merges its prestigious legacy with the potentialities of the new age, especially in the vibrant sector of online news platforms and apps (Pürer, 2015). Digital forerunners like *Der Spiegel*, *Die Zeit*, or *Süddeutsche Zeitung* have

seamlessly integrated into the digital narrative, becoming crucial pillars for a German audience that values in-depth, comprehensive, and multimedia reporting (Beck, 2012).

Positioned at the heart of Europe, Germany's online news spectrum not only dissects national debates but also provides insights into broader European and global dynamics. An economic decision in Paris or a societal shift in Asia might promptly resonate within Germany's digital news discourse (Newman, et. al, 2016).

The characteristic German principle of *Gründlichkeit* – thoroughness and attention to detail – is evident within the online news arena. Even though digital journalism is not exempt from market pressures, with entities such as BILD incorporating paywall strategies, there exists a dominant urge to uphold rigorous, nuanced journalism. In an era dominated by rapid content consumption, the challenge remains to ensure depth isn't sacrificed at the altar of immediacy. As global currents, tech breakthroughs, and economic factors continually reframe the media landscape, German platforms are ever vigilant, understanding the implications for both domestic and global readers.

Fundamentally, the Germany online news ecosystem embodies not just information dissemination but a rich amalgamation of history, culture, meticulousness, and global interactions. Its intricacies, challenges, and developments offer invaluable insights into the intricate dance between German journalism and its discerning audience.

7. Brazil

Brazil, nestled in the heart of South America, pulsates with a rich tapestry of cultures, histories, and narratives (Skidmore, 1999). Its expansive landscapes, from the dense canopies of the Amazon to the energetic avenues of São Paulo, teem with tales yearning for expression. In this backdrop, it is no wonder that Brazil boasts one of the most luminous and influential media landscapes in Latin America (Straubhaar, 2007). For a nation that sways to samba and revels in the drama of football, its media rhythmically intertwines with its very soul (Burke, 2013).

Historic publications like O Globo and Folha de S. Paulo have gracefully narrated Brazil's journey for over a century, capturing everything from the infectious spirit of its carnivals to profound political upheavals (Mídia Dados Brasil, various years). Their narratives have evolved, adapting to the times while retaining their essence. The electromagnetic waves of Brazil hum with their own tales. Titans like TV Globo, with their gripping telenovelas, not only captivate but shape societal perceptions (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005). Radios, an ever-present background score, accompany Brazilians with tunes, news, and discourses, resonating from towering urban edifices to the serene Amazonian hamlets. But the saga isn't confined to traditional media. The dawn of

the digital age in Brazil unveils a vivacious chapter (Azeredo, various years). Emerging platforms and online networks empower a digital-native generation. They defy conventions, scrutinize established stories, and foster global conversations. Social media platforms, from Twitter to Instagram, become vibrant stages for Brazil’s impassioned debates on politics, justice, and culture (Recuero & Zago, 2020).

Yet, shadows sometimes loom over this vast media panorama. Despite constitutional protections, Brazilian journalists often tread cautiously, balancing between expression and risk (Freedom of the Press Reports: Brazil, various years). Confronted by political interference and threats from covert factions, especially when delving deep into investigative pursuits, their resilience shines even brighter (Simon, 2014). But undeterred, Brazil’s media persists, echoing the indomitable spirit of the nation. As Brazil’s stories meld with worldwide narratives, its media stands as both a reflective prism and a guiding light, portraying the nation’s multifaceted realities and shaping its evolving narrative. In a nation as multifarious and vibrant as Brazil, the media dances - a perpetual waltz of heritage and progression, past and potential.

7.1 Internal Factors Shaping Brazilian Media Practices

Brazil, with its intricate socio-political history and diverse cultural fabric, boasts a media landscape that is both dynamic and multifaceted. As with many nations, both internal and external factors have played significant roles in shaping its media practices. In this exploration, we’ll delve into the internal factors, providing a comprehensive understanding of how history, culture, political structures, economics, education, and legal frameworks intersect to influence Brazil’s media system. From its tumultuous periods of military dictatorship to its rich cultural influences and its evolving political and economic structures, the media in Brazil offers a unique lens through which the nation’s heartbeats can be discerned.

Table 23 – Internal Factors Shaping Brazilian Media Practices.

FACTOR	DESCRIPTION
Historical Context	Brazil’s media has a dark past during the military dictatorship with prevalent government interventions and censorship. Although democratization opened up the press, historical influences remain.

Cultural Norms and Values	Brazil's rich cultural tapestry, stemming from varied roots, profoundly impacts its media content, coloring everything from television to music.
Political Systems	With a federal republic structure, Brazil's media often intertwines with politics, navigating regional nuances and catering to diverse political affiliations.
Economic Systems	Concentrated media ownership, especially in the print sector, coupled with economic volatility, challenges Brazil's media landscape.
Education and Literacy	Brazil's varied educational landscape sees mainstream media, like telenovelas, acting as significant educational tools.
Legal and Regulatory Frameworks	The Constitution promotes freedom of expression, but media faces intricate regulations and potential adversities, especially in sensitive reporting areas.

As summarized in Table 23, internal factors shaping Brazilian media practices include:

- **Historical Context:** Brazil's military dictatorship era (1964-1985) heavily influenced its media through direct interventions, including censorship. Post-democratization, while the media has become more diverse and open, vestiges of past government interventions occasionally resurface.
- **Cultural Norms and Values:** Drawing from indigenous, Portuguese, African, and various immigrant groups, Brazil's vibrant cultural palette is vividly reflected in its media content.
- **Political Systems:** Brazil's media landscape, influenced by its federal republic structure, often finds itself at the crossroads of politics and regional interests. The broader media system bears similarities to the Polarized Pluralist model, particularly in the structure of media markets. However, the prevailing presidential system and a wide-reaching political audience slightly shift this alignment.

- **Economic Systems:** The media sector in Brazil witnesses significant ownership concentration, notably by entities like Grupo Globo in the print sector. This, coupled with economic volatilities affecting advertising, offers both challenges and varied narratives in broadcasting.
- **Education and Literacy:** Brazil's media, especially popular formats like telenovelas, shoulder the responsibility of reaching and educating a populace with diverse literacy levels.
- **Legal and Regulatory Frameworks:** The Brazilian Constitution's commitment to freedom of expression operates in tandem with a complex regulatory environment. Media professionals often find themselves navigating challenges, ranging from legal actions to threats, especially when covering sensitive subjects like corruption.

The myriad internal factors shaping Brazilian media practices offer a deep dive into the heart and soul of the nation. Each of these elements, from its historical trajectory to its legal nuances, plays a pivotal role in understanding the media's present landscape. As Brazil marches ahead, so will its media, reflective of the changing tides, echoing the past but also looking towards the future. It remains imperative for scholars, journalists, policymakers, and the general populace to remain vigilant and informed, ensuring that media continues to serve as a beacon of democracy, truth, and representation for all Brazilians.

7.2 External Factors Shaping Brazilian Media Practices

Beyond Brazil's vibrant frontiers, a sprawling global expanse stretches out, alive with myriad influences that deeply infuse the Brazilian media landscape. These aren't mere superficial imprints; they are profound currents, steering the nation's communication *ethos*, shaping its narrative strategies, and redefining its place within the grand tableau of global discourses. Central to this intricate web is the ceaseless dance of global geopolitics. Every move on this vast chessboard, whether it is the formation of new alliances, the strain of diplomatic tensions, or the shared challenges of global crises, is keenly observed and relayed by Brazilian media. They not only report these events but also interpret them, providing a lens that's uniquely Brazilian, tinted with its rich history and diverse cultural sensibilities. Parallely, waves of technological advancements continually lap at Brazil's shores. The rapid ascendancy of digital platforms, the ever-evolving landscape of social media, and the advent of groundbreaking communication tools don't just provide new mediums for storytelling, but also influence the very essence of the stories themselves. In this interconnected age, Brazilian media isn't a mere reflection of the nation's internal heartbeat.

It has grown to be a resonant echo chamber, capturing both the country's unique pulse and the rhythm of the wider global community, forging a harmonious symphony that speaks of shared experiences, challenges, and aspirations.

Table 24 – External Factors Shaping Brazilian Media Practices.

FACTOR	DESCRIPTION
Geopolitical Influences	As an active member of BRICS and a primary force in South America, Brazil's geopolitical positioning significantly molds its media narratives.
Global Economic Trends	Brazil's status as an emergent economy deeply ties its media focus to global economic shifts, especially where commodities such as soy and iron ore are concerned.
Technological Diffusion	The rapid embrace of digital media, underscored by platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and especially WhatsApp, has revolutionized Brazilian media consumption. Yet, this evolution has not been without its challenges, notably misinformation and increased polarization.
Migration and Diaspora	Brazil's rich immigrant backdrop, featuring communities from nations like Japan and Italy, deeply influences specific media segments. In tandem, Brazilian diaspora, particularly in places like the US, creates a notable demand for Brazilian content abroad.
Environmental Factors	Brazil's ecological centerpiece, the Amazon rainforest, ensures that environmental concerns are consistently in media limelight.
Global Media and Cultural Exports	Brazil's colorful cultural exports, from music like samba to its renowned telenovelas, command global attention, even as international media, especially from the US, permeates the Brazilian media ecosystem.

As summarized in Table 24, external factors shaping Brazilian media practices include:

- **Geopolitical Influences:** Brazil's geopolitical significance, both as a key member of BRICS and as South America's dominant nation, ensures that its media often reflects regional politics, power dynamics, and strategic alliances.

- **Global Economic Trends:** As a rising star in the world's economic theater, Brazil's media is acutely responsive to shifts in global finance. This sensitivity is particularly palpable in its coverage of commodities like soy and iron ore, which are integral to its economy.
- **Technological Diffusion:** Brazil's media horizon has witnessed a transformative shift due to the onset of digital platforms. Online avenues, spanning from social media giants like Facebook and Twitter to messaging platforms like WhatsApp, have risen as primary news sources, especially for younger demographics. This shift, however, has been twined with concerns, chiefly the spread of misinformation and an uptick in divisive narratives.
- **Migration and Diaspora:** Brazil's complex tapestry of immigrant communities, encompassing influences from Japan, Italy, Lebanon, and many other nations, has carved out distinct niches in its media landscape. Beyond its borders, the Brazilian diaspora in countries like the US amplifies the demand for homegrown media content, linking global Brazilian communities with their roots.
- **Environmental Factors:** Holding the Amazon rainforest, often termed the 'lungs of the Earth', ensures that Brazil's media persistently underscores ecological challenges and discussions. It serves as a beacon, bringing global environmental discourses right to Brazil's doorsteps.
- **Global Media and Cultural Exports:** Brazil's rich cultural heritage, manifested in musical wonders like samba and bossa nova and its globally adored telenovelas, keeps global audiences enamored. At the same time, international media, predominantly American, deeply influences and merges with local content, creating a unique media blend.

Brazil's media landscape is a vibrant mix of regional and national content, reflecting its diverse culture and history. The challenges, including media ownership concentration and threats to journalists, remain a concern. Nevertheless, the influence of Brazilian media, both domestically and internationally, is undeniable. Ensuring the media's role in buttressing democracy and enlightening the populace requires concerted efforts from policymakers, media professionals, and the citizenry. Collaborative endeavors are vital in surmounting challenges such as media concentration, mounting pressures on journalists, and the dissemination of fake news.

7.3 The Brazilian Online News Ecosystem

Brazil's media sphere, infused with its vibrant cultural richness, socio-political complexities, and spirited dynamism, stands as a unique beacon within Latin American journalistic practices, emphasizing values of diversity, passion, and democratic dialogue (Waisbord, 2000; Matos, 2012). As digital winds reshape global communication, Brazilian journalism marries its colorful tapestry with digital innovations, primarily evident in the realm of online news platforms and apps (Reis, 2017).

Key digital players like O Globo, Folha de S.Paulo, or Estadão have transitioned adeptly into the digital sphere (Porto, 2012), catering to a Brazilian audience that seeks vibrant, immediate, and diverse content. Given Brazil's significance in Latin America, its online news covers not just national intricacies but extends to regional dynamics and global events. A political move in Washington or a cultural festival in Europe can swiftly find space in Brazil's online headlines. This global outreach is enhanced by the prominence of international media entities like Al Jazeera or CNN within Brazil's digital media, reflecting a society with burgeoning global aspirations (Newman et al., 2020). Brazil's distinctive flair for celebrating diversity and voice impacts its online news ecosystem. While commercial dynamics, evident in monetization experiments by outlets like Valor Econômico, play a role, there's a steadfast commitment to plurality and representation. In the fast-paced digital realm, the tension between comprehensive reporting and attention-grabbing headlines poses challenges. Amidst the backdrop of global trends, technological innovations, and evolving socio-political landscapes, Brazilian media entities remain agile, calibrating their approach for a vast, diverse audience.

At its core, the Brazil online news ecosystem serves as a mirror, reflecting the country's vibrant interplay of history, culture, politics, and global engagements (Matos, 2012). Its multi-layered nature, potential pitfalls, and evolutionary strides offer deep insights into the heart of Brazilian journalism and its dynamic relationship with the public.

8. Argentina

Argentina, renowned for its rich tapestry of culture, geography, and history, boasts an equally diverse and dynamic media landscape (Waisbord, 2000). From the bustling urban sprawl of Buenos Aires to the tranquil horizons of Patagonia, the nation's media reflects its multifaceted spirit. With its potent mix of public, private, and community outlets, Argentina stands out as one of the most developed Spanish-language media markets in South America (Becerra & Mastrini, 2009). This distinction can be attributed to the country's high literacy rates coupled with a robust communications infrastructure.

Central to Argentina's media fabric is its enduring tradition of journalism (Waisbord, 2000). Iconic newspapers such as *La Nación* and *Clarín*, which have been molding public sentiment since the late 19th and early 20th centuries, epitomize this legacy (Becerra & Mastrini, 2009). These print behemoths, despite facing the challenges of declining subscriptions and ad revenues, remain vital to the nation's journalistic landscape, testament to their adaptability and resilience. While private entities like Grupo *Clarín*, which owns an array of newspapers, TV channels, and digital portals, dominate the media scene (Becerra & Mastrini, 2009), Argentina also takes pride in its robust public media sector. The National Public Radio and Television Service stands out as a primary public broadcaster, complemented by numerous regional counterparts. Additionally, community media—grassroots, non-profit entities—offer alternative viewpoints, addressing the unique needs of specific communities and underserved populations (Waisbord, 2000).

However, the winds of change brought about by digitization haven't bypassed Argentina (Matassi & Sidicaro, 2018). The burgeoning realm of digital news media is reshaping the country's media dynamics. As traditional outlets grapple with shifting economic realities, the rise of online platforms is changing not just the mode of information delivery but also the relationship between journalists and their audiences. The digital transformation is evident in the increasing focus of legacy media houses towards online editions and mobile applications (Matassi & Sidicaro, 2018).

The chronicles of Argentine journalism, however, aren't without their dark chapters. The Dirty War era of the late 1970s and early 1980s stands out as a grim reminder (Sivak, 2015). During this period, press freedom was severely curtailed, with many journalists facing dire consequences for their work. Yet, it was the unwavering spirit of the journalistic community that brought international attention to the tragedies of the 'desaparecidos' (disappeared persons) (Sivak, 2015).

Radios, integral to Argentina's media story, have consistently connected its populace to both cultural milestones and pressing current events (Mastrini & Becerra, 2006). With stations like Radio Mitre and Radio Continental, they have served as both a cultural and informational lifeline.

As Argentina continues its media journey in the age of the internet, challenges persist. Despite a constitution that champions press freedom, the complex interplay of politics, economics, and societal issues sometimes clouds the landscape (Becerra & Mastrini, 2009). Yet, amidst these challenges, the resilience and adaptability of Argentine journalism shine through. With international media giants making their presence felt and Argentine narratives capturing global attention, the country's media is not just reflecting its vibrant society—it is shaping its future trajectory.

8.1 Internal Factors Shaping Argentine Media Practices

Argentina, often referred to as the “Paris of South America”, boasts a vibrant and dynamic media landscape. The nation’s media practices are influenced by a combination of historical, cultural, political, economic, educational, and legal factors, with unique nuances that shape the country’s media practices.

Table 25 – Internal Factors Shaping Argentine Media Practices.

FACTOR	DESCRIPTION
Historical Context	Argentina’s media has evolved under the shadow of its colonial legacy and significant events like the <i>Dirty War</i> . The period from 1976-1983 wasn’t just a chapter of observation for media, but direct involvement, facing persecution.
Cultural Norms and Values	The media in Argentina reflects a vibrant mix of indigenous, Spanish, and European traditions. This cultural fusion is evident in media segments, from the fervor of tango to the depths of Argentine literature.
Political Systems	Media in Argentina has often found itself intertwined with politics, especially during the leadership of figures like Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. Politics is not just a subject but an influencer of media narratives.
Economic Systems	The fluctuations in Argentina’s economy, notably its debt crises, directly impact the media’s financial health, affecting advertising, funding, and operations.
Education and Literacy	Boasting high literacy rates, Argentina’s print media, especially newspapers, enjoy a special prominence, informing and influencing societal dialogues.
Legal and Regulatory Frameworks	Despite the constitution championing press freedom, on-the-ground challenges, from organized crime exposés to political scandals, can pose hurdles for Argentine journalists.

As summarized in Table 25, internal factors shaping Argentine media practices include:

- **Historical Context:** Argentina’s media history is inseparable from its broader national past. Colonial influences laid early foundations, but the *Dirty War* between

1976 and 1983 stands out as a particularly formative era. During this period, media didn't merely observe but became a significant actor, with journalists often facing persecution. This legacy informs media's present-day roles and responsibilities within Argentine society.

- **Cultural Norms and Values:** The cultural richness of Argentina is the product of a melting pot of indigenous, Spanish, and broader European influences. In media, this heritage finds vivid expression—be it through the impassioned notes of tango or the literary wonders of Argentine writers. This intricate cultural tapestry is reflected, celebrated, and disseminated through various media outlets.
- **Political Systems:** Navigating Argentina's political waters has often been a challenging endeavor for its media. The interplay between media and politics became especially pronounced during the leadership tenures of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. Media, in many ways, became an extension of political ideologies and battles, resulting in unique narratives and tensions.
- **Economic Systems:** Argentina's economic story is one of highs and lows, with events like the debt crisis leaving deep impacts. These economic dynamics are mirrored in the media's operational realities. As the nation's economy ebbs and flows, so do advertising revenues, funding opportunities, and the overall financial stability of media houses.
- **Education and Literacy:** A silver lining in Argentina's story is its commendable literacy rate. This educational achievement ensures that print media, and notably newspapers, hold a pivotal position. They not only inform but shape public discourses and debates. Even as the world goes digital, the essence of Argentine newspapers continues to resonate, albeit on new platforms.
- **Legal and Regulatory Frameworks:** While the Argentine constitution extols the virtues of press freedom, the lived experience for many journalists can be more nuanced. Legal safeguards are in place, but media professionals often find themselves at the crosshairs when they delve into contentious issues, be it high-level corruption or the activities of organized crime syndicates.

The Argentine media landscape, rich and multifaceted, is the result of numerous internal factors working in concert. As with any nation, understanding these factors provides invaluable insights into its media practices, narratives, and influences. Whether it is the echoes of the past,

the vibrant culture, or the political and economic dynamics, each plays a pivotal role in shaping the Argentine media mosaic.

8.2 External Factors Shaping Argentine Media Practices

Argentina, with its vast landscapes and vibrant cities, has never been isolated from global influences. As in many aspects of its society, the media landscape is not solely a product of internal dynamics. Instead, it is also shaped significantly by myriad external factors, ranging from geopolitical considerations to the environmental challenges faced by the globe. Let's delve into these external forces that impact Argentine media practices.

Table 26 – External Factors Shaping Argentine Media Practices.

FACTOR	DESCRIPTION
Geopolitical Influences	Argentina's geographical positioning and relationships, especially with nations like Brazil and Chile, directly influence media content. Its participation in regional alliances, like Mercosur, further amplifies geopolitical media discussions.
Global Economic Trends	As a hub for commodities like beef and soy, Argentina's media is attentive to global economic shifts, ensuring these trends are at the forefront of national discourse.
Technological Diffusion	Argentina has embraced the digital age, with platforms such as Twitter becoming central to its media ecosystem, reflecting the nation's adaptive nature.
Migration and Diaspora	Argentina's rich immigrant tapestry, particularly European influences, casts its shade on media preferences. This results in media channels specifically dedicated to various communities, like the Jewish diaspora.
Environmental Factors	Argentina's media, in alignment with worldwide concerns, places a significant emphasis on environmental subjects, often highlighting regional matters such as deforestation in Patagonia and mining activities.
Global Media and Cultural Exports	Argentine cultural exports find global appreciation, but the nation also absorbs international media influences, particularly from Europe and the US, fostering a dynamic cultural exchange.

As summarized in Table 26, external factors shaping Argentine media practices include:

- **Geopolitical Influences:** Argentina's geopolitical standing, owing to its strategic location and interactions with neighboring nations like Brazil and Chile, holds immense weight in its media narratives. Further, Argentina's role within Mercosur, a prominent regional bloc, ensures that regional geopolitical discussions are a mainstay in media channels.
- **Global Economic Trends:** Being a major player in the global commodities market, especially with products like beef and soy, Argentina's media remains keenly attuned to international economic fluctuations. Changes in global market scenarios don't just affect the economy but shape media narratives, ensuring the public remains informed and engaged.
- **Technological Diffusion:** The rise of digital platforms has seen Argentina adapting swiftly. Social media, especially Twitter, has emerged as not just a communication tool but a significant news dissemination platform. This transition underscores Argentina's capacity to integrate technological innovations into its media landscape.
- **Migration and Diaspora:** Argentina's historical and contemporary migration patterns, especially its European connections, are evident in the nation's diverse media tastes. Catering to this diversity, certain media outlets focus on niche audiences, such as channels dedicated to the Jewish community, highlighting the significant overlap of migration history and media trends.
- **Environmental Factors:** Global environmental dialogues find strong echoes in Argentina. The media does not shy away from spotlighting pressing local issues, such as deforestation or the implications of mining in areas like Patagonia. This focus mirrors a larger global emphasis on sustainability and environmental preservation.
- **Global Media and Cultural Exports:** Argentina, while a significant exporter of cultural content, from films to literature, is also a major consumer of global media. European and American influences, whether in content or production styles, can be discerned in various media products. This illustrates Argentina's position at the crossroads of media influence, both absorbing and broadcasting cultural narratives.

Argentina's media reflects the nation's intricate history, diverse culture, and ongoing political and economic challenges. It plays a critical role in shaping public opinion and remains an essential facet of Argentine daily life. The dance between Argentina and the global stage is intricate

and ongoing. Its media, a mirror to this dance, not only reflects the nation's internal complexities but also its engagement with wider global narratives. From geopolitics to cultural exchanges, understanding these external influences offers a holistic view of the media's role in the Argentine tapestry of life.

8.3 The Argentine Online News Ecosystem

Argentina's media framework, intertwined with its rich political history, artistic lineage, and continental significance, occupies a pivotal space in South American journalistic traditions, underlined by principles of introspection, fervor, and public service (Waisbord, 2000). Navigating the currents of the digital age, Argentine journalism intertwines its historical depth with the opportunities of the online domain, especially within the expanding universe of online news portals and apps (Becerra & Mastrini, 2009).

Digital luminaries like La Nación, Clarín, or Página/12 have made significant inroads into the online space, becoming essential touchpoints for an Argentine populace that values articulate, timely, and multimedia-enhanced content. As key actors in South American narratives, Argentina's digital news channels not only delve into domestic affairs but also encompass regional stories and global dynamics (Fox & Waisbord, 2002). An economic event in Brazil or a social movement in Europe can quickly ascend Argentina's digital news agenda. This international focus is intensified by the conspicuous influence of global media giants like the BBC or Telesur, suggesting an audience with a deep-seated international inclination (Fox & Waisbord, 2002).

The Argentine ethos, with its emphasis on introspective critique and socio-cultural expression, permeates its online news environment. While the digital arena does grapple with commercial imperatives, seen in monetization attempts by media giants like Infobae, there's a prevailing sentiment to prioritize depth and societal reflection (Matassi & Sidicaro, 2018). The delicate balance between maintaining journalistic rigor and catering to digital consumption trends is ever-present. With global events, tech advancements, and changing socio-political scenarios influencing the media terrain, Argentine platforms are in a perpetual state of evolution, discerning the implications for their national and continental audiences.

The Argentina online news ecosystem stands not merely as an information reservoir but as a dynamic canvas portraying the intricate fusion of history, culture, socio-politics, and global interactions. Its complexities, challenges, and trajectories provide a comprehensive view of the evolving bond between Argentine journalism and its multifaceted readership.

CHAPTER 7

INTERNAL FACTORS OF RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN USER & MEDIA COMPANY

Understanding the theoretical constructs and the investigative methodology is essential for diving into the empirical side of media dynamics. The upcoming chapters are geared to show how the concepts discussed so far play out in real-world situations. Starting this exploration, the focus shifts to news organizations. As we explore the 80 news websites from eight different countries from our *corpus* (Table 27), in this chapter we break down the basics, looking at how these websites are designed, from their overall structure to user interfaces and the internal factors of media companies that become pillars from a user-news organizations relationship.

First, we considered elements like support features, layout choices, and advertising methods all come into play, offering a clear picture of the digital space these news platforms occupy and how they may influence their audience. Then, to gain insights into how news organizations constructed relationships with their users, we adopted a holistic approach that involves examining three internal factors that shape media organizations: (1) the nature, (2) the business models, and (3) the place of the user. When discussing media organizations, internal factors pertain to those elements that are inherent to the organization itself, as opposed to external influences like regulatory changes, societal shifts, or technological advancements. Understanding these internal factors is crucial, as they provide insight into the operational mechanics of media organizations and explain why different entities might adopt varied content, engagement, and revenue strategies even within the same media landscape.

Table 27 – Selected corpus of news sites per country.

COUNTRY	NEWS SITES
United States of America	New York Times (Legacy – print)
	Washington Post (Legacy – print)
	BuzzFeed News (Digital Native) ²⁵
	HuffPost (Digital Native)
	Vice (Digital Native)

²⁵ BuzzFeed News closed in May 2023. We will address the closure in our analysis. We had finished data collection on the website before it ended.

	Los Angeles Times (Legacy – print)
	Wall Street Journal (Legacy – print)
	FoxNews.com (Legacy – broadcasting)
	CNN.com (Legacy – broadcasting)
	Politico (Digital Native)
United Kingdom	Daily Mail (Legacy – print)
	The Guardian (Legacy – print)
	The Telegraph (Legacy – print)
	The Sun (Legacy – print)
	The Independent (Digital Native)
	The Mirror (Legacy – print)
	BBC.com (Legacy – broadcasting)
	The Canary (Digital Native) ²⁶
	Metro.uk (Legacy – print)
	Sky News (Legacy – broadcasting)
Spain	El País (Legacy – print)
	El Español (Digital Native)
	La Voz de la Galicia (Legacy – print)
	Público (Digital Native)
	El Confidencial (Digital Native)
	20 minutos (Legacy – print)
	La Vanguardia (Legacy – print)
	ABC (Legacy – print)
	OK diário (Digital Native)
	El País (Legacy – print)
France	Le Monde (Legacy – print)

²⁶ The Canary went through a change of media ownership in October 2022, when it became a workers co-op. A fact we will address further on.

	Le Figaro (Legacy – print)
	Liberation (Legacy – print)
	Le Parisien (Legacy – print)
	Mediapart (Digital Native)
	Brut (Digital Native)
	Les Jours (Digital Native)
	France 24 (Legacy – broadcasting)
	20 minutes (Legacy – radio)
	Lintern@ute (Digital Native)
Netherlands	The Correspondent (Digital Native) ²⁷
	De Telegraaf (Legacy – print)
	DutchNews.nl (Digital Native)
	AD.nl (Legacy – print)
	RTL Nieuws (Legacy – broadcasting)
	nu.nl (Digital Native)
	NL Times (Digital Native)
	de Volkskrant (Legacy – print)
	NOS.nl (Legacy – broadcasting)
	Metro NL (Legacy – print)
Germany	Krautreporter (Digital Native)
	Welt (Legacy – print)
	Corretiv (Digital Native)
	DER Spiegel
	TAZ (Legacy – print)
	Bild (Legacy – print)
	Zeit Online (Digital Native)

²⁷ The Correspondent closed on January 1st, 2021. We will address the closure further on in our analysis. For the data collection on the website, we will consider the information available up to its end.

	DW (Legacy – broadcasting)
	Focus (Legacy – print)
	Stern (Legacy – print)
Brazil	Folha de S. Paulo (Legacy – print)
	Estadão (Legacy – print)
	GaúchaZH (Legacy – print)
	G1 (Digital Native)
	Uol Notícias (Digital Native)
	Intercept Brasil (Digital Native) ²⁸
	Agência Pública (Digital Native)
	Nexo (Digital Native)
	O Globo (Legacy – print)
	Correio Braziliense (Legacy – print)
Argentina	La Nación (Legacy – print)
	Clarín (Legacy – print)
	La Prensa (Legacy – print)
	Diário Popular (Legacy – print)
	Cronica (Legacy – print)
	Pagina 12 (Legacy – print)
	La Voz (Legacy – print)
	The Bubble (Digital Native) ²⁹
	Reda/Acción (Digital Native)
	Infobae (Digital Native)

²⁸ The Intercept Brasil went through a complete remodeling in October 2022, when it became completely independent from the version of the website from the United States. A fact we will address further on.

²⁹ The Bubble closed in 2021. A fact we will address further on. For its analysis, we will consider the data collected while the site remained online.

In the intricate web of modern media dynamics, understanding the internal factors within media organizations becomes paramount. These factors are the core tenets that govern a media's operational *ethos*. They drive not just what we see on our screens or read on our devices, but also how the content is presented, and even why it is created in the first place (McQuail, 2010). From our *corpus* of 80 news sites, regarding (1) the nature of a media company, we investigate the distinctions between legacy media and digital-native organizations. As for (2) business models, they are crucial in understanding how the media organizations operate and how they generate revenue. Our analysis includes examining whether the news sites are supported by advertising, subscriptions, or a combination of both, and how this affects their journalistic practices. To conclude, we explore the connection between the news organizations and their audience/public, by analyzing (3) the place of the user in their journalism, which meant exploring how they refer to their users and their professional practices. This provides insights into how news organizations perceive their users and their relationship with them. These intertwined facets present a panoramic view of the online news ecosystem. By understanding them in unison, we can form a more holistic view of the contemporary media landscape (Anderson, 2011).

1. The Significance of Form in Websites for Media Organizations and Users

Understanding the fundamental concepts of website creation is critical for both media companies and their users, as it has a direct influence on how they utilize the website. The concept of form encapsulates the essential components of material arrangement, structure, and format utilized by each organization to manifest the visual aspect of their news. By doing so, organizations project an ideal image of themselves and their actions.

The New York Times was one of the pioneers in the field of digital media, having launched its online edition in the 1990s (as illustrated in Figure 4). The newspaper eagerly harnessed the potential of technological advancements of the time, with a steadfast belief in the utopian promise that the internet would overcome constraints of time and space, enabling access to a wider audience.

The New York Times Introduces a Web Site

By PETER H. LEWIS

The New York Times begins publishing daily on the World Wide Web today, offering readers around the world immediate access to most of the daily newspaper's contents.

The New York Times on the Web, as the electronic publication is known, contains most of the news and feature articles from the current day's printed newspaper, classified advertising, reporting that does not appear in the newspaper, and interactive features including the newspaper's crossword puzzle.

The electronic newspaper (address: <http://www.nytimes.com>) is part of a strategy to extend the readership of The Times and to create opportunities for the company in the electronic media industry, said Martin Nisenholtz, president of The New York Times Electronic Media Company.

The company, formed in 1995 to develop products for the rapidly growing field of digital publishing, is a wholly owned subsidiary of The New York Times Company, and also produces the @times service on America Online Inc.

Mr. Nisenholtz reports to Russell T. Lewis, the president and general manager of The New York Times, and to Joseph Lelyveld, the newspaper's executive editor.

The Web-based Times is the newest of dozens of papers available to a global audience on the Internet's fastest-growing service, which lets computer users see electronic publications consisting of text, pictures and, in some

cases, video and sound.

A selection of the day's news, discussion forums and other material from The Times has been available through the @times service since the spring of 1994 on America Online.

The Web site's global audience means a larger potential readership than that of @times, which is limited to America Online's subscribers, currently more than four million. The new site also offers new products and services.

"Our site is designed to take full advantage of the evolving capabilities offered by the Internet," said Arthur Sulzberger Jr., publisher

country will be offered a 30-day trial without charge, but will eventually face a subscription fee.

Advertisers that have already announced participation on the Web site include Toyota Motor Corporate Services, Chemical Bank and the Northeast real estate concern Douglas Elliman.

Subscribers will have limited access to archives of Times articles and features dating to 1980, and will be able to copy articles to their own computers for \$1.95 each, Mr. Nisenholtz said.

The new service will also offer, for a fee, a customized clipping service that delivers to a subscriber's electronic mailbox articles gleaned from each day's editions of the newspaper, based on key words the subscriber selects.

With its entry on the Web, The Times is hoping to become a primary information provider in the computer age and to cut costs for newsprint, delivery and labor. Companies that have established Web-based information sites include television networks, computer companies, on-line information services, magazines and even individuals creating electronic newspapers of their own.

"The New York Times name will get people to look at the product once or maybe twice, and the fact that The New York Times has the kind of reach and credibility it does may persuade people to look three or four times," said John F. Kelsey 3d, president of the Kelsey Group, a consultancy running a conference on interactive newspapers next month.

"The market is booming for newspapers on the World Wide Web," Mr. Kelsey said.

A service hopes to build readership in cyberspace.

of The Times. "We see our role on the Web as being similar to our traditional print role — to act as a thoughtful, unbiased filter and to provide our customers with information they need and can trust."

The Web site will also offer access to much of what the newspaper has published the previous week and access to feature articles from as far back as 1980.

Mr. Nisenholtz said that initially, at least, no subscription or access fee would be charged for readers in the United States and that the electronic paper would generate revenue from advertising. Readers who connect to the electronic paper from outside the

Figure 4 – New York Times' first digital edition in 1990s.
Source: Lewis, 1996

Folha de S. Paulo made its entry into the digital landscape with the launch of its initial online platform, Folha Web, in 1995 (Figure 5). This was an early exemplar of a real-time newspaper in Portuguese, which marked a significant milestone in digital journalism. Four years later, the channel was renamed Folha Online, and it began operating independently from the print version of the newspaper. In the year 2000, Folha de S. Paulo launched FolhaWAP, the first news service in Portuguese for mobile internet, which was yet another pioneering step in digital journalism. Over the years, Folha Online underwent numerous graphic changes, reflecting technological advancements. These changes included the introduction of blogs, a tool to display the most-read news of the day, and more prominent search fields. In 2010, they unified their print and online newsrooms, renamed the site Folha.com, and launched the first app for iPad and Android, as well as 'TV Folha.' These measures enabled them to stay ahead of the competition and maintain their position as a leading digital news platform in the region. By 2014, Folha.com had achieved a record number of page views (395.7 million) and unique visitors (33.5 million), cementing their place as one of the most successful digital news outlets in Brazil.



Figure 5 – FolhaWeb, online platform from Folha de S. Paulo in 1995.
Source: *Líder Entre Jornais, Folha Completa 20 Anos Na Internet – FOLHA NA WEB | Folha, 2015.*

As traditional print newspapers adapted to the internet, the consumption of news underwent a significant transformation. The digitization of journalistic processes, from gathering and producing to distributing content, has continued to evolve and innovate (Anderson, Bell and Shirky, 2013). Early web publishing efforts simply reproduced print format, but with the advent of new platforms, physical aspects of newspapers, such as texture, thickness, and scent, were lost, and screens of varying sizes became the predominant medium (Gruszynski et al., 2016). These changes facilitated the development of new approaches to producing, distributing, and receiving journalistic information, incorporating multimedia, hypertext, interactivity, memory, immediacy, personalization, and ubiquity (Palacios, 1999, 2002, 2004; Bardoel and Deuze, 2000; Zamorra, 2002; Salaverría, 2005, Canavilhas, 2014). This has fundamentally altered the nature of content created for consumption on different platforms. The current journalism model is characterized by interactive digital information that enables direct and immediate participation; personalized content that allows for active selection; documented news via hypertext and links; constantly updated news that challenges the traditional concept of periodicity; and integration of all journalistic formats – text, audio, video, graphics, and photos – into a single multimedia medium. Additionally, it requires new design conceptions that go beyond aesthetics and focus on making navigation easier for readers (Concha, 2007).

The design of news sites began to integrate various demands, including information architecture, interface, and interaction design, among others, with the goal of enhancing user experience when navigating the online environment (Gruszynski, 2016). Consequently, certain elements can be recognized as defining for the computer-mediated experience of users in digital

and online journalism when navigating news sites, namely, the reading support (machine), interface, and advertisement. Below, we explore these elements by examining our *corpus* of study.

1.2 The Support

Within the digital domain, the reading support for journalistic content is embodied by the machine, which has become a necessary possession for those who wish to access news content online, in addition to requiring an internet connection. In the current context, the machine can be defined as a device used to access digital networks, and it encompasses various technological tools capable of processing and interpreting digital information (Lévy, 1999). It is important to note that the device used to access the internet does not have to be a personal computer, as smartphones and tablets, for example, are also commonly used to access digital media, each with their own particularities, based on aspects such as programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication (van Dijck and Poell, 2013; Helmond, 2015).

Mobile media, particularly smartphones and tablets, have emerged as agents that are reconfiguring the production, publication, distribution, circulation, recirculation, consumption, and reception of multi-platform journalistic content. In addition, mobile media are driving a new cycle of innovation, in which journalistic applications designed for tablets and smartphones, or apps, are becoming increasingly popular (Barbosa, Firmino da Silva and Nogueira, 2012). Mobile media, especially smartphones and tablets, are the new agents that reconfigure the production, publication, distribution, circulation, recirculation, consumption, and reception of multi-platform journalistic content. Mobile media are also driving a new cycle of innovation, in which journalistic application products (apps) for tablets and smartphones appear (Barbosa, Firmino da Silva and Nogueira, 2012).

The rise of mobile navigation has not only introduced fresh opportunities for journalism but also redefined immediacy, which had already undergone a shift with the advent of the web. Since 2016, mobile devices have surpassed desktop usage in online news consumption, with social media platforms, especially Facebook, exerting a substantial influence in fueling this trend (Newman et al., 2016). Consequently, news outlets are increasingly tailoring their content to reach their audience where they are. Finally, media companies have the possibility of developing native applications that are specifically designed and tailored to the features and capabilities of mobile devices. These applications are edited based on affordances, which refer to the inherent properties of the device, such as tactility (Palacios and Cunha, 2012), design attributes for portable devices (García, 2012), and the utilization of differential resources for content composition. In essence, such applications go beyond those that are merely comprised of materials compiled from websites.

In today's digital landscape, user interaction with software largely revolves around two platforms: mobile apps and desktop applications. These platforms, though both essential conduits of user experience, exhibit diverse design requirements and cater to varied user expectations. Table 28 offers a concise comparison of the design principles that guide the development of mobile apps versus desktop software.

Table 28 – Comparison of design principles for mobile apps and desktop software.

FEATURE	MOBILE APPS	DESKTOP SOFTWARE
Screen Size	Limited screen real estate.	Larger, more space for UI elements.
Input Method	Touch-based (swipe, tap, pinch).	Mouse & Keyboard dominant.
User Context	On-the-go, brief interactions.	Likely seated, longer sessions.
Connection	Intermittent connectivity possible.	Typically, stable internet connections.
Resources	Limited CPU, memory, and battery.	More powerful CPU and memory.
Installation	App stores with review processes.	Direct downloads, CD/DVDs, fewer restrictions.
Updates	Frequent, smaller updates.	Less frequent, larger updates.
Notifications	Push notifications integral.	More reliant on in-software or email alerts.
Access to Device Features	Camera, GPS, accelerometer, etc.	Limited, mostly to system hardware.
Orientation	Landscape and portrait modes.	Primarily landscape.
User Expectation for Interface	Simplified, intuitive UI/UX.	More tolerance for complex features.
Multitasking	Limited due to screen size and resources.	Multiple windows, more robust multitasking.
Compatibility	Variability in device sizes and OS versions.	More consistent, but OS differences exist.
Loading Time	Expected to be quick, instant response.	Slightly more tolerance for loading times.
Offline Functionality	Often expected for core functions.	Not always expected.

While the aforementioned design principles are broad and applicable to a multitude of applications, their practical implications can be further elucidated when analyzed in the context of specific domains. One such domain where these principles have a pronounced effect is in the

creation and consumption of news. As news consumption has increasingly migrated to digital formats, understanding the unique design considerations for mobile news apps versus desktop news sites becomes crucial.

News platforms, whether mobile or desktop-based, serve the integral purpose of keeping users informed. Their design, hence, plays a pivotal role in ensuring that news is accessible, engaging, and relevant. Table 29 encapsulates the nuanced design aspects that differentiate mobile news apps from desktop news sites. These considerations, from screen size to offline functionality, underline the importance of tailoring the user experience to the specific strengths and constraints of each platform. In essence, whether users are seeking quick updates on-the-go or in-depth analyses from the comfort of their desks, the design must facilitate and enrich their informational journey.

Table 29 – Design considerations tailored to news sites/apps.

FEATURE	MOBILE APPS	DESKTOP WEBSITES
Screen Size	Concise headlines, fewer articles on view.	Multiple columns, more content displayed.
Input Method	Swipe to navigate, scroll stories.	Click navigation, scrollable sections.
User Context	Quick updates, glancing news on-the-go.	In-depth reading, multi-tab browsing.
Connection	Offline reading features, lightweight content.	Richer media, less concern about offline mode.
Resources	Optimized images, streamlined design.	HD images/videos, more elaborate layouts.
Installation	News app updates through app store.	Website updates invisible to user.
Updates	Real-time news push notifications.	Refresh for updates, email subscriptions.
Notifications	Breaking news alerts, tailored interests.	Browser notifications, RSS feeds.
Access to Device Features	Use of location for local news, camera for user reports.	Limited to browser capabilities.
Orientation	Switch between portrait (scrolling) and landscape (media).	Primarily landscape view.
User Expectation for Interface	Simplified, "at-a-glance" interface.	Detailed sections, advanced search.
Multitasking	Background updates while using other apps.	Multiple tabs/windows for various stories.
Compatibility	Responsive design for varying screen sizes.	Optimized for major web browsers.

Loading Time	Quick load for headline view.	Slightly longer load times tolerated for rich content.
Offline Functionality	Save articles for offline reading.	Less frequent, but cached pages might be available.

After examining the 80 news sites from our *corpus*, we discovered that all of them can be accessed via desktop and viewed on a cellphone browser. However, as illustrated in Figure 6, a majority of 63 sites (78%) offer specific applications designed for portable devices. Out of these, 10 are from the United States, 9 are from the United Kingdom, 8 are from Spain, 10 are from France, 6 are from the Netherlands, 9 are from Germany, 7 are from Brazil and 5 are from Argentina.

Distribution of Mobile Apps by Country

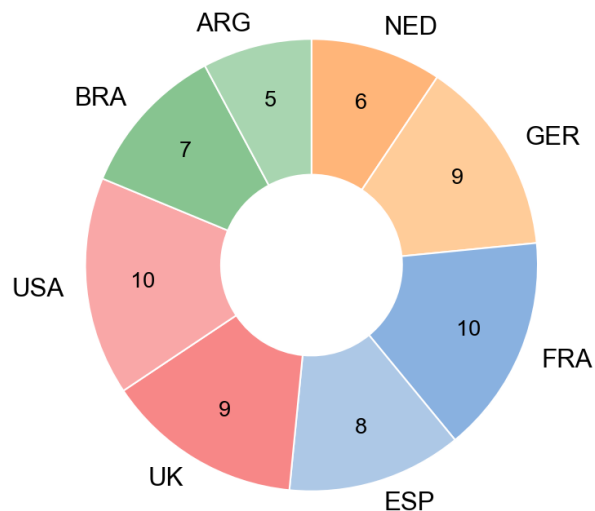


Figure 6 – Adoption Rate of Mobile Apps by Country.

Next, we compared the prevalence of mobile applications between legacy media and digital natives in each country, with the aim of determining whether there was a correlation between the nature and ownership of an app (Figure 7). However, we found that the presence of mobile applications was balanced between media organizations of different natures, possibly more related to the media market of each country, the reading behavior of local consumers, and the level of resources of newsrooms to maintain their own applications. Hence, it appears that the dominance of mobile applications is not solely influenced by the type of media organization, but rather by a blend of various factors.

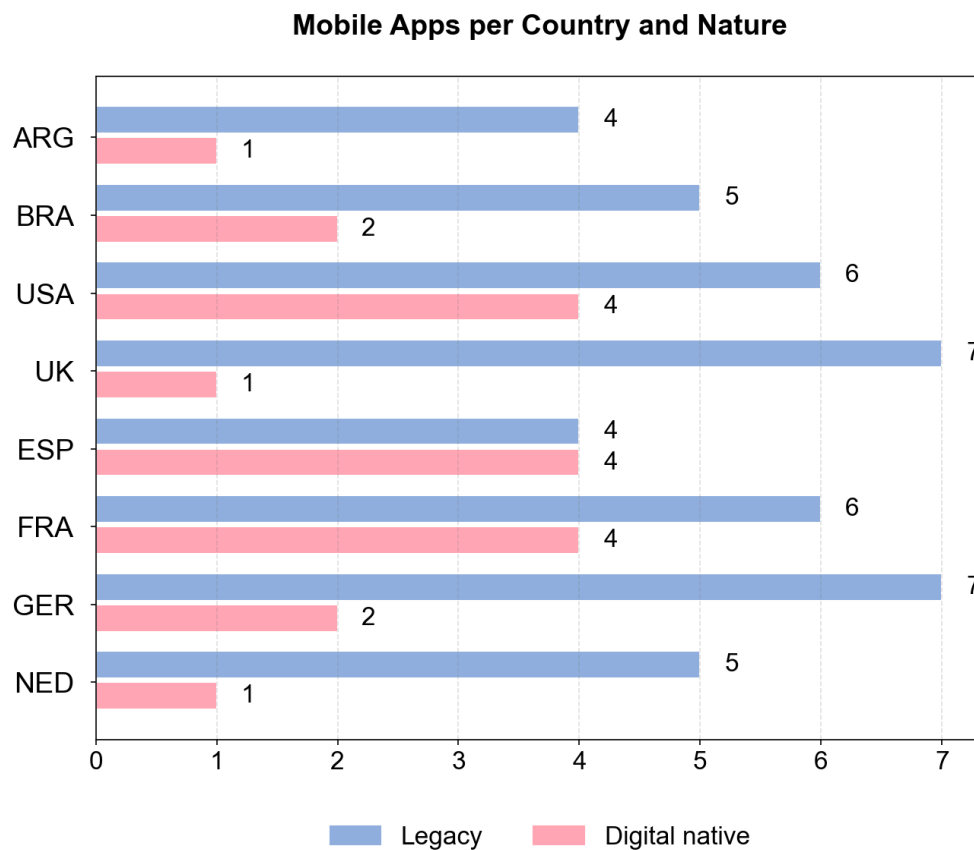


Figure 7 – Distribution of mobile apps per country and nature of the media organization.

It is noteworthy that all 80 news sites are designed to be accessible both on desktop computers and cellphone browsers. This demonstrates a conscious effort by these news organizations to cater to a diverse range of users across different devices. In an era where smartphones have become ubiquitous, news sites accessible through mobile browsers like Safari, Chrome, and others play an indispensable role in digital news dissemination. Unlike dedicated mobile news apps, these browser-accessible sites offer flexibility by not necessitating app installations, but they come with their unique set of challenges and considerations.

Firstly, responsive design is paramount. These sites must automatically adjust their layouts based on the device's screen size, ensuring readability and navigability. Features like collapsible menus, touch-friendly buttons, and optimized images become essential. Load times are crucial too; mobile users often expect quick access, and any delay can deter them from consuming content. Secondly, while these sites can't deliver push notifications in the way apps can, they can utilize browser-based notifications to alert users of breaking news or updates. Offline access, though less prevalent compared to apps, can still be facilitated through technologies like Service Workers, allowing users to view previously loaded content without an active connection.

Finally, considering the varying data plans and connection speeds users might have, mobile browser sites often benefit from a “lite” version. This ensures faster load times and reduced data consumption, catering to users with bandwidth or data restrictions. While news sites accessed via mobile browsers might not offer the full suite of features available in dedicated apps, they provide a versatile and essential avenue for news consumption, blending accessibility with adaptability.

Moreover, a significant majority of these news sites, specifically 63 out of 80 (78.5%), offer dedicated mobile applications. This data showcases the dual strategy of news organizations to cater to both desktop and mobile users but is also a strong indicator of their recognition of the importance of creating tailored user experiences for mobile device users. Mobile apps can provide additional features, improve engagement, and offer a more user-friendly interface compared to just accessing sites via mobile browsers.

Digging deeper into the distribution of these mobile apps across different countries, certain patterns emerge. Notably, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany stand out with higher numbers of news sites offering mobile applications. This could be attributed to the tech-savvy nature of their populations and the competitive media landscapes in these countries. However, it is also interesting to see Spain, the Netherlands, Brazil, and Argentina represented in this mobile app trend. This suggests that the adoption of mobile apps is not confined to a handful of countries. Rather, various regions show different levels of digital adoption and preferences for consuming news on portable devices.

Taking a closer look at the specific count of mobile apps in each country, the United States leads with 10 news sites providing mobile applications. This underlines a strong emphasis on enhancing mobile engagement and user experiences in the country’s news media landscape. Similarly, the United Kingdom, Spain, France, and Germany also exhibit considerable numbers of news sites with mobile apps. Even Brazil and Argentina, with fewer mobile apps comparatively, show a significant percentage (11% and 8% respectively) of their news sites offering mobile applications. This reinforces the idea that the trend of prioritizing mobile accessibility is not limited to a specific set of countries.

The prevalence of mobile applications underscores their commitment to improving user experiences, while the distribution of these apps across countries sheds light on varying digital readiness levels and media consumption habits. The domain of mobile media also encompasses unique aspects such as distinctive production practices, consumption patterns, business models, and a distinct grammar. Newsrooms have mainly adapted to digital media at a technological level, focusing on new methods of content distribution, rather than undergoing cultural or relational

changes. (Bruns, 2012; Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton, 2012; Hermida, 2013; Ekdale et al., 2015; Boczek and Koppers, 2020).

Our study of 63 mobile applications from media companies indicates that the primary appeal to users is the option for personalized navigation. In a general sense, personalization pertains to the provision of journalistic content that is specifically tailored to the individual preferences of users (Mielniczuk, 2003). Upon our observation, a significant number of mobile applications allowed users to pre-select topics of interest and receive customized content delivery through push notifications, with the option to mark articles as favorites and save them for later, as illustrated in Figure 8. Several media companies, such as The Daily Mail and The Telegraph in the UK, even allowed the downloading of content for offline reading, which may prove useful in locations without internet access, such as the London Metro. Notably, some legacy media organizations provided a feature for browsing the print edition, possibly as a nod to their origins in print journalism. Such companies include La vanguardia in Spain, Le Parisien in France, De Volskrant in the Netherlands, and GauchaZH in Brazil.

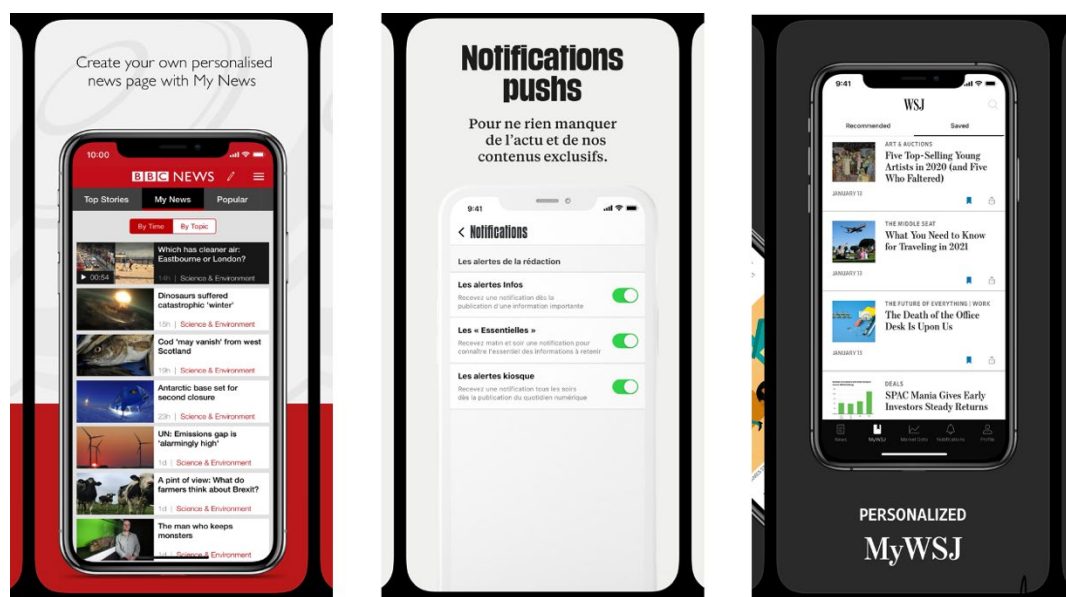


Figure 8 – Examples of personalization from different mobile apps.

However, regarding the specific aspects of grammar and production practices, our investigation revealed that although the content was adapted to fit the mobile screen, the structure and distribution of content was largely unchanged, providing users with a similar experience to that of the desktop and mobile browser sites. Personalization features were also constant across both platforms.

1.2.1 The future of online news? Brut. and the mobile first-approach

Brut, a French news media platform established in November 2016, has a mobile application that stands out from the rest of our *corpus*. Brut targets a young audience with its short-video format, which is highly shareable on social media platforms. While their news site is accessible on desktop and mobile browsers, the user experience is specifically designed for their mobile application (Figure 9), which is the sole platform for engaging with their videos. Users can comment on videos and access content through Brut's social media profiles, but the mobile application is the primary hub for their short videos.

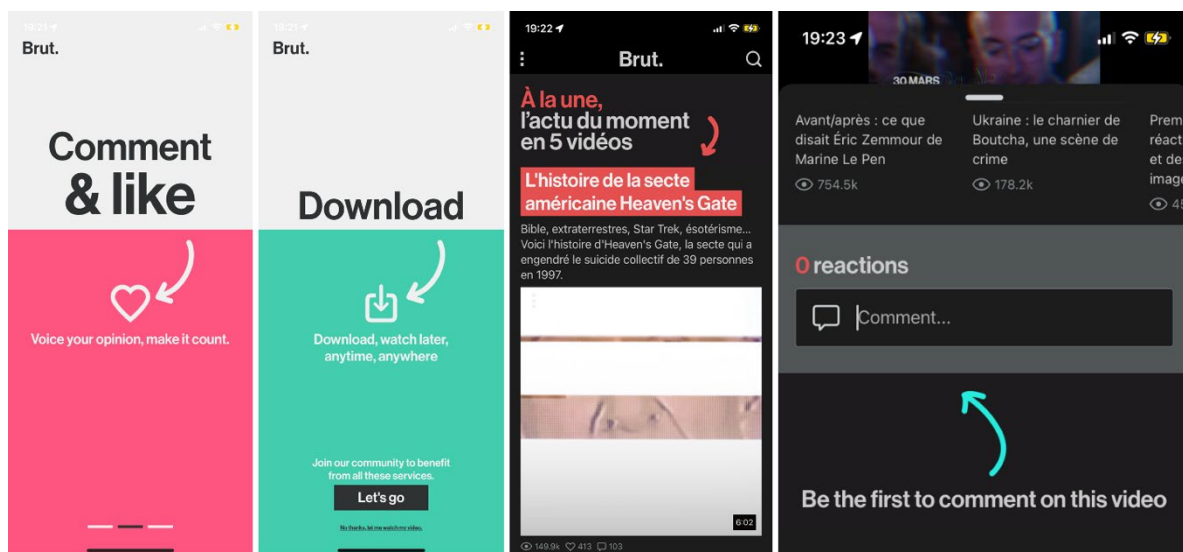


Figure 9 – Preview of Brut's mobile application.

The mobile platform offers an intimate and instant way for users to consume content. For Brut, this approach is particularly relevant given their primary audience: millennials. These users often rely on their smartphones for information, underscoring the importance of prioritizing this platform. Mobile apps also provide the flexibility for a more tailored user experience. As Brut continues to adapt, it is clear that offering a personalized news feed based on user interests is not only easier but more effective on a mobile app compared to a generic website.

The opportunity for real-time interaction is another compelling advantage. Mobile apps, equipped with features that allow users to chat directly with content creators and reporters, foster an environment of immediate and dynamic communication. Beyond engagement, there's the matter of monetization and access. Managing premium content, subscriptions, and even in-app purchases is more streamlined through mobile applications.

Globally, there's a marked rise in smartphone usage. More individuals now access the internet primarily through their mobile devices. News organizations, recognizing this shift, are not

only optimizing content for mobile but are also leveraging it for real-time news consumption. Push notifications serve as a bridge between publishers and readers, ensuring timely updates reach the audience as events unfold. The essence of adaptive content delivery – be it through videos, infographics, or concise stories – meshes perfectly with the mobile-first approach. These formats not only cater to the small screens but also to the waning attention spans of today's mobile users.

Another strategic advantage is the ease of integrating with social media apps on mobile platforms. Given that a significant portion of users now consider social media a primary news source, the ability to share and potentially virally spread content is invaluable. However, with the rise of ad-blockers, especially on desktop browsers, there's a need for novel monetization methods, and mobile apps seem to offer a solution, presenting opportunities for more controlled and inventive revenue generation strategies.

We're also witnessing a generational shift in content consumption. Younger demographics, such as Gen Z, are inherently mobile-centric. Their habits and preferences will increasingly influence the modus operandi of news publishers. Looking ahead, as technologies like Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) become mainstream, mobile devices are poised to offer more immersive news experiences. Additionally, the growing popularity of voice search and AI-driven personal assistants on mobile platforms will prompt news outlets to reshape their content to fit these new modes of consumption.

The design of Brut's user experience, centered around mobile navigation and its corresponding application, is intrinsically linked to the media outlet's founding mission. Established in 2016 with the intention of reaching a youthful audience, aged 15 to 35, Brut leveraged the strengths of social media to attract and engage its readership. This approach has proven successful, with the company now regarded as an innovator in the French media market and boasting an international presence, with content produced in various languages and operations based in the United States, United Kingdom, Spain, Mexico, and India. Such success is reflected in the interface design, which is a fundamental component of any news website, as it plays a critical role in cultivating a relationship between the user and the media outlet beyond the confines of the device. Brut's dedication to a mobile-first strategy isn't just about staying relevant today; it is a forward-looking decision. As traditional news, social media, and personalized content continue to intermingle, a mobile-centric approach becomes indispensable. It is the key to staying agile, pertinent, and harmonized with the ever-evolving tastes of digital consumers.

The evolving landscape of digital news consumption, as underscored by our study, showcases a nuanced interplay between technology, user preferences, and media strategies. The decision of numerous news organizations to invest in mobile applications signifies a deliberate and calculated response to the changing behaviors of news consumers across the globe. Notably, the emphasis on personalization, as seen through user-centric features, underscores the media industry's bid to foster a deeper and more personalized relationship with its audience. Yet, while the shift towards mobile is undeniable, the manner in which content is presented still draws heavily from traditional web formats. Exceptions like Brut serve as testament to the potential for innovation in this realm, reminding us that as technology and user behaviors continue to evolve, so must the media's strategies to engage, inform, and captivate their audience. In this dynamic digital era, the challenge and opportunity for news outlets lie in balancing tradition with innovation, and accessibility with personalization.

1.3 The Interface

Technological innovations have significantly influenced the level of user engagement. As the user experience is enhanced, the quality of engagement can be elevated. This concept considers the characteristics of the systems that comprise a news site, such as usability, aesthetic appeal, and interactivity. Among these, the interface is one of the most critical components of a website, as it establishes the relationship between the visitor and the system (Radfahrer, 2000). The notion of a graphical interface became popular with the launch of the Apple Macintosh in 1984. The Macintosh aimed to provide users with an easy-to-use information manipulation system that featured analogies with everyday objects such as folders, trash cans, files, and leaves (Lemos, 2004). This precursor graphical interface established an almost organic dialogue between users and their computers. In the PC universe, the first friendliest graphical user interface appeared about six years later with Windows 3.0. The simpler an interface is, the simpler are also the tools symbolized by it, allowing users to navigate between their documents and applications in a user-friendly way.

The graphical interface refers to the software presented on the screen of the device used to access the internet. It serves as a means of interaction between the user and the computer. The graphical interface plays a critical role in enabling visual contact between the user and the application, facilitating communication between the user's desired tasks and how to achieve them. According to Lemos (2004), the graphical interface acts as the space where interactivity occurs, enabling subjects and objects to develop tasks through a process that requires collaboration, reciprocity, and sharing. In this regard, the graphical interface plays a pivotal role in shaping user engagement with digital technology. As Radfahrer (2000) notes, the interface must be simple,

straightforward, enjoyable, and practical. It should serve as a transition element between the real world and the digital world, ideally transparent, invisible, natural, and intuitive. By providing an optimal graphical interface, users can easily focus on their desired tasks, thus making them forget that they are using a digital tool. Moreover, the graphical interface serves a dual purpose in digital journalism. It functions not only as a platform for displaying journalistic content, but also as a production tool. This characteristic leads to a repositioning of both technological devices and categories of journalistic practice, such as verification, editing, and circulation. The multipurpose nature of the graphical interface enhances the resources available for content production.

To demonstrate the evolution of traditional print media to online platforms over time, studies have identified four models of internet journalism, which correspond to different stages in the development of electronic print: facsimile, adapted, digital, and multimedia (Cabrera Gonzalez, 2001; Cely Álvarez, 2004; Codina, 2006; Codina, et. al., 2014; Dimitrova and Neznanski, 2006; López Carreño and Pastor Sánchez, 2010; Palacios and Ribas, 2011; Baños-Moreno, 2017). Some of these models continue to be utilized in the production and publication routines of online news sites, while others exist in hybrid forms on the same platform. The **facsimile model**, deemed primitive, entails a static form of digitized reproduction of printed newspaper pages that are intended to be viewed in PDF format on a screen, devoid of interactivity with the available content. It is noteworthy that the facsimile model persists in use, either to assemble digital collections of printed editions or to present the diagrammed pages of the day's edition with its graphic characteristics that are distinct from those of the web as an optional view for readers.

The **adapted model** is a format that encompasses the features of the online environment, integrating hypertexts and links in informative units. The primary differentiation from the previous model (fac-similar), is the adaptation of the printed newspaper to a digital language, encompassing a distinct visual presentation and treatment from that of paper publication. This treatment is marked by a simple design and a text-heavy presence. The **digital model** has emerged as the predominant format for online newspapers. This model has been designed specifically for the digital medium, with little resemblance to the traditional printed version. Its main objective is to take advantage of the unique characteristics of the online platform, offering readers a more interactive and visually engaging experience while providing a wider range of content and services than traditional print newspapers. The **multimedia model** represents an evolution of the digital model, incorporating additional resources to fully leverage the interactivity and multimedia possibilities of the new medium. This model provides various formats, such as sound, still and moving images, and text, to enhance the user's experience. More than two decades after its

inception, the framework first thought of by Gonzalez Cabrera (2001) remains relevant in analyzing the presentation of news on digital networks.

Analyzing our *corpus* of news sites, we scrutinized different components of their interfaces, encompassing the homepages, specific articles, and “about” pages. Our evaluation centered on appraising the efficiency and user-friendliness of navigation, as well as the availability of the targeted information. Across all 80 websites, we observed that online news is presented through multimedia, interactive, and hypertextual interfaces that incorporate text, audio, and visuals. Furthermore, these interfaces promote social awareness and engagement through links to recommended and related content.

To gain understanding of the interfaces of our *corpus*, we employed Gonzalez’s (2000) classification as a foundational framework. It is notable that over time, all the organizations have transitioned away from the facsimile and adapted models, and in many cases, the digital model as well. This is attributed to their ability to integrate a range of resources that optimize interactivity and multimedia potential in diverse formats, thereby enabling the amalgamation of a revolutionary model, namely, the multimedia news site. However, organizations can have different approaches to their interfaces, and though they apply fully multimedia and interactive resources, their layout and design still in many cases reflect the heritage of print journalism.

As shown in Figure 10, we classified our interfaces considering their architectural design, aesthetic, and layout, in three categories: **traditional**, **modern**, and **reminiscent of print**, considering that all of them can fall under the category of multimedia news sites. Moreover, we note that their mobile versions are designed to adapt to the smaller screen size, enabling users to scroll through news content seamlessly without deviating from the desktop website’s design style. We understand that the appearance of the interface, while essential for aesthetics, primarily serves the purpose of delivering news content in the most user-friendly, engaging, and trustworthy manner. Design practices ensure that readers can access information seamlessly and comfortably, encouraging them to stay informed and return to the site. We recognize that this is oversimplified classification, and that the aesthetics of a news site can be a matter of personal taste and subjective perspective, but this categorization serves our purpose of analyzing the possibilities for user navigation of these news sites and the aesthetic format of their interfaces. We note that one cannot discuss news interface design without mentioning the hierarchical arrangement of content. The most pressing news stories take prime real estate at the top or center, ensuring immediate visibility. Complementing these headlines are usually high-quality visual elements—thumbnails and images—that offer users a snapshot of the story’s essence. It is a strategy reminiscent of print that applied to all three of our categories for interfaces. However, we highlight that what each news

site considers more important, varies according to diverse factors, such as their business model, marketing strategies and idea of journalism.

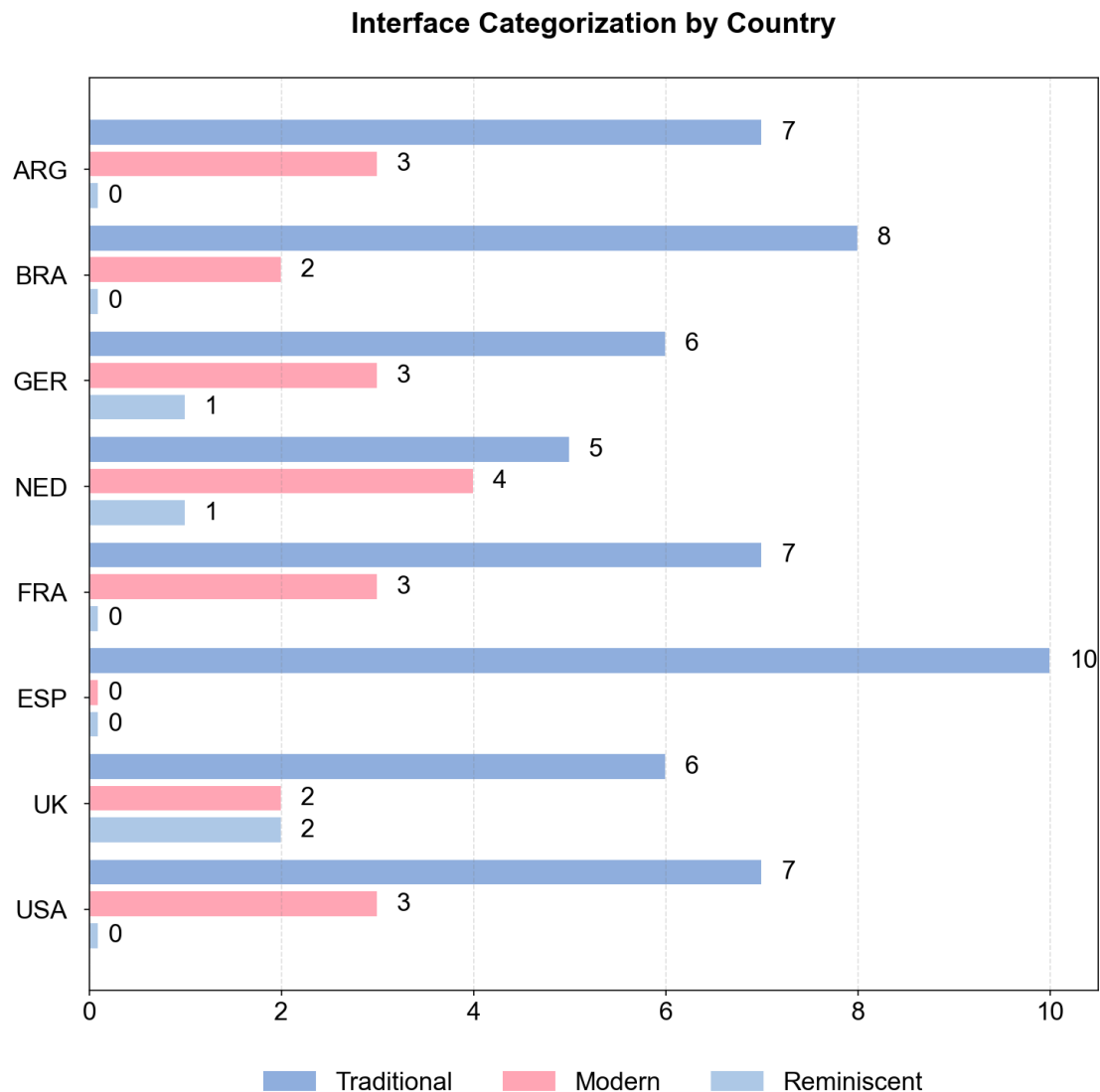
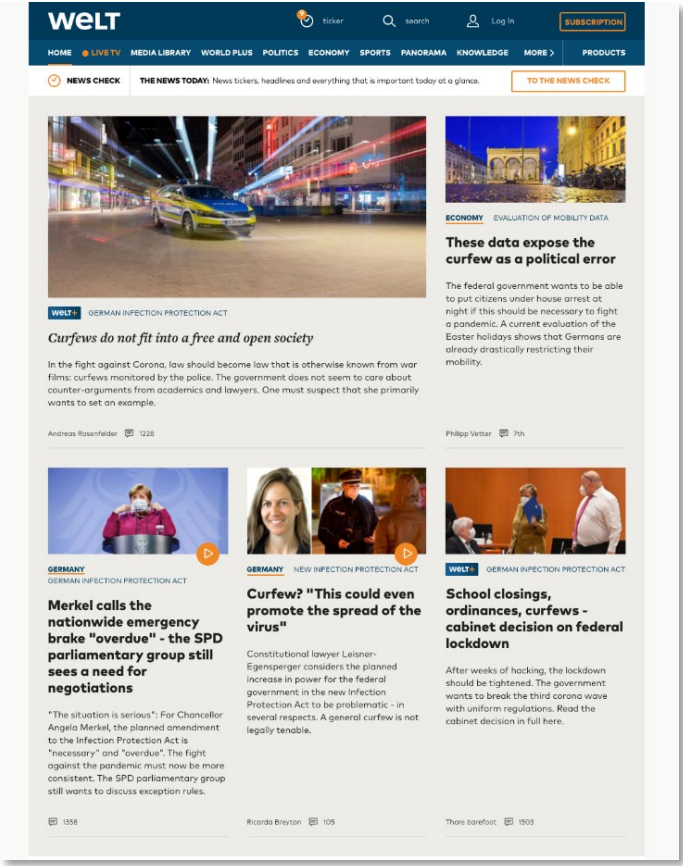



Figure 10 – Interface categorization of websites by country.

Our classification of traditional interfaces (Table 30) pertains to those designs commonly found on news sites, featuring column-based layouts reminiscent of print media. These interfaces typically showcase a homepage filled with headlines, images, and summaries of major news stories, as well as links to access smaller ones. This design style remains consistent across both mobile browsers and applications, though it adapts to the touch-based navigation of smaller screens. The hierarchical design, in which important news or features are prominently displayed, often at the top or center of the page, ensures users see the most crucial information first.

Table 30 – Traditional interfaces.

TRADITIONAL INTERFACES	
<p><i>Welt</i> (Germany)</p>	 <p>The screenshot shows the 'Welt' website interface. At the top is a navigation bar with categories like HOME, LIVE TV, MEDIA LIBRARY, WORLD PLUS, POLITICS, ECONOMY, SPORTS, PANORAMA, KNOWLEDGE, and MORE. Below this is a 'NEWS CHECK' section with a headline 'THE NEWS TODAY: News tickers, headlines and everything that is important today at a glance.' The main content area features several articles. The top article is titled 'Curfews do not fit into a free and open society' with a sub-headline 'In the fight against Corona, law should become law that is otherwise known from war films: curfews monitored by the police. The government does not seem to care about counter-arguments from academics and lawyers. One must suspect that she primarily wants to set an example.' Below this are three smaller articles: 'Merkel calls the nationwide emergency brake "overdue" - the SPD parliamentary group still sees a need for negotiations', 'Curfew? "This could even promote the spread of the virus"', and 'School closings, ordinances, curfews - cabinet decision on federal lockdown'. Each article includes a small image and a brief summary.</p>
<p><i>DutchNews.nl</i> (Netherlands)</p>	 <p>The screenshot shows the 'DutchNews.nl' website interface. At the top is a navigation bar with categories like News, Features, Blogs, Jobs, Housing, Best of the Web, Donate, and Advertise. Below this is a 'Home' section with a headline 'Ministers under pressure to change course on terraces and vaccines'. The main content area features several articles. The top article is titled 'Ministers under pressure to change course on terraces and vaccines' with a sub-headline 'Ministers are expected to confirm that lockdown rules will not be relaxed until April 28 at the earliest at Tuesday evening's press conference, despite coming under mounting pressure to open pavement cafes sooner. A leaked document last week suggested that the cabinet... More >'. Below this are three smaller articles: 'Fast test event trials "not transparent"', 'Renting a flat gets cheaper in big cities', and 'Party of 4: an app that hopes to help couples make friends even during lockdown'. Each article includes a small image and a brief summary.</p>

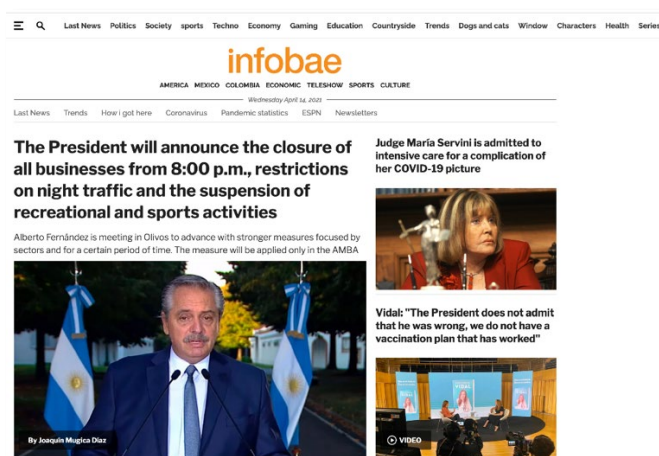
The Guardian
(UK)



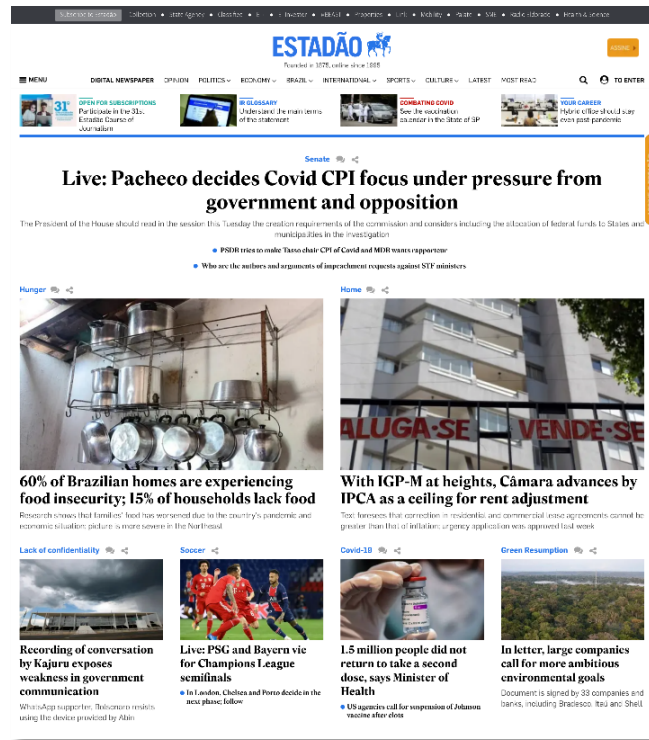
The New York Times
(US)



Infobae
(Argentina)



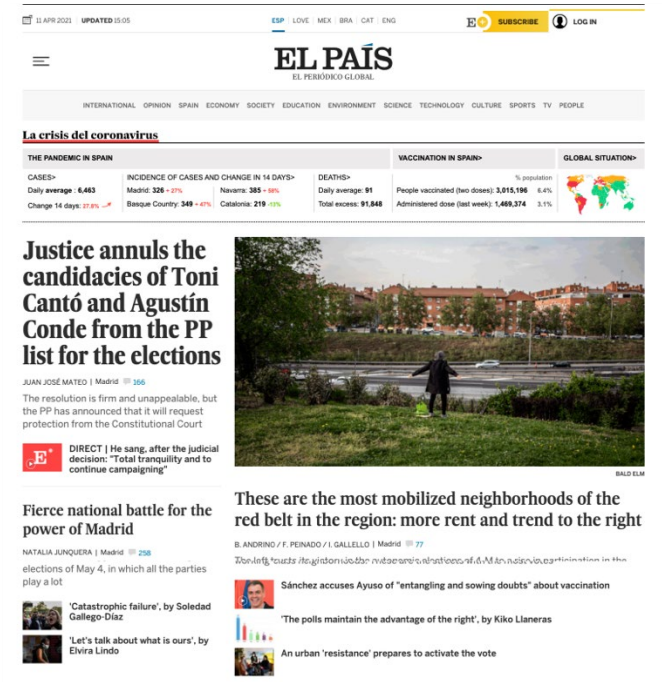
Estado de S. Paulo
(Brazil)



Le Monde
(France)

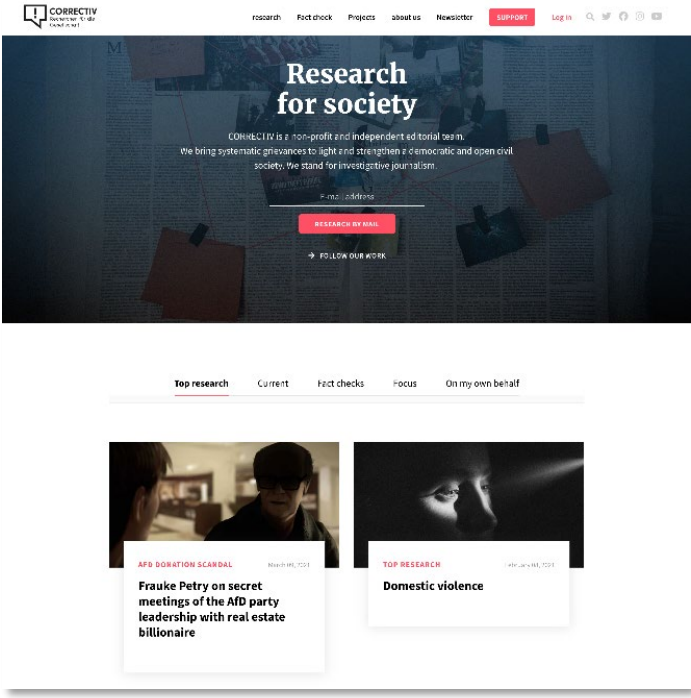
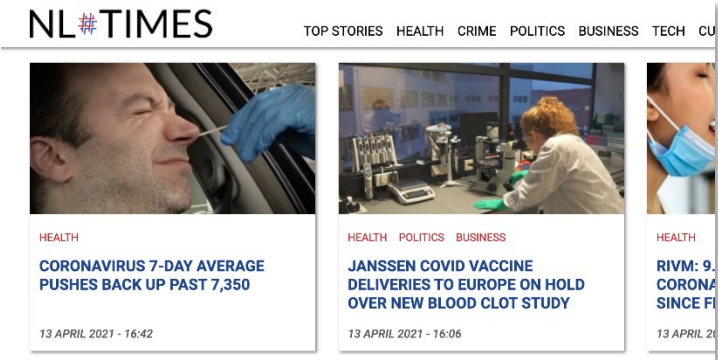
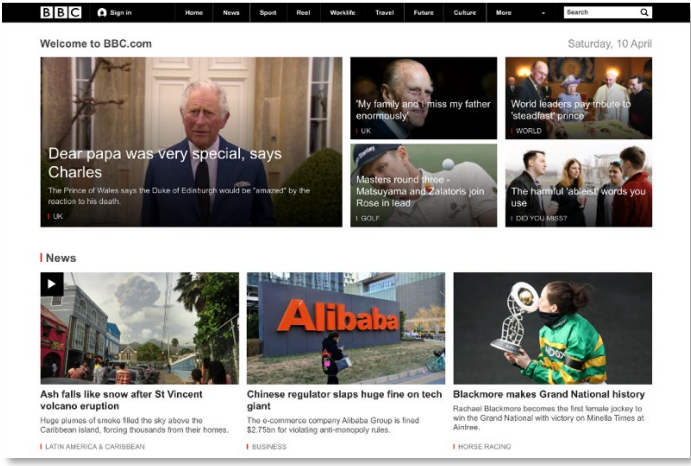


El País
(Spain)

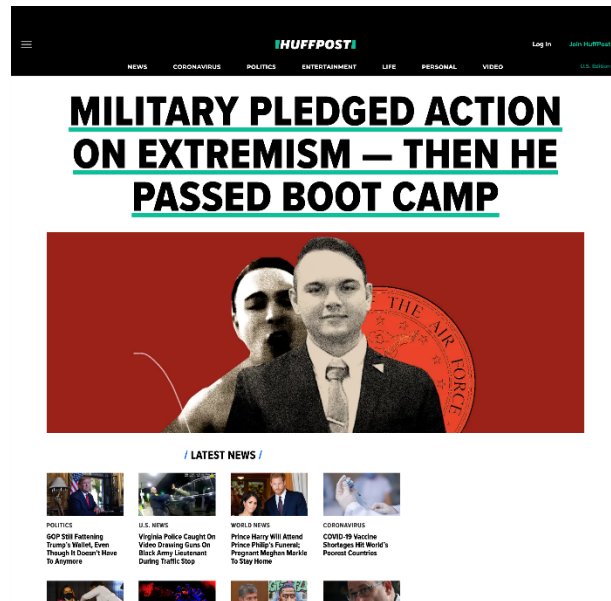


The **modern** news interface (Table 31), is a progression of the traditional interface. A symphony of design choices, each meticulously selected to serve the user, from color to typography, layout to adaptability, every element converges to deliver news in the most engaging, trustworthy, and user-friendly manner. There are news sites that utilize an abundance of images to attract the attention of the public, presenting their headlines in a visually appealing manner from the outset. Depending on factors such as the size, font, and positioning of these images, the aesthetic may be perceived as either modern or overwhelming.

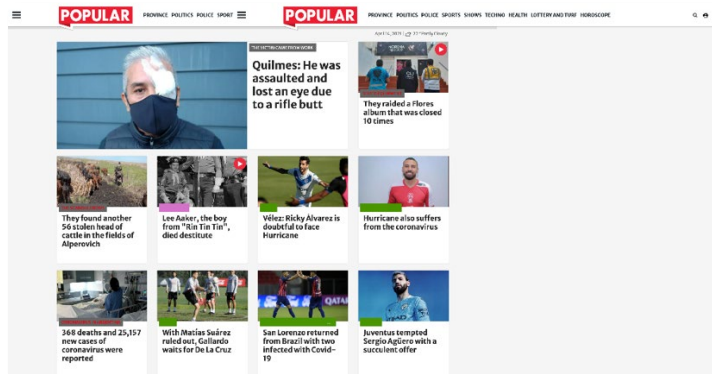
Table 31 – Modern Interfaces.

MODERN INTERFACES	
<p><i>Corretiv</i> (Germany)</p>	
<p><i>NL Times</i> (Netherlands)</p>	
<p><i>BBC News</i> (UK)</p>	

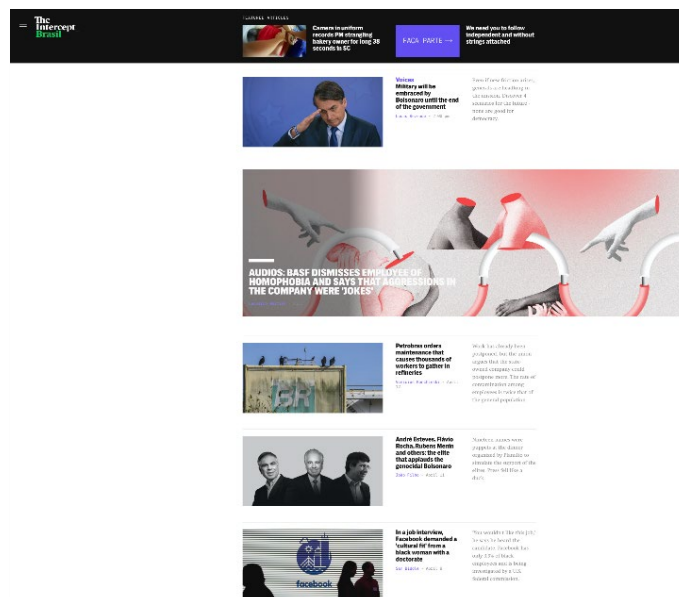
HuffPost
(US)

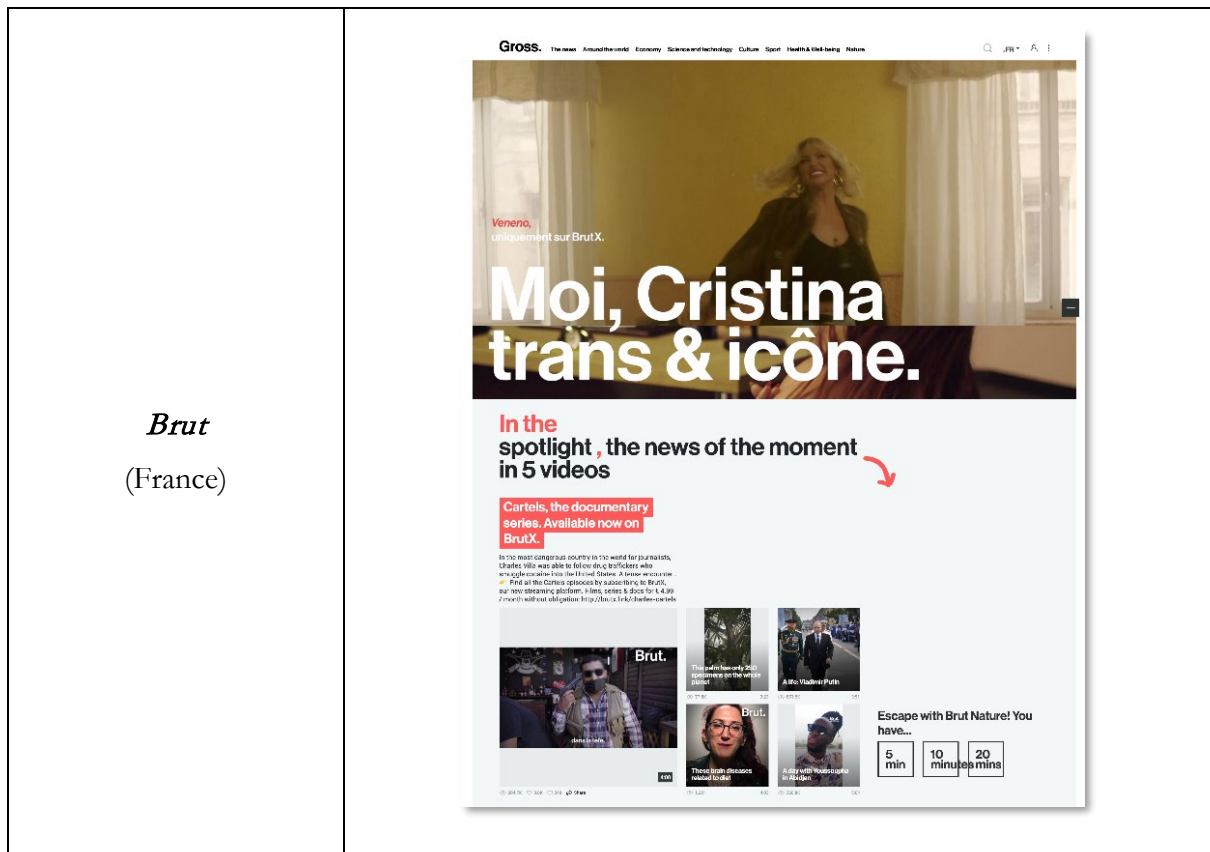


Diario Popular
(Argentina)



The Intercept
(Brazil)





Brut
(France)

There are, however, discernible patterns in website interfaces that allow for the identification of sites from our *corpus*, that, though classified as modern, stand out. The interface design of news sites is evolving to ensure a compelling and user-centric experience. At the heart of this transformation is the principle of minimalistic design, which champions a clutter-free and focused presentation of information. By paring down the essentials and enveloping content in ample whitespace with clean typography, news sites can direct their user's attention where it matters most.

Key to this visual approach are the carefully chosen color schemes. Neutral and muted hues dominate, lending a professional and trustworthy aura. Occasionally, bolder shades punctuate the layout, drawing attention to significant updates or interactive elements. And speaking of typography, the emphasis is unequivocally on legibility. Sans-serif fonts, favored for their crisp display on digital screens, are a staple. They weave through headlines and article bodies, creating a harmonious balance between aesthetics and readability. Then there's the increasingly popular card design, wherein bite-sized chunks of information are presented in neatly delineated blocks. Each card acts as a window into a news story, often accompanied by an evocative image, a headline, and a brief summary. This modular approach allows for quick scanning and offers a streamlined browsing experience.

One such example is the Agência Pública website from Brazil (Figure 11), which employs a visual architecture that emphasizes a diversity of visual elements to enhance the presented information. Notably, its homepage features an image that spans the entire computer screen, and the digital architecture of the site is further divided by images arranged in blocks, each accompanied by their respective titles or text-subtitles, and grouped into categories such as “Most recent,” “Highest,” and “Videos.”

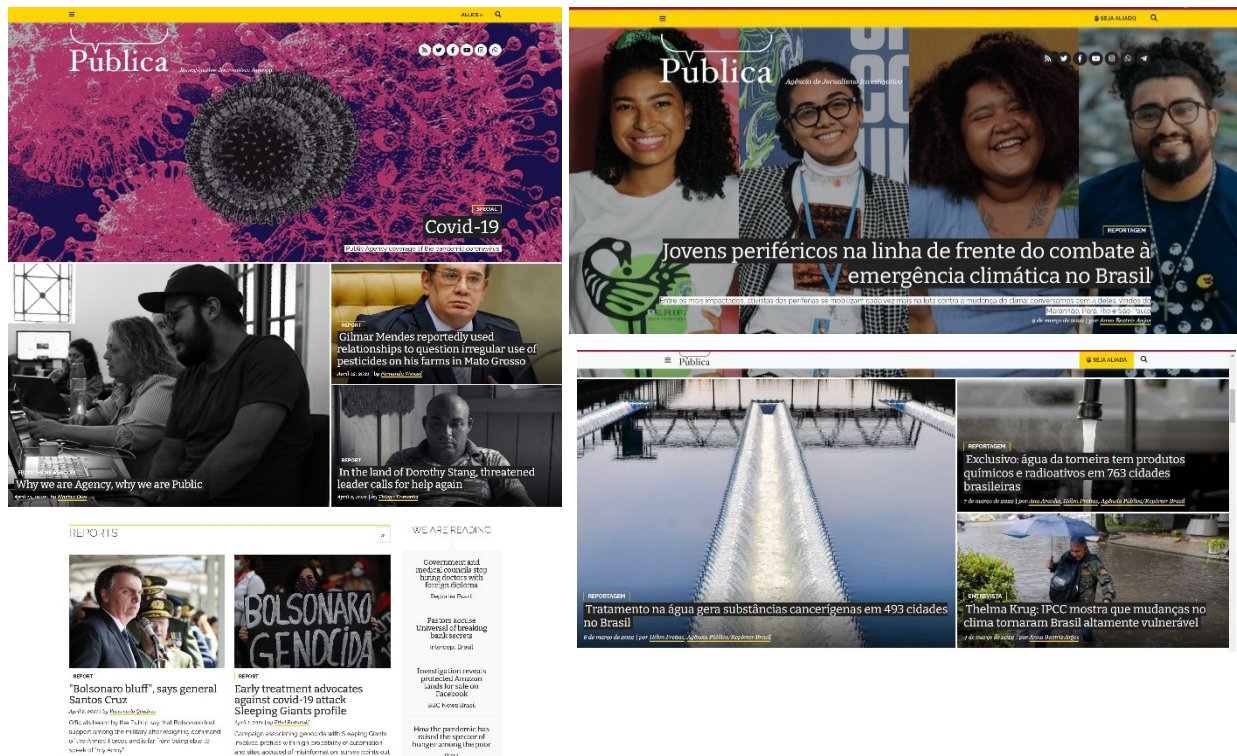


Figure 11 – Example of Interfaces of Agência Pública.

Such architectures are primarily used by digital-only news websites that are not associated with print news organizations. This design approach involves implementing an architecture that is tailored to the requirements of mobile-first models, achieved using responsive design resources. With the proliferation of devices, adaptability has also become paramount. A multicolumn layout on desktop, for example, might gracefully condense into a single column scroll on mobile, ensuring a consistent user experience. Interactive elements, from graphs to infographics, further enrich the content, inviting deeper engagement. These elements, distinct in style, beckon readers to explore, interact, and understand news from multiple dimensions. By employing these resources, the webpage can be viewed seamlessly on any device screen, without regard to its resolution, allowing for visual adaptation in both vertical and horizontal reading formats.

This approach is visible on various websites with modern interfaces including Les Jours from France, Vice from the US, The Correspondent from the Netherlands, Krautreporter from

Germany (Figure 12), and Red/Acción from Argentina (Figure 13), with the latter being the recipient of a silver medal in design from the Society for News Design in 2019, for its desktop and mobile experiences. Additionally, even websites with more traditional layouts are implementing features such as images distributed in blocks, each accompanied by their respective titles or text-subtitles, in various sections of their homepages to ensure easy navigation on any device.

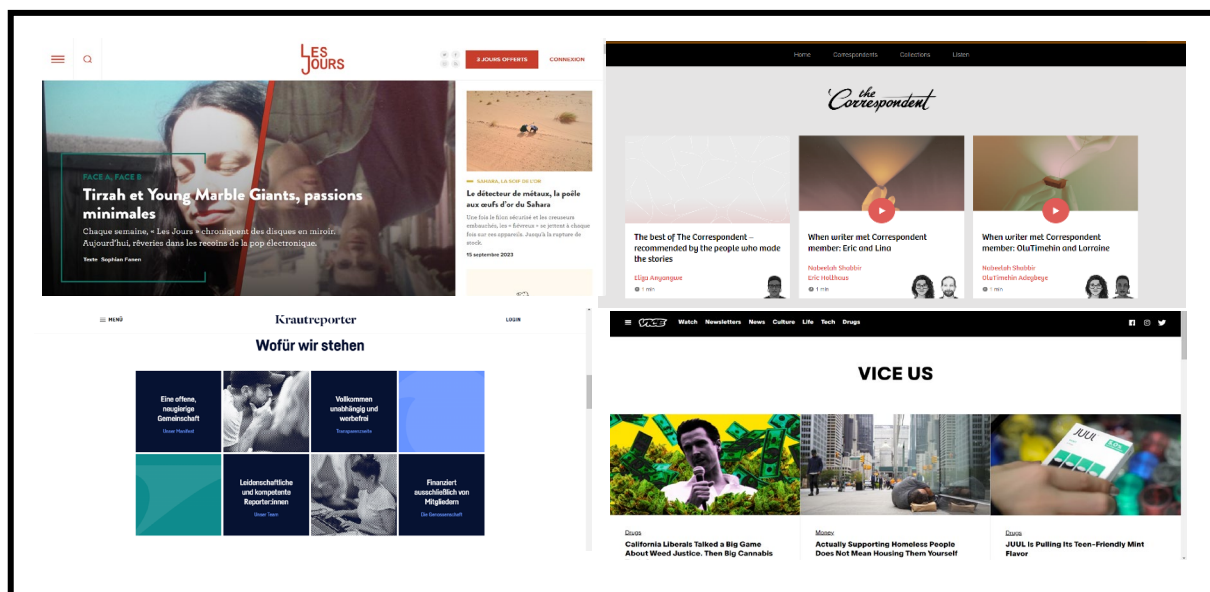


Figure 12 – Interfaces of *Les Jours* (France), *The Correspondent* (Netherlands), *Kratreporter* (Germany) and *Vice* (US).



Figure 13 – Interface of *Red/Acción* (Argentina).

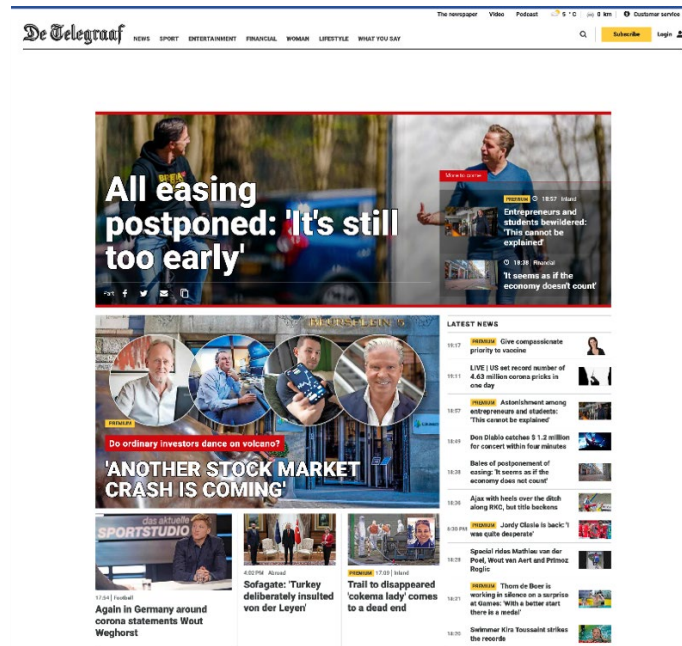
The last category is particularly interesting, comprising four news outlets – Bild from Germany, De Telegraaf from the Netherlands, and The Daily Mail and The Sun from the United

Kingdom – that have opted for an **interface that evokes the appearance of traditional print newspapers** (Table 32). These websites employ bold headlines placed atop images that are reminiscent of print editions. Although they do integrate other design elements that correspond with those of traditional news sites, the primary impression remains that of a replication of print aesthetics on a digital screen. Notably, The Daily Mail and The Sun, both of which have origins as tabloid newspapers, feature an interface design that is consistent with their respective identities as media organizations. This design style is evocative of their print versions, with large headlines prominently displayed over substantial photos that immediately draw attention. This design aesthetic is mirrored across both their mobile browser interfaces and their applications.

Table 32 – Interfaces Reminiscent of Print Edition.

REMANISCENT OF PRINT EDITION	
<div> <div>Bild</div> <div>(Germany)</div> </div>	

De Telegraaf
(Netherlands)



Daily Mail
(UK)



Despite the differences in design among the 80 news sites, it is apparent that images and headlines remain essential components used to attract readers to articles, in parallel to traditional print media. The adoption of multimedia resources, such as photos, videos, and other audiovisual materials, in conjunction with journalistic texts, conveys a more interactive and dynamic digital visual aesthetic to the user. Even with diverse aesthetic preferences, most news sites display

common elements that ease navigability for users, including a visible menu bar atop the homepage with section links for easy access. The incorporation of features such as selecting recommended articles and following links within stories, further enhances the user experience and allow for a more personal and engaging navigation, enabling personalization.

Interfaces for news sites have undergone a series of evolutions, driven not just by the need to cater to changing user behaviors and the rapid pace of technological advances, but also by the ever shifting and dynamic nature of the news itself. These platforms have had to remain fluid, adapting to the mediums where consumers are most active, be it on mobile devices, through voice assistants, or immersive augmented reality experiences. As users continue to interact with the website designs, their experiences are shaped not only by the website’s usability and presentation of information but also by the novelty and personal relevance of the articles, which can significantly impact their level of engagement.

However, while these interfaces aim for optimal user engagement and seamless information delivery, they also serve as a reflection of the news organization’s core identity. Much like the distinct voice and editorial stance of a publication, its interface communicates its “personality” and underlying philosophy of journalism. For instance, a news organization with a tradition of investigative journalism might prioritize in-depth pieces, interactive data visualizations, and detailed timelines on its interface. In contrast, a site dedicated to quick updates might favor a more modular design with bite-sized news snippets.

Moreover, the design and functionality of these interfaces are also heavily influenced by the business models and marketing priorities of the news organization. A site that thrives on subscription revenue might feature teaser content or metered paywalls, nudging readers to subscribe after consuming a specific number of articles. Those reliant on ad revenues might have more prominent ad placements or branded content sections, designed to blend seamlessly with regular news stories. In essence, while news site interfaces are certainly shaped by technological trends and user habits, they remain, at their core, a canvas that paints a picture of the news organization’s *ethos*, business strategy, and its unique perspective on journalism.

1.4 The Advertisement³⁰

The integration of advertisements into the website’s design is a crucial factor in balancing the monetization with the navigation experience. Advertisements have the potential to significantly impact the user’s experience and can become an inadvertent part of the interface. While some

³⁰ In this subsection, we address advertisement as part of the user experience in news sites. We will approach the theme again when we discuss business models (Chapter 7, section 3) and revenue (Chapter 11, section 5).

websites can append ads without turning readers away, in some cases, the ads may be somewhat intrusive or excessive. Therefore, it is important to examine how news organizations integrate advertisements into their design and how advertisements may affect the user experience. In the present study, we conducted a classification of the presence of advertisements on the websites of our *corpus*. This classification included four categories: outside ads (from external companies), self-ads (from the media organization or its parent, showcasing their different products), both outside and self-ads, and none. While most news organizations have learned the balance between ads and content, outside ads remain the most intrusive for navigation. Certain news sites such as The Mirror and the Daily Mail (UK) – prominently tabloid heritage – may experience an overwhelming incidence of advertisements that overshadows their content (Figure 14).

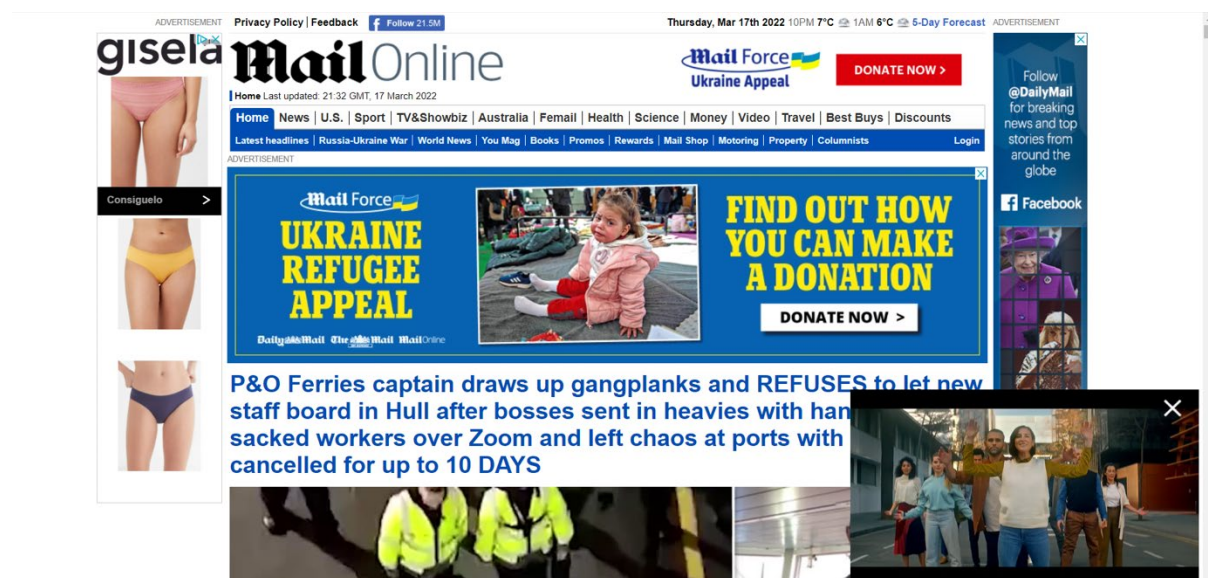


Figure 14 – Advertisement examples from Daily Mail.

Outside ads are often categorized as targeted advertisements, designed to appeal to a specific audience based on their viewing habits and interests. The relationship between specific individuals and their consumption behavior provides marketers with valuable insights, allowing them to tailor their advertising strategies accordingly. Over time, media companies and advertisers have adapted their methods to reach the viewer-as-consumer, from mass audiences targeted by broadcasting in the 1950s to niche audiences reached by narrowcast channels in the 1990s.

With the advent of the internet, the potential for niche marketing has been further enhanced, thanks to advanced digital technologies that facilitate the tracking of individual social behavior. This has led to a more intimate relationship between content producers, advertisers, and consumers. While only a small percentage of users create content, the vast majority are passive viewers who are still potential consumers. As an example, during our investigation from a Spanish

location, we noticed that various news sites from different countries displayed location-based advertisements in the Spanish language (Figure 15).

Advertisements also serve as a crucial component of media companies' financial strategy and are often linked to their ideological views of journalism. Some websites offer open navigation but require users to disable ad-blockers to continue navigating the site, emphasizing that the site is free as long as the user views the ads. Other sites, both with open and closed navigation, take pride in being ad-free, claiming that this allows them to be accountable solely to the public. For example, Público and Eldiario.es from Spain promote the lack of advertisements as a selling point for subscription/membership (Figure 15). In the United States and the United Kingdom, all news sites had some form of advertising, with most featuring outside ads or a combination of both outside and self-ads. However, some sites, such as The New York Times and the Washington Post, featured solely self-ads. This is an interesting strategy for promoting other journalistic products, such as podcasts.



Figure 15 – Ad-free mode from elDiario.es.



Figure 16 – Location-targeted Spanish advertisements from elDiario.es.

The presence or absence of advertising is a critical consideration in the relationship between news organizations and their audience. News organizations that reject advertising generally treat it as a subscriber or member privilege, and by abstaining from external advertising, they purport to ensure the independence of their journalism. These organizations consider themselves accountable solely to their paying subscribers or members, and they offer their users an ad-free environment to navigate. For instance, Mediapart (France), The Correspondent (Netherlands), The Intercept Brazil, and Krautreporter (Germany) are among the news organizations that claim their lack of external advertising promotes independence and accountability to their audience. By emphasizing their lack of external advertising, these organizations position themselves as champions of journalistic independence and of news as a public service (Carpes da Silva and Sanseverino, 2020).

2. Nature: Legacy and Digital Native Media Organizations

In today's rapidly evolving media landscape, the ways in which we consume news have drastically transformed. Traditional news outlets that have stood as pillars of journalism for decades are now navigating the digital realm, striving to maintain their relevance and reach. Concurrently, the digital era has ushered in a wave of new media organizations, ones inherently embedded in the online fabric from their inception. As consumers, the way we perceive, trust, and engage with news varies significantly based on its source—be it a time-honored newspaper that's been in circulation for over a century or a dynamic online-only news portal born in the last decade.

Understanding the distinctions between legacy and digital-native news media isn't merely an exercise in classification. It is imperative to comprehend the shifting paradigms of journalism, the challenges, and opportunities inherent to each model, and their implications on the broader

media ecosystem. This analysis delves into these nuances, providing insights into how these distinct media types operate, innovate, and interact with their audiences. As we further embark on this exploration, it becomes evident that our relationship with news and its providers is not just changing—it is being reinvented.

In the 2020s, providing a definition of digital news media, whether native or not, is not an easy task. A quarter of a century ago, when the first news publications went online, all types of digital publications were referred to with the broad, and perhaps imprecise label, ‘new media’. In recent years, however, journalism scholars and practitioners have started to distinguish between legacy digital publications, meaning those derived from consolidated journalistic brands, and new online publications, characterized by their digital nature and recent origin. These latest publications have been labeled in various ways, such as ‘digital-born’ (Nicholls, Shabbir, and Nielsen, 2016), ‘digital-native’ (Wu, 2016), ‘online-native’ (Harlow and Salaverría, 2016), or even simply as ‘pure players’ (Sirkkunen and Cook, 2012) or ‘start-ups’ (Naldi and Picard, 2012; Wagemans, Witschge, and Deuze, 2016).

While *legacy news organizations* could be generally thought of those based, derived, or attached to a news operation that is in another platform such as print newspaper or television, we are considering those organizations that were not “born on the web” or for the web. As for *digital native news organizations*, we are considering any news organization that was “born on the web,” meaning their inaugural content was published online (even if they later also published broadcast or print content). Though we have sites that are attached to other news operations, as they were designed and launched for the web, we considered them digital native, such as the Brazilian G1, that is from the parent company Globo, but even has its own newsroom, with content made specially for the site.

We also have cases of legacy news natives that became fully digital, such as the Argentinian Infobae, the Spanish Público and the British The Independent. We refer to those news organizations as *transition*. In our *corpus*, we have 48 legacy news media, 29 digital natives and 3 transition outlets (Table 33). Though the birth of digital journalism is deeply linked to legacy media outlets, the current news media landscape could not be understood without digital native media outlets, as these have changed the way in which journalism is made in almost every cultural or economic context (Tandoc, 2018). In sum, what started by experimenting with the use of the internet as a new way to share information or try new informative products at consolidated media brands has become a place where countless journalistic projects coexist, regardless of their internal features (Salaverría, 2020).

Table 33 – Legacy and digital native news distribution per country and media system.

MEDIA SYSTEM	COUNTRY	LEGACY		DIGITAL		TRANSITION	
Liberal	United States	6	14	4	5	0	1
	United Kingdom	8		1		1	
Polarized Pluralist	Spain	5	11	4	8	1	1
	France	6		4		0	
Democratic Corporatist	Netherlands	6	13	4	7	0	0
	Germany	7		3		0	
Peripheral	Brazil	5	12	5	7	0	1
	Argentina	7		2		1	
		48		29		3	

Within the Liberal media framework, the United States stands out with a close contest between 6 legacy news sites and 4 digital news natives. Notably, the country hasn't seen any of its legacy platforms transition to a purely digital format. In contrast, the United Kingdom upholds a stronger reverence for its traditional roots with a dominant 8 legacy sites, complemented by a singular digital news native. Remarkably, the UK's media canvas also captures a legacy platform that has transitioned into the digital domain. Venturing into the Polarized Pluralist domain, Spain offers a balanced tableau. With 5 legacy and 4 digital news sites, the scales are nearly even. Furthermore, the transition of one traditional platform into the digital sphere showcases the evolving dynamics of Spanish media. In parallel, France mirrors this balanced act with 6 legacy sites coexisting alongside 4 digital natives.

Shifting the gaze to the Democratic Corporatist sphere, both the Netherlands and Germany highlight a preference for time-honored media. The Netherlands maintains 6 legacy sites against 4 digital platforms, and its media landscape remains unchanged with no transitions. Germany, with its 7 legacy platforms, reveals an even more distinct inclination towards traditional media, bolstered by 3 digital natives and an unchanged transition landscape. Lastly, examining the Peripheral framework, Brazil emerges as a bastion of equilibrium. Its media scene celebrates a perfect balance with 5 legacy platforms mirroring 5 digital news natives. Argentina, however,

slightly leans into its traditional heritage with 7 legacy platforms. Yet, its 2 digital natives and a transitioning site underscore the evolving media tendencies of the nation.

The disparity between legacy and digital news natives in our sample is influenced by historical media traditions, cultural values, technological adoption rates, economic factors, and political contexts unique to each country. In the expansive realm of global media, the United States, with its 6 legacy news sites, leans on its long-standing media institutions that have captivated audiences for centuries. These juggernauts of journalism, wielding vast resources, are countered by a modest 4 digital news natives. Even in a nation that houses Silicon Valley, the transformation has been more about integrating digital avenues rather than a wholesale shift, a nod to the vast American market that accommodates both traditional and cutting-edge platforms.

Meanwhile, the United Kingdom, with its 8 towering legacy sites, anchors its media identity in deeply entrenched traditions. Icons like the BBC encapsulate this sentiment. However, recent years, especially the era of the Coronavirus pandemic, have witnessed a seismic shift in the UK media landscape. The pandemic fast-tracked the long-standing decline of circulation and ad revenues in the local press industry. The repercussions are evident: a slew of job cuts, the shuttering of about 295 local newspapers since 2005, reducing the UK's local press by a significant fifth (Chivers, 2021). Moreover, though the UK digital media spectrum includes independent news websites like The Canary, Byline, and Novara Media, their web traffic pales when juxtaposed against legacy media powerhouses like MailOnline and the Guardian.

Spain's media scene paints a balanced portrait with 5 legacy and 4 digital platforms. The country's historical fondness for newspapers has met the digital age, with recent years observing a surge in online platforms. The equilibrium is also informed by Spain's layered political history and regional diversity. France, too, showcases an equilibrium with 6 legacy and 4 digital platforms, but for different reasons. The French media, steeped in nationalism, often veers towards home-bred institutions, while an intrinsic respect for tradition and a rich intellectual culture has moderated the pace of digital adoption.

The Dutch media landscape features 6 legacy platforms, drawing strength from deep-seated public trust, especially towards broadcasters like NPO. But this doesn't overshadow the digital realm; with 4 digital natives and a notable internet penetration rate, the Netherlands hints at a brewing digital momentum. Germany, with its 7 legacy and 3 digital platforms, demonstrates the German people's enduring trust in traditional media. Though they have notable digital natives, the new enterprises tend to fail due to a high degree of homogeneity within founding teams, tensions between journalistic and economic practices, insufficient user orientation, as well as a tendency for organizations to be underfinanced (Buschow, 2020).

Brazil, in its vastness, has carved out a media balance with 5 platforms each for legacy and digital. A recent uptick in internet and smartphone use has spurred this digital emergence, even as diverse audience' needs mandate a spectrum of media formats. Argentina's intricate economic situation could have curtailed a swifter embrace of digital media, especially considering the capital-intensive nature of digital ventures. Also, In times of political and economic upheavals, legacy media in Argentina possibly continue to hold a significant edge in credibility. As such, the 7 legacy platforms echo economic challenges and an audience seeking credible sources during volatile times, but its 2 digital platforms and an organization that transitioned to the web, could reveal an undercurrent of change.

The disparity in our *corpus* between legacy (48) and digital media (32) – considering that 3 outlets transitioned to web only – illustrates how historical lineage, technological strides, societal imprints, economic theatrics, regulatory plays, and the ever-evolving pulse of audience preferences can impact the national media markets. Legacy media has crafted significant trust, reputation, and brand recognition before the digital age dawned. This deep-rooted establishment, especially in countries with a storied history of media institutions, naturally underscores their strong presence. As the global tide turned with increased internet penetration and the proliferation of affordable smart devices, newer digital native platforms sprouted, mirroring the rapid technological pulse of societies.

Economic dynamics further paint the canvas of this disparity. The towering financial foundations required to anchor legacy media, complete with extensive infrastructure and logistics, often place them in an advantageous position, with considerable might that can act as a bulwark against fresh entrants. In contrast, the relatively nimble digital natives, not anchored by hefty setup costs, flourish where technology paves the way. Delving deeper, certain regulatory environments might unfurl the red carpet for legacy media, granting them protective shields or privileges. Such advantages can sometimes stifle the rise of their digital counterparts. However, in places where the winds of open internet policies blow strong, digital platforms find fertile ground to grow.

It's also fascinating to observe how legacy media, sensing the digital shift, has nimbly integrated online strategies to remain relevant. Their chameleon-like adaptability ensures they retain a firm foothold even as the landscape evolves. As we pan out, audience behavior and age demographics cast their own influence. The reassuring familiarity of legacy media resonates with older generations, while the digital hum finds an eager audience in the youth. Moreover, in areas where legacy giants have merged forces, their consolidated might can sometimes overshadow and leave little room for budding digital platforms.

Given this context, is it fair to compare legacy and digital native media organizations, as they are in the same national media market, fighting for space and audience in online news environment? Drawing a direct comparison between them can be both complex and enlightening, depending on the perspective:

- **Shared Battleground:** At a fundamental level, both legacy and digital native media organizations operate within the same digital realm, leveraging similar platforms like websites, social media, and apps to reach their audiences. Given they're both targeting the same online users and utilizing similar digital tools, a comparison in terms of digital reach, engagement metrics, and online influence is indeed fair.
- **Inherent Differences:** However, the historical baggage, reputation, brand trust, and resources that legacy media bring to the table can differ dramatically from digital natives. Legacy media often have a reservoir of trust, brand loyalty, and a vast archive of content. Digital natives, meanwhile, may operate with agility, fresh perspectives, and a nimbleness that larger legacy outlets might lack. These inherent differences might skew direct comparisons, making them seem unfair at times.
- **Evolving Business Models:** The monetization strategies for both entities can vary. Legacy media, transitioning to the digital domain, might grapple with balancing their traditional revenue streams with newer online models. Digital natives, free from print or broadcast legacies, often adopt innovative and adaptive monetization models. While they're competing in the same space, their economic challenges and advantages might differ.
- **Audience Expectations and Brand Identity:** Legacy media might be expected to uphold certain journalistic standards, tones, and styles rooted in their long history, whereas digital natives might have the freedom to experiment, disrupt, and innovate in terms of content presentation and format. While they're both vying for the same online audience, the expectations from each can be distinct.
- **Adaptation and Resilience:** Legacy media's journey of adaptation to the digital realm, their successes and challenges in this transition, can be a point of comparison. On the other hand, the resilience and growth trajectory of digital natives in a space filled with competitors can also be evaluated.

While legacy media and digital native outlets operate in the same online environment, they come with their distinct histories, advantages, challenges, and audience expectations. We consider

that comparing them can offer valuable insights into the media landscape's nuances, but it's essential to approach such a comparison with an understanding of their unique positions in the media ecosystem. While it's fair to compare them in terms of their digital strategies, outcomes, and user engagement and participation, it's also crucial to account for their inherent differences to paint a holistic picture.

The constant movement of changes – technological, editorial, professional and language – related to the opening of channels for the circulation of information gave way to new organizational models in the journalistic market. Smaller native digital companies with local and/or specialized operations entered the market and proved to be agile/adapted to the modes of access and consumption of information online (Salaverría, 2014). Unlike legacy media, digital-born organizations are native to a digital environment, which means that, though they too face the challenge of constantly adapting to a continuously changing environment, they do so with less of the inertia and often a leaner organization and cost structure than that which comes with having a longer history and a more entrenched set of organizational structures, business practices, and professional norms (Bruno and Nielsen 2012). They are therefore in some ways better positioned to focus on future opportunities without having to also manage inherited operations that often inhibit change.

However, digital-born news media organizations also must establish themselves without the assets that legacy media have, including brand reputation, loyal audiences, and revenues generated by print and broadcast activities (Cornia et al. 2016; Sehl et al. 2016). They therefore must fight for attention and live only off their digital operations as they cannot rely on subsidies from legacy operations to fund investments in digital initiatives. Looking broadly beyond news media, it is worth remembering that most new businesses fail and most of those who succeed take years before the break even. Still, the population of digital-born news media remains highly diverse. It includes advertising-funded, subscription-based, and donation-supported organizations, and both for-profit and non-profit organizations.

Nevertheless, legacy media are struggling to deal with the endless technological upheaval and to secure their positions as leading information providers in the online domain (Althaus and Tewksbury, 2000; Cagé, 2016; Downie and Schudson, 2009; Fenton, 2010; McChesney and Pickard, 2011). The proliferation of the internet dealt a significant blow to the business models of many print newspapers and magazines. With content widely available for free online, many readers stopped purchasing physical newspapers, leading to declines in both circulation and ad revenue. The immediacy and ease of online news also posed challenges for daily newspapers that couldn't keep up with the real-time nature of digital news. Print journalism, once the cornerstone of daily

information, faced diminishing returns as the internet reshaped consumption habits. The tactile bond between reader and morning newspaper gave way to the convenience of digital screens, leading to a profound shift in user engagement.

Unlike print, TV news had a format, video, that translated well to the digital age. Although the traditional TV set's popularity might have waned, screens proliferated everywhere – from smartphones to laptops to public displays. Video content, which TV broadcasters specialize in, became even more popular online. However, this transition wasn't without its challenges, as TV broadcasters had to grapple with monetization in an online realm, face competition from purely digital platforms, and deal with the rapid spread of misinformation on social media. Though their core content was adaptable to digital spaces, their online presence often represented an alternative point of entry rather than a fully immersive digital experience. These legacy TV news sites sometimes fostered more superficial online relationships with viewers, as while users could trust the content and even share it in an online environment, their ability to participate or influence the narrative remained limited. For engagement, news sites need two-way communication, and traditional TV news, with its broadcast origins, often leaned towards one-way dissemination.

Amidst these two giants of media, legacy radio also found its own niche in the digital era. Much like TV, radio had a format—audio—that seamlessly integrated into the digital landscape. Podcasts, digital radio stations, and streaming services have rejuvenated audio content, preserving radio's essence while adapting to contemporary consumption habits.

The digital frontier, while opening avenues for traditional platforms, also highlights inherent challenges they face in translation and adaptation. Print journalism, once a bastion of daily discourse, now grapples with waning physical sales and the changing dynamics of ad revenues in the face of online immediacy. TV news outlets, although benefiting from the ubiquity of video content, often find their online relationships with viewers to be somewhat superficial. Content tailored for scheduled television broadcasts might not always offer the depth of engagement that purely digital-native platforms provide. The internet thrives on interactivity, and traditional media's often one-way communication mode sits at odds with this expectation. While radio has found renewed relevance through podcasts and digital streaming, even this medium must constantly innovate to stay resonant with evolving listener preferences.

At the same time, digital-only competitors make it more difficult for legacy media across geographies to engage a new loyal public, especially when it comes to paying for content and attracting a young target audience (Cage, Viaud, and Herve, 2015). These online-native platforms, unburdened by the need to retrofit traditional content for the digital age, can often be more agile, tapping into trends and leveraging technologies more rapidly. They also naturally foster deeper

audience participation, setting a standard of engagement that legacy outlets might struggle to match. As younger generations, already embedded in the digital realm, become primary news consumers, the challenge for traditional media isn't just about content translation but also about relevance and connection in an age where immediacy, interaction, and authenticity are highly prized.

Digital-born news media tend to be smaller than legacy media in terms of reach, resources, and revenues, because of the dynamics of the digital media environment, especially the intense competition between legacy media and large technology companies for attention and advertising, most are likely to remain so. Nonetheless, some digital-native organizations have grown into impressive additions to the overall media environment, in correlation to the media market in which they are inserted, their practice/proposal of journalism and the public they aim to reach. There are outlets that are highlighted for providing in-depth coverage of issues others ignore, giving voice to viewpoints marginalized elsewhere, such as *Agencia Publica* and *The Intercept Brazil*, and engaging more directly with younger people less loyal to legacy media, like *BuzzFeed News* from the US, *The Canary* from the UK, *Brut* from France, and *Krautreporter* from Germany (Nicholls, Shabbir and Nielsen, 2016).

These new journalistic ventures seem to have found the most success where old ones are weak, rather than where digital media are most widely used or where the online advertising market is most developed – you can see that in the UK and Germany, where legacy news media still prevails, even in the digital environment, opposite to Spain and France, with relatively weak legacy news media, where digital-born news media are generally more prominent (Nicholls, Shabbir, and Nielsen, 2016). European digital-born news media organizations tend to be similar in many respects to legacy media. Some interesting journalism is being done, but they are generally not necessarily more innovative than leading legacy media in terms of their funding models, distribution strategies, or editorial priorities. This can reflect their focus on journalism over business and technology. The digital-born news media we studied, in its majority, are rooted in the profession of journalism, with the motivations for starting out are focused on producing quality journalism or having social impact are more prominent goals than delivering digital innovation or building lucrative new media businesses, though there are exceptions, such as *BuzzFeed News*, a US based brand, which find their origin not in professionals of news media, but in business-people and technologists.

Digital-born news media tend to have different editorial priorities and seek to offer distinctive voices, such as the cases of *The Intercept Brazil*, *The Correspondent* from the Netherlands, and *The Krautreporter* from Germany. In Europe, it includes organizations that have

grown to rival some legacy media in terms of their audience reach and their editorial resources, such as *El Confidencial* in Spain and *Mediapart* in France, as the bigger digital-born in France and Spain more closely approximate the broad coverage of traditional legacy media. Other organizations focus more tightly on niches such as investigative journalism, where they feel they can bring a distinctive contribution and social impact is a common aim, which is also in line with the campaigning tradition of many newspapers, like the cases of *Correctiv* in Germany or *Agencia Publica* in Brazil.

Media organizations have varying attitudes regarding the relationship between legacy media digital-born news media, as some see themselves as competitors, others see digital natives as supplements to industry incumbents, while there are digital-born organizations that are happy to work in partnership with legacy media to break stories (Nicholls, Shabbir and Nielsen, 2016). In the end, digital native and legacy news media face very similar challenges online, especially around funding and distribution. In terms of funding, the online advertising market remains difficult for all content producers and progress with signing up subscribers is generally gradual. As a result, digital-born organizations are trying many of the same approaches – video, native advertising, various pay models, and commercial diversification – as their legacy counterparts.

In terms of distribution, the shift from a direct relation between producer and users to one increasingly intermediated by search engines and social media represents the same combination of challenges and opportunities to digital-born news media as for legacy media. The rise of digital media—including the diffusion of mobile devices and social media affordances—is a key engine of change among news institutions. Their digital nature emphasizes the tendency towards an early adoption of new technologies (Nee, 2013), as well as a deeper experimentation with multimedia storytelling formats and more diversification in business models (Sirkkunen and Cook, 2012). There is also a shifting character of industry competition, as legacy news organizations struggle against an ocean of online competitors to claim sustained audience engagement and related revenue opportunities (Picard, 2014; Westlund, 2011). Be it digital-born news, be it legacy news media, in a context with a new value chain, shaking up the way of relating to the public and understanding the new ways of consuming information and services, becomes essential, as relationships with the audience are an important pillar of any business model (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010).

3. Business Models

The media ecosystem is an intricate web of evolving models, with new and traditional players vying for the attention and loyalty of a highly fragmented audience. The business model has become the lifeblood of any media organization, determining its sustenance and growth

prospects in the digital age. The business model can be defined as the way in which an organization dynamically articulates the main components to generate revenue and benefits (Demil and Lecocq, 2009) in a sustainable manner. It is, in the end, a matter of strategic planning undertaken to serve the project's dynamic by fostering comprehension, creativity and reflexivity (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010). The need to be profitable and the transformations of advertisement investment have pushed digital media to redefine their structures, content typology and journalistic routines.

We find that the nature of news outlets has a strong relationship with the business model and idea of journalism that they propose – these are symbiotic elements in the existence and survival of the organizations. Cost cuts, a drop in advertising revenue, loss of readers and decrease in size have been a constant in this business in recent years, especially given the emergence of new features brought by technology and network communication. This is the scenario where digital natives arise and where, to obtain profitability, legacy organizations of industry have no choice but to reinvent themselves.

Like traditional media, digital-native media seek to gain the public's attention and confidence through a quality news service. Once the public's trust is obtained, they aspire to build a sustainable business model, either through advertising, subscriptions, or through other formulas. This is a growing competition, in which traditional media have the advantage of their brand recognition, but where digital-native competitors also have their assets: usually their greater ease of adaptation to the dynamics of the internet, a closer relationship with the public, and less burdensome production structures (Nee, 2013).

Media ownership is also a foundational pillar that often dictates the course of media operations, including the choice of business models. Ownership plays a pivotal role in determining a news organization's primary business models (Table 34). While private entities often pivot towards market-driven models like advertising, subscription, or affiliate marketing, conglomerates with broader interests may employ a mix of advertising, branded content, and licensing, leveraging their vast resources and multi-platform presence. State-owned entities predominantly rely on government funding, underscoring their public service mandate, although some might also include advertising to supplement their income.

Table 34 – Influence of Ownership on Business Models.

Ownership Type	Primary Business Models	Key Characteristics
Private Entity	Advertising, Subscription, Affiliate	Market-driven, Audience-focused, May be niche or broad

Conglomerate	Advertising, Branded Content, Licensing	Diversified interests, Resource-rich, Multi-platform
State-owned	Government funding, Advertising (in some cases)	Public service mandate, Politically influenced, Wide reach

Private entities often display remarkable flexibility, using a blend of advertising, subscriptions, and affiliate marketing to strike a balance between delivering user-centric content and implementing monetization tactics (Chyi and Lee, 2013). In contrast, conglomerates, with their broad portfolios, diversify revenue streams by merging advertising with branded content, licensing, and subscriptions. While such diversification anchors financial resilience, it can also introduce conflicts, especially when the conglomerate’s other ventures become subjects of media scrutiny (Picard, 2011). State-owned media, predominantly funded by government budgets, might experience a diminished drive to innovate. The potential for editorial content to reflect political mandates, especially in restrictive regimes, poses an additional challenge (Dragomir, 2018).

In this context, the media industry utilizes a diverse array of business models to monetize its offerings (Table 35). While advertising aims for a broad reach, converting viewers to revenue via ads, the subscription model provides a more predictable and steady revenue stream, ensuring that users are willing to pay for consistent value. The freemium model tries to balance the two, hoping to convert free users to premium subscribers. Affiliate sales turn content into product recommendations, while licensing amplifies content reaching outside the platform. Crowdfunding relies on the direct support of the audience, emphasizing its democratic potential. The membership model, however, seeks not just to provide content but to build a community around it.

Table 35 – Media Business Models Overview.

Business Model	Description	Key Benefits
Advertising	Revenue from ad placements	Broad audience reach
Subscription	Regular fee for content access	Steady revenue stream
Freemium³¹	Free + premium content mix	Wider audience with conversion potential

³¹ Freemium is a pricing model that combines the words “free” and “premium” and involves offering a basic product or service at no cost, while charging for additional features or a premium version.

Affiliate Sales	Commissions from product promotions	Monetize product recommendations
Licensing	Sell content rights	Expand content reach without platform expansion
Crowdfunding	Audience donations	Direct audience support
Membership	Fee for content + perks	Foster community and loyalty

An ad-supported model is most prevalent amongst more established and older players who are aiming for wide reach, while newer digital media have generally opted for a subscription-supported or donation-supported model and aim to serve more niche markets. Digital-native media tend to operate on a lower cost base than most legacy media, with smaller newsrooms, leaner organizations, and lower distribution costs. At the same time, media organizations are complementing advertising with user revenue. They focus on building the size and loyalty of their audience with unique content that people will be willing to pay for. In some cases, a media organization with free content asks users to make a voluntary payment—a one-off donation or a membership with recurring fee—to support quality, independent journalism (González-Esteban, 2014).

In other cases, they establish a metered paywall that grants users access to a limited number of articles before requiring them to pay, or they restrict access to more distinctive or exclusive content. In all cases, the user's willingness to pay is based on the media organization's developing a relationship of trust and service with the audience (Negredo et al., 2020). The adaptive paywall sits apart from the three largely established models: freemium where content is not born equal; metered, with its arbitrary free read figure; and the hard paywall that strictly admits only subscribers/members.

Distribution of News Sites Access Types

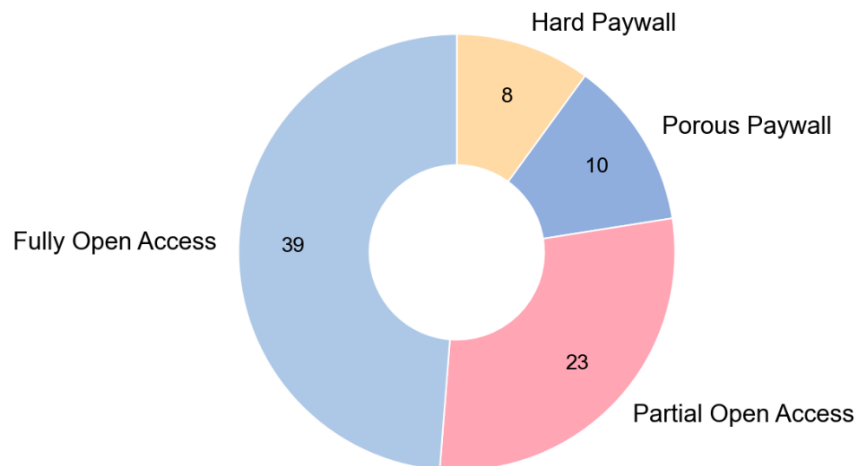


Figure 17 – Distribution of News Sites Access Types.

As shown in Figure 17, from the 80 news sites we analyzed, 8 had a hard paywall, 10 had a porous paywall (limited number of stories you can access), 23 had opens access to some stories while others were exclusive to subscribe or members and had 39 had fully open access. In its majority, legacy news media used mixed business models, relying on advertisement, money from their other enterprises, and types of subscription. Though some digital natives also relied on a mix of advertisement and subscription, there were several who adopted membership-based models, depending only on reader revenue.

In the end, media companies frequently combine multiple business models (Table 36), weaving a web of revenue streams. This hybrid approach reduces dependence on a single revenue source, mitigates risks, and capitalizes on varied audience behaviors. For instance, an advertising model can be merged with a freemium approach, capturing both wide reach and the potential for conversion. A subscription model can incorporate elements of membership, enhancing loyalty and community sentiment. The combination strategy ensures resilience in the face of market fluctuations and changing audience preferences. The media industry's business models are far from siloed strategies but interconnected approaches. Each model impacts how the audience engages with content and influences their participation level. By combining multiple models, media entities not only diversify their revenue streams but also cater to a wider spectrum of audience behaviors and preferences.

Table 36 – Combination of Business Models.

Primary Business Model	Commonly Combined With	Rationale
Advertising	Freemium, Subscription	Diversify revenue & balance breadth with depth
Subscription	Advertising, Membership	Enhanced user loyalty & additional revenue
Freemium	Advertising	Convert free users while still earning from ads
Affiliate Sales	Advertising, Subscription	Monetize across buying journey
Licensing	Subscription	Offer premium content on multiple platforms
Crowdfunding	Membership	Foster deeper community ties
Membership	Subscription, Advertising	Diversify offerings & deepen engagement

This is consistent with an online news scenario, in which consumption made it more difficult for publishers to control the value chain of content production and distribution (van der Wurff, 2012). People can now choose to get the information they want from multiple sources, many of which are free. Therefore, the willingness to pay for news content in most countries is still low (Newman et al., 2019). In this sense, simply putting up paywalls around content may work for some well-established brands, but probably not for online-born news media, which need to innovate and develop relationships that create value for these readers to reach sustainability (Jarvis, 2014).

In examining the symbiotic connection between media companies and their audiences, we cannot overlook the profound influence of business models. These models, often relegated to the sidelines as mere financial frameworks, play a pivotal role in shaping the user experience, determining content delivery, and even molding the very nature of interaction between media outlets and their consumers. The choice of business model directly influences how media companies engage their users and stimulate participation (Table 37).

The advertising model, aiming for breadth, might lead to wide but shallow engagement. Subscribers, having made a financial commitment, are usually highly engaged, offering feedback and showing clear content preferences. The freemium model seeks broad engagement but puts

effort into converting free users to premium. Affiliate models engage niche audiences who have a clear intent to purchase. Licensing often leads to passive engagement as content is consumed on different platforms. Crowdfunding harnesses the commitment of supporters, while the membership model encourages active community participation.

Table 37 – Impact on User Engagement and Participation.

Business Model	User Engagement	Encouragement for Participation
Advertising	Broad but might be shallow	Engage to view more ads
Subscription	High (users commit financially)	Feedback and content preferences
Freemium	Broad with a focus on conversion	Participate by upgrading
Affiliate Sales	Niche, based on purchase intent	Engage through purchases
Licensing	Might be passive (consumed elsewhere)	Depends on the licensing platform
Crowdfunding	Highly committed (financial support)	Direct financial contributions
Membership	Deep, community-driven	Active participation in events, forums

The financial sustainability of media organizations is deeply entwined with their relationship with users. Amidst the saturation of information and the emergence of alternative news channels, building and nurturing user relationships is paramount. Trust has emerged as a cornerstone in an era rife with misinformation and ‘fake news’. Interestingly, the nature of media ownership can significantly shape public perception. Independent news outlets, for example, might be perceived as more impartial than state-owned entities in countries with press restrictions (Freedom House, 2020; Tandoc et al., 2018).

Beyond mere consumption, modern users crave engagement, personalized content, and platforms that align with their values. The membership structures of some media entities, by fostering community, promote this active user engagement (Newman et al., 2019). Moreover, while the rise of ad-blockers presents challenges to the traditional advertising model, the digital age offers opportunities. The ease of online transactions, for instance, has spurred the growth of subscription and donation models, with younger demographics showing a penchant for flexible paywalls or micro-payments (Cherubini and Graves, 2016).

The dynamics of the relationship between news organizations and their readers are continuously being redefined. One critical, often understated factor affecting this relationship is the business model a media outlet adopts. It is tempting to view business models merely as mechanisms to ensure financial viability. However, they are better understood as the very DNA of a media company's interaction strategy, shaping user experience, content delivery, and the overall relationship dynamics.

Consider, for instance, the direct and tangible rapport that subscription models establish. When a user subscribes to a media platform, it is not just a transaction; it is a declaration of trust and a commitment to a relationship. This binding commitment ensures that users seek consistent value - be it top-tier content, exclusive insights, or an uninterrupted, ad-free journey. When readers commit to a subscription, as with *The New York Times*, they are not just buying access to content but entering into a tacit contract. They expect consistent journalistic value and, in return, offer their loyalty and financial support. *Le Monde* in France similarly emphasizes this direct bond, leaning on its deep-rooted reputation to convert readers into paying subscribers.

The case of *El País* is quite interesting. The organization was among the early adopters of digital media and launched its online edition in the mid-1990s. In 2002, it became the first Spanish newspaper to introduce a payment system for access to the contents of its electronic version, which drastically reduced the number of visits to the website. However, their initial attempt to monetize the digital content by introducing a payment system met with severe criticism. *El País* digital was suspended in the same year by the *Oficina de Justificación de la Difusión* for four months because of two serious breaches of OJD regulations. The *El País* digital website opened again in 2005.

This time, they offered free access to most of their content while requiring subscriptions for multimedia content and the newspaper's archive. Their new approach proved to be a resounding success, as they have emerged as the world leader in information in the Spanish language, and a reference for journalism in the Ibero-American sphere. With its extensive coverage of news, culture, and entertainment, *El País* has become a trusted source of information for millions of Spanish speakers worldwide.

Nevertheless, *El País* had been considering a shift to a subscription model for their digital version since 2017-18. Their plan was to launch it on March 1, 2020, but the COVID-19 pandemic changed everything. Two days before the planned launch, the newsroom had its first COVID-19 case, and all preparations were thrown off course. Staff members began working from home, and the launch was postponed – transitioning to a subscription model became the crazy story in the middle of a pandemic (Shilpa, 2021). He noted that the pandemic accelerated the shift towards

digital and subscription-based models. Although the transition was challenging, the success of El País demonstrates that it is possible to make such a shift, even in difficult times.

The organization managed to make the transition to a subscription model work. The newspaper managed to attract 100,000 subscribers in just 11 months. Echevarría (2021) admits that El País was late to move to a subscription model, but, ironically, because it had been a pioneer of using it as business model. By establishing a paywall in 2002 on their website, they were one of the first general newspapers in the world to do so. However, they took the paywall down two years later as it wasn't working as expected, and this was partly why the newspaper waited so long to try again. Using a freemium model, outlets like El País draw a line between casual readership and a more committed subscriber base. By offering select premium content behind a paywall, it nudges readers to evaluate the perceived value of their content.

Yet not all direct interactions are rooted in subscriptions. The emergence of the membership model redefines this interaction, making readers feel more like stakeholders. These aren't just transactional pathways; they are invitations into a community. Members might be privy to exclusive behind-the-scenes glimpses, rich interactions with journalists, or access to members-only discussion forums. This model transforms users from passive consumers into active stakeholders, deepening their connection to the media entity. The Guardian invites readers to become members or supporters, giving them a sense of ownership and belonging to a journalistic community. Similarly, eldiario.es offers membership perks like early access, fostering a deeper connection with its readership. However, the way content is delivered can play a pivotal role in shaping these relationships.

Then there is the vast ocean of ad-supported models, where content is freely accessible, but the user experience is interspersed with ads. For platforms like the HuffPost, the relationship becomes subtly transactional. The content remains free, but users pay attention to advertisements. However, this model comes with challenges, especially when it comes to user trust. If ads become too intrusive or if there's a lack of transparency between editorial and sponsored content, as seen sometimes in outlets like Stern, the trust can erode quickly. The allure of personalization brings us to data-driven models. Tailoring content based on user preferences, as done by Folha de S. Paulo or La Nación, can enhance the user experience. But this comes with the responsibility of handling data ethically. Any breach or misuse can quickly sour the relationship, turning a tool of engagement into a point of contention.

Among these giants, alternative voices like The Canary or Red/Acción carve out unique spaces with mixed models, combining ad revenues with reader contributions or partnerships, emphasizing their independent voice or solution-oriented journalism. Red/Acción, founded in

2018 in Argentina, aimed to make the public a part of the journalism that they produce. They believed of the main obstacles for journalism is often the unwillingness to think about the relationship that it establishes with the public beyond its transactional nature. 90% of the media content is free to access, but the outlet has membership plans that calls the as “Co-Responsables” (Co-Responsible), in a program includes access to exclusive content, like *Mono*, a monthly print publication, produced and designed for its members. *Red/Acción* claims that the newspaper industry has long depended on advertising for financial support but that it must seek new business strategies and other ways of engaging with readers and brands.

The business model isn’t just a backdrop; it is an active player on the stage of media-user relationships. Whether it is the exclusivity of a subscription, the community feel of membership, the transactional nature of ads, or the personalized touch of data-driven content, the chosen model shapes the narrative. Outlets like *The New York Times* or *The Guardian*, *Le Monde* or *Mediapart*, each tell their stories, not just through the articles they publish but through the business models they embrace. In today’s media landscape, the way we pay, and play is as integral to the story as the story itself.

“Looking to the future, publishers are increasingly recognizing that long-term survival is likely to involve stronger and deeper connection with audiences online” (Newman et al., 2020). For years, though, news media has not invested much effort into nurturing rich connections with their consumers and, consequently, neglected the promotion of a participatory culture that could bring benefits for all involved (Carpes da Silva and Sanseverino 2020; Neuberger and Nuernbergk, 2010; Rosen, 2006). vanishing advertising revenue and changing habits of news consumption on the internet forced a change on that situation—especially when considering journalism as a service (Jarvis, 2014); though the appropriations of User-Generated Content and public participation tend to be aimed at raising revenues, not the worth of the relationship they establish or the quality of the content that comes from the audience.

A news outlet cannot simply bet on some of the several different options of sponsored content or advertising available. It cannot leave this job only to a marketing team. For news publishers, reaching much larger audiences than in the past does not exactly mean acquiring more financial gains. Hence, most of the media nowadays is looking at diversifying with, and regaining control over, other revenue sources—especially ones derived from readers (Rashidian, Tsiveriotis, and Brown, 2019). It needs to create channels of conversation with readers, work on promoting the idea behind the news company, its mission and the newsroom has a role in this logic (Carpes da Silva and Sanseverino 2020; Cornia et al. 2018; Quamby et al., 2019).

The digital news domain represents the intersection of media ownership, operational models, and user engagement, all of which contribute to the fiscal viability of news platforms. As media consumption evolves, it is imperative for news organizations to understand these dynamics, adapt accordingly, and prioritize their audience. The converging forces of modernization, globalization, and capitalism are continuously reshaping the media landscape, introducing both opportunities for growth and challenges like media centralization and the tension between profitability and journalistic integrity.

4. The Place of User

The place of the user addresses how central the audience or user is to the organization's operations and strategies. Some media organizations may prioritize user engagement and feedback, tailoring content to suit audience preferences and behaviors. Others might maintain a more top-down approach, deciding content independently of direct user input. The place of the user also pertains to how the organization interacts with its audience: Is there a feedback mechanism? Are there community engagement initiatives? How are analytics and user data employed to shape content strategy? A media entity that places users at its core might be more adaptive and responsive to its audience's needs, while one that doesn't might have a more defined, unwavering editorial stance.

The exploration of the place of the user within the journalistic context of online news ecosystems is of paramount importance. At the heart of this exploration lies the need to understand how news sites perceive and articulate their relationships with users. Our assertion is that the place of the user acts as an internal factor within media organizations, significantly influencing the relationships they establish with their users. Given the intricacy of this context, determining the exact place of the user becomes a challenging endeavor. To tackle this task, our research approach combined a spectrum of methods. Content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002; Bardin, 1977) stood out as a pivotal method, as in the contemporary media landscape, how news organizations perceive their relationship and the phrases and quotes they use to describe their audiences/public offer insight to the place of the user for them. In this analysis, we dissect the positioning of various media entities and discuss the implications of their chosen verbiage regarding their readers.

Our focus on the place of the user doesn't end with content analysis alone. Chapters 8 and 9 of our research further delve into the strategies news sites employ for engagement. They shed light on tools utilized, spaces earmarked for audience participation, and the deployment of User-Generated Content (UGC). These aspects are not merely strategies in isolation; they offer

significant clues about the envisaged place of the user within a journalistic enterprise. In this section, we've sought to provide an introductory perspective on this internal dimension of media companies. However, the essence of our thesis revolves around the relationship between media companies and their users. Consequently, the place of the user is not a static or singularly defined element. It is a dynamic concept that we will continually address throughout the empirical analysis of this thesis. The culmination of our findings will be integrated and presented in the final chapter. In Section 2 of Chapter 12, we will paint a holistic picture of how the user's place is constructed within the news organizations in our *corpus*.

In this section, we will explore the place of the user through two perspectives, derived from our content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002; Bardin, 1977):

- Role & Identity: how users are perceived and portrayed, considering how they are referred to by the news organizations (for example, are they consumers, collaborators, critics, members, subscribers, allies?)
- Community & Networked Aspect: considering how news organizations perceive their users and if they are referred to not just as individual entities but as part of a larger community or network that shares, discusses, and shapes news narratives collectively.

In the dynamic realm of media, the language news organizations employ to define their audience reflects more than mere semantics—it often reveals their core values, *ethos*, and strategies. By examining key phrases and quotes from these organizations, we unearth the depth of their perceived relationship with their users. There have been studies conducted on how the language used to refer to users on websites can impact user perceptions and behaviors. For instance, one study found that using the term “member” instead of “user” or “visitor” on a website led to increased feelings of belonging and attachment among users, as well as increased willingness to contribute content and participate in online discussions (Smith et al., 2017). Similarly, another study revealed that using language that emphasizes the social aspects of a website, such as “community”, “group” or “network” can increase users’ sense of social connectedness and ultimately lead to greater engagement with the website (Kim and Jang, 2019; Dwivedi et al., 2021). These studies suggest that the language used to refer to users on a website can have a significant impact on user perceptions and behaviors, including their willingness to engage with the website and contribute content.

We conducted a mapping of user labelling by the news organizations in our *corpus*, represented in Figure 18. The image is designed as a heatmap, where full color indicates references

made by legacy news organizations, while dashed lines represent references from digital native news outlets. Our findings revealed a spectrum of terminology, including terms such as *member*, *subscriber*, *supporter*, and *ally*.

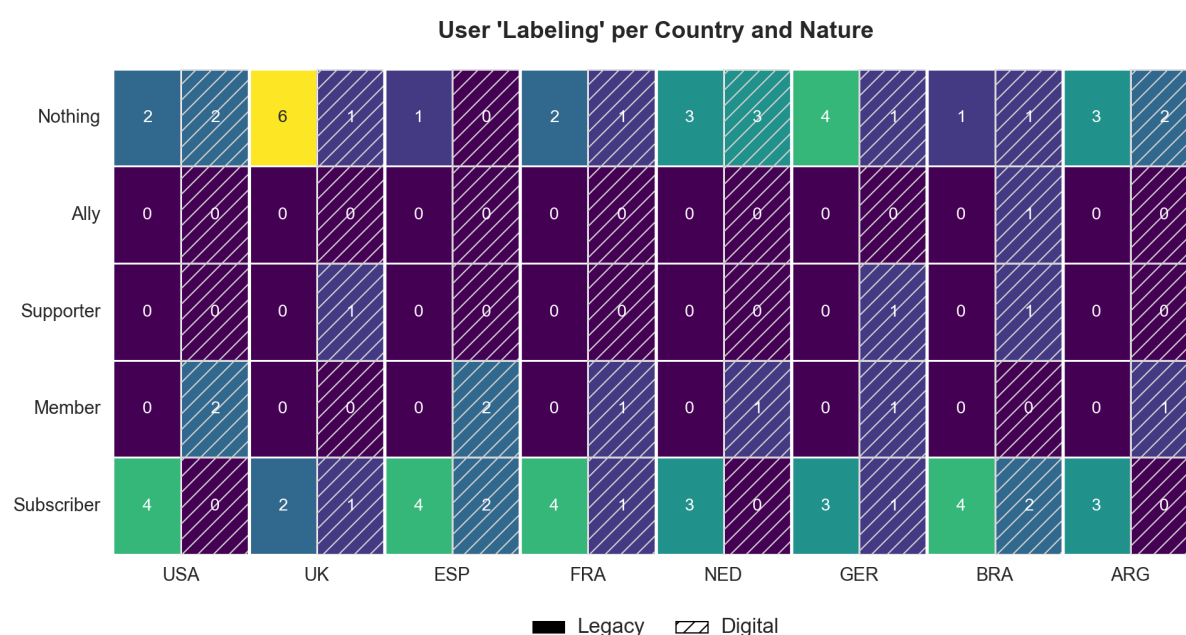


Figure 18 – Heatmap representing user labelling per country and nature of the news sites.

Additionally, we identified news websites that did not use any specific term at all; instead, they simply referred to the audience as the user accessing their website. We can observe that 22 legacy news organizations do not refer to their user by any name. The origin and access of the legacy tends to affect that relationship – sites which are open to users, do not use any specific terms to refer to them, and those sites usually come from television or radio; though in the UK legacy media that originates from print tends to leave their websites for open navigation and, so, relegates the audience to *just* the user navigating their site. Contrastingly, among digital natives, only 9 out of 29 do not specifically address their audience. This relates to the business models they tend to adopt and the type of access to their sites – if there is no paywall, but open navigation, the audience is again viewed as the *just* the user accessing their website. This lack of personalized addressing might reflect a more distant relationship between the legacy media and their audience. On the other hand, digital native news organizations tend to use terms that are more specific.

The term subscriber is quite straight-forward, and it refers to the user paying to access that news site, being used 27 times by legacy news media, especially those whose origin is in print and have either a form of paywall or offers benefits to those who are paying customers, and 7 times by digital natives. Though customer is not a term you see mentioned in the news sites, it does seem appropriate to describe the transaction between user and news site in this case: they pay to receive

access to a product/service. There is a connection between the choice of terminology and the business models adopted by news organizations. Open access without paywalls tends to lead to a more generalized term like “user,” while terms like “subscriber” are associated with paid access models. This indicates that the terms used are tied to the financial relationship between the news organization and its audience.

The term supporter is only used 3 times, and always by digital natives (The Canary/UK, Corretiv/Germany, and The Intercept Brazil), and the term ally only once, also by a digital native (Agencia Publica from Brazil). They both are associated with the idea of supporting a cause, in this case, supporting the idea of journalism this media organizations propose and practice.

The term member is used 11 times – 10 by digital natives and one by a legacy media, Página 12 from Argentina – and it has the connection of becoming a part of something. Being member-based journalistic companies is part of the companies’ brands. It is representative not only of their business models, but also an indicator of how they view their journalistic mission and what journalism they propose (Carpes da Silva and Sanseverino, 2020).

Membership isn’t just subscription by another name (though it is often referenced that way), or about giving consumers access to a product. It is participation in a larger cause that reflects what they want to see in civil society. In membership, there’s a different social contract or value proposition between the site and its members. At the basic level of: What do you give? What do you get? Subscribers pay their money and get access to a product. But members join the cause and participate because they believe in it. Ignacio Escolar (2019a; 2019b), founder of Eldiario.es, understands that when readers decide to become members, it is because they are committed to the media mission, which is why the medium refers to them as well as engaged readers.

When you invite the public to become a member of your news organization, that comes with duties and expectations. When you are a member-funded organization, you are obligated to ask for permission when shifting course, because you work for your members – you are in the relationship business. The framework is closer to that of a cooperative or collective where every member is invested in the organization’s success. Failing to engage and consult your members about topics they find important is a trust buster. The key point is that you outline how your organization functions and where members of the community can engage and provide input (i.e., define the relationship model and where it starts and stops and where members are empowered and where they are not). Membership frequently is meant to enhance the relationship between a news outlet, its sources, and its readers, and their overlap; it is about joining the cause of the news organization, even if that cause is as simple as providing accurate and useful information to its followers.

The terminology used is not just a superficial choice, but is deeply tied to the organization's brand, business model, and mission. Our data highlights the diverse ways news organizations choose to address their audience, revealing their business models, engagement strategies, and how they perceive their relationship with their readers. The numbers indicate a contrast between legacy and digital native news organizations in terms of how they refer to their audience. Legacy media seem to lean more towards general terms like *user* and *subscriber*, while digital native media are more likely to use terms like *member*, *supporter*, and *ally*, reflecting a stronger emphasis on community engagement and shared values (Table 38).

Table 38 – The terminology used to refer to users of news sites in our corpus.

TERM	DESCRIPTION	Usage by Legacy Media	Usage by Digital Natives
Subscriber	Refers to users who pay to access news sites. More commonly used by legacy news media, especially those with a print origin and paywalls or subscription benefits. Digital native organizations use it less frequently.	More frequent	Less frequent
Customer	Not frequently mentioned in news sites. Proposed as appropriate to describe the transaction between a user and a news site, highlighting the financial aspect of the relationship.	Rarely mentioned	Not frequently mentioned
Supporter	Used sparingly by digital native news organizations. Suggests a connection with supporting the journalistic cause and mission of these organizations.	Not used	Used sparingly
Ally	Used once by a digital native organization. Suggests a connection with supporting the journalistic cause and mission of the organization.	Not used	Used once
Member	Describes users who are part of something, often indicating membership-based journalistic companies. More commonly used by digital native organizations, but also by a legacy media organization. Signifies alignment with values.	Less frequent	More frequent

The language employed by these news entities offers crucial insights into how they perceive and engage with their users. Terminology, phrasing, and the underlying sentiments of a news organization's self-description can serve as clear indicators of their approach to journalism and the role they envision for their audience. By analyzing the terminologies and declarations of six prominent media outlets, we can delineate patterns, compare models, and ultimately, understand the spectrum of relationships these organizations foster with their users.

The nuances of language adopted by news organizations can provide invaluable insights into their *ethos*, approach, and relationship with their users. From the vast array of data collected, the terms and declarations from Mediapart, Krautreporter, EL PAÍS, HuffPost, The New York Times, and Red/Acción stand out as exemplary (Table 39). These examples illustrate not just how news organizations refer to their audience, but also how they pinpoint the place of the user according to their own perception and the role they attribute to them. By diving deeper into these phrases and quotes, we can glean a comprehensive understanding of the underlying dynamics shaping the media-audience relationship.

Table 39 – Systematization of Terms & Declarations from Media Companies.

MEDIA COMPANY	TERMS & DECLARATIONS
Mediapart	Words like <i>"Contributing readers"</i> and the assertion that <i>"Every reader is a potential journalist"</i> reflect Mediapart's philosophy. They don't just see their audience as passive consumers but as an intrinsic part of their journalistic endeavor. Their belief that <i>"Community insights drive true journalism"</i> further bolsters this viewpoint.
Krautreporter	Krautreporter's declaration, <i>"perspectives make our journalism better,"</i> alongside their motto, <i>"Every voice matters,"</i> showcases their belief in a symbiotic relationship between the medium and its users. The publication understands that the depth and breadth of user perspectives empower and enrich their journalistic narrative.
EL PAÍS	With terms like <i>"global community"</i> and the statement that <i>"We bring the world to our readers, and our readers to the world,"</i> EL PAÍS shows an ambition that transcends borders. While the term <i>"subscribers"</i> acknowledges a commercial aspect, their emphasis on a global community reveals their aspiration for a united reader base.

HuffPost	HuffPost's motto, " <i>Real stories about real life,</i> " and their belief that " <i>Stories are best told by those living them,</i> " resonate with their grounding in everyday human experiences. They want to spotlight real stories, and their users are central to that mission.
The New York Times	While phrases like " <i>content delivery</i> " highlight a business model, The New York Times also emphasizes its legacy with the sentiment, " <i>A tradition of excellence, delivered to our subscribers.</i> " This blends a commercial approach with a nod to the storied journalistic past and the crucial role readers have played in it.
Red/Acción	Using terms like " <i>peer-to-peer,</i> " " <i>horizontal relationship,</i> " and advocating for a " <i>Community-driven narrative,</i> " Red/Acción promotes an egalitarian approach to journalism. Their assertion that " <i>News is a shared endeavor, not a top-down directive</i> " underscores this <i>ethos</i> .

The perceptions of the **Role & Identity** of the user by a media company can be inferred by the language and terminologies used by these media outlets as they offer valuable insights into how they view and engage with their users. The spectrum ranges from the traditional view of readers as mere consumers to more modern, engaging roles such as collaborators and members of a larger community.

Consumers is the most traditional and longstanding view of readership in journalism. The relationship is transactional: the media produces content, and the reader consumes it. The New York Times' focus on "content delivery" and its emphasis on "Serving quality to our subscribers" is indicative of this perspective. Their users are seen primarily in a commercial light — they subscribe, they consume, and they expect value in return. While this might seem like a somewhat passive role for the user, it is also clear that there's an expectation of high quality and consistency in the content provided.

In contrast to the traditional consumer model, users are viewed as **Collaborators**, as some news platforms are looking to them as integral parts of the news-making process. Krautreporter stands out in this regard. Their statement "News is richer when our readers pitch in" clearly indicates a shift from the passive consumer to an active collaborator. This is not just about consuming news; it is about contributing to it, shaping narratives, and providing insights that might not be accessible otherwise. This collaborative model actively blurs the line between journalist and reader, hinting at a more democratic and inclusive approach to journalism.

Moving beyond the individual, there's a growing recognition of readers as part of a collective, as **Community Members** — a community bound by shared interests, values, or geographic ties. EL PAÍS taps into this sentiment with their declaration, "Together, we're not just an audience, but a world." This not only underscores the collective identity of their users but also elevates them beyond mere consumers. It suggests a shared journey, a collective experience of the world through news narratives. This perspective recognizes the social and connective role of news, binding individuals together into a larger, interconnected entity.

The **Community & Networked** aspect, that provide an understanding of users in a collective context, considers that, in the modern digital age, news is not just read but shared, commented on, and even reshaped by users. The way media organizations talk about their readers in relation to the collective, and to each other, offers a window into their perception of the news ecosystem and its stakeholders.

The assertion by Mediapart that "A story evolves when shared" is profound. It recognizes the dynamic nature of narratives in the age of digital media. Instead of viewing news as a static entity, delivered from the journalist to the passive reader, they see it as a living entity, subject to evolution, interpretation, and reshaping as it passes through the hands of a networked community. This perspective elevates each user to an active participant in the journalistic process, hinting at a broader, more engaged and interactive user network.

While both EL PAÍS and HuffPost understand and underscore the significance of their readers, their language suggests a slightly different approach. They seem to view readers primarily as individual entities, each consuming and interpreting news in their personal context. There is an acknowledgment of the collective – the larger ecosystem of readership – but it is the individual's place within this collective that's emphasized. This perspective can be likened to viewing a forest: while each tree (reader) is essential and unique, it is the forest (the collective) that defines the landscape.

Contrasting with the others, Red/Acción's proclamation that "Every reader is a link in our vast network" puts forth a bold image. By likening readers to 'links', they emphasize the interconnectedness of users. Each reader, while being an individual, is also seen as a crucial connecting point in a vast web of information flow, sharing, and discussion. This perspective underscores the idea that users aren't just passive consumers but are instrumental in distributing, validating, and even critiquing news narratives within a larger community framework.

By dissecting these perspectives, we see the spectrum of user roles, from individual consumers to active, networked participants in a broader community. Understanding these roles is essential as it informs how news organizations tailor their content, engagement strategies, and

even business models to their perceived audience's needs and roles. In a world increasingly driven by interconnectivity and shared experiences, the roles that news organizations ascribe to their users significantly influence the nature of engagement, the design of platforms, and the direction of news narratives. Recognizing users as collaborators or community members, rather than just consumers, suggests a more participatory and inclusive future for journalism. The language these organizations employ speaks volumes about the evolving dynamics of journalism in the digital age. Some are moving towards a more participatory model, blurring the lines between journalists and readers, while others maintain a more traditional, albeit refined, approach to reader engagement. The selected mediums offer a snapshot of this spectrum, each representing different degrees of user integration and participation in the journalistic process.

Mediapart and Krautreporter wield collaboration-centric language, which underscores their commitment to integrating readers into their journalistic processes. Phrases like Mediapart's "co-construct the news with us" and Krautreporter's "Journalism is teamwork" immediately highlight the value they place on the role of the user, not merely as passive consumers but as active contributors. This elevates the user from a traditional reader status to that of collaborators or partners, suggesting a more democratic, open-source journalism model.

On the other hand, EL PAÍS and The New York Times employ a more transactional vernacular. When The New York Times says, "We aim to create a space where readers can exchange intelligent and informed commentary," it places the emphasis on the provision of a service, treating the users as subscribers or consumers. Similarly, EL PAÍS's phrase "Be a part of the best journalism" again focuses on the idea of consumption rather than active contribution. The relationship here leans more towards a traditional business-customer model.

While HuffPost and Red/Acción manage to bridge the gap between the aforementioned extremes. HuffPost's "We report with empathy and put people at the heart of every story," reflects an effort to humanize news narratives and consider individual stories within larger contexts. This positions users as subjects of stories, but also potential collaborators in sharing unique narratives. Red/Acción's approach with "News is a conversation" encourages interaction, and views users as integral parts of a conversational, networked community.

The language and proclamations used by news organizations serve as insightful indicators of their guiding principles and aspirations. These phrases illuminate how such entities perceive and relate to their readers—be it through the lens of consumers, collaborators, or integral members of a community. In our contemporary digital era, these conceptions not only inform media's operational strategies but also the essence of journalism and its engagement with a vast, interconnected global readership. However, regardless of the varied designations for users—

whether they are termed as subscribers, members, supporters, or customers—the reality seems to diverge from the ideal. Aligning with the sentiments of several scholars (Bird, 2011; Carpentier, 2011; Couldry, 2011; Picone et al., 2019), the technological promise of transforming every reader into a writer appears unfulfilled by a significant number of news platforms. Indeed, while news agencies have extended an invitation to the public, the following chapter will demonstrate that this inclusion lacks the depth and substance that the early promises of internet-fueled interactivity had implied.

5. Internal factors in unison

The nature of a media organization – whether it springs from the roots of time-honored journalistic traditions or is bred in the dynamic pulse of the digital age – significantly influences its approach to content. Legacy media, rooted in established practices, often contrast sharply with the flexible approach of digital-native outlets (Napoli, 2008). The business model underpins the very sustainability of these organizations (Picard, 2005). Whether leaning on the allure of advertisements, the commitment of subscribers, or a mix of both, these models often dictate the type and tone of content produced. Lastly, at the heart of it all, is the user. The media's portrayal of and engagement with its audience can either relegate them to passive roles or uplift them as active contributors in the news ecosystem (Jenkins, 2006).

In the intricate web of the online news ecosystem, these three pillars – the media's inherent nature, their business model, and the user – are not just standalone entities. They intermingle, influence, and reshape one another in a dance of symbiosis.

- **Nature of Media & Business Model:** Legacy media starts with a trust bank, often built over decades. While historically relying on subscriptions and emphasizing reader loyalty (McManus, 1994), many have incorporated advertisements as they transitioned online. Digital-native outlets, agile and contemporary, often launch with ad-heavy models, catering to a broader audience (Thurman and Fletcher, 2019). Yet, as they establish trust, they might incorporate subscription tiers, aiming for exclusive content and a dedicated reader base (Chyi, 2012).
- **Business Model & the User:** Ad-centric models lead to content designed for broad appeal, which can sometimes lead to a compromise in quality (Myllylahti, 2018). Subscription models focus on quality, depth, and a niche approach, treating users as valued patrons (Newman et al., 2019). Subscription models may introduce paywalls, making content accessibility an ongoing discussion (Küng, 2008).

- **Nature of Media & the User:** Legacy outlets' transition to online platforms is a blend of tradition and innovation (Boczkowski, 2004). On the other hand, digital-native outlets thrive on interactivity, considering users as collaborators from inception (Bell and Owen, 2017).

The synergy of these factors keeps the online news ecosystem dynamic. It is a feedback loop where the media's nature shapes its business model, influencing user engagement. This engagement then feeds back, impacting both business approaches and media nature (Anderson et al., 2013). Understanding the symbiotic interplay of these internal factors is more than just an academic exercise; it is essential for comprehending the dynamic landscape of modern media. This awareness allows us to dissect the motivations behind content strategies, business decisions, and audience engagements. By delving into the intertwined nature of media characteristics, business models, and user roles, we can better appreciate how and why media companies in the online news ecosystem make certain choices and prioritize narratives. Moreover, this knowledge equips users, policymakers, and industry stakeholders with insights, enabling them to make informed decisions and advocate for a more transparent and accountable media landscape.

It is also crucial to note that while these factors have a universal resonance, their manifestation and impact can vary based on a country's media system and national settings. Different countries might have varied regulations on advertising, divergent histories of press freedom, and distinct cultural values around journalism. For instance, in countries with strong public broadcasting traditions, legacy media might have a different trajectory in the digital realm compared to countries where commercial media dominates. Similarly, in nations where freedom of the press is restricted, digital-native outlets might play a critical role in providing alternative viewpoints, while in others, they might align closely with mainstream narratives. The expectations and engagement of users will also differ depending on their cultural, socio-political, and economic backgrounds.

Take the UK, for instance, with its powerful public broadcasting tradition anchored by the BBC. Legacy media in the UK has enjoyed a unique balance between public and commercial interests, which has influenced its digital evolution, emphasizing credibility and broad-based engagement. In contrast, the US's media landscape, with giants like CNN and Fox News, is overwhelmingly commercial, leading to a competitive and fragmented online news environment, often driven by advertising and subscription metrics.

Brazil and Argentina offer a glimpse into the complex interplay of media systems in South American contexts. Brazil, with its history of media concentration and recent political upheavals, has seen digital-native outlets like The Intercept Brasil offering alternative viewpoints, especially

in the digital domain. Argentina, on the other hand, with its oscillation between government regulations and media freedoms, has observed its legacy and digital media navigating a tightrope between political pressures and the drive to maintain journalistic integrity.

In Europe, countries like the Netherlands, Germany, France, and Spain each provide nuanced perspectives. The Netherlands, with its pluralistic media system, ensures a diverse range of voices, both in legacy and digital platforms. Germany's strong commitment to press freedom and public broadcasting, epitomized by institutions like Deutsche Welle, ensures depth and stability in its digital news ecosystem. France, with its rich journalistic tradition, confronts the challenges of digital transformation while emphasizing journalistic standards and ethics. Meanwhile, Spain, grappling with regional identities and linguistic diversities, presents a media landscape where digital platforms cater to both national and regional narratives.

The expectations and engagement of users will also differ depending on their cultural, socio-political, and economic backgrounds. Therefore, while the fundamental dynamics of these internal factors remain consistent globally, their expressions and implications can be heavily influenced by the broader societal and political environments in which they operate.

CHAPTER 8

STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGEMENT & SPACES FOR PARTICIPATION IN NEWS SITES

After delving into the heartbeat of news organizations, we turn our focus to the tangible tools they employ to engage their users, connecting our theoretical foundation with real-world practices. The concept of participatory journalism was initially accompanied by promises for democratization and community enhancement (Bowman and Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004), but now, it has been recognized that the incorporation of User-Generated Content in the journalistic process is not an easy task (Spyridou and Veglis, 2013), due to significant ethical, legal and responsibility issues (Saridou and Veglis, 2016). Many news organizations are characterized by their slow adaptation to interactivity and consumer participation (Domingo, 2008; Matheson, 2004; Thurman, 2008). The main reasons for this are somewhat reluctant attitude concerning responsibility – both legal and ethical (Peterson et al., 2007); organizational issues related to economic and other resources (Cardoso, 2007; Chung, 2007; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008; Thurman, 2008) and the journalist's professional role (Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Karlsson, 2011; Singer, 2009). This is not a new phenomenon: Williams et al. (2011) concluded that there has been a general, well-documented resistance to audience participation for decades. This panorama on news sites, however, and the tools and features they propose to interact with the user, are about a decade old.

Alas, as news continues to evolve online, with the need for new business models and, consequently, novel manners to engage the audience, interest and studies have been resurfacing on these topics. Zheng (2020) explores user engagement with news on social media and investigates how news consumers are interacting with news content through sharing and commenting. Blanchett, Neheli and Craig (2020) analyze the social media strategies of news organizations and how these strategies are used to build an engaged audience. Mishra and Kumar (2020) provide a qualitative analysis of the digital journalistic practices used by Indian newsrooms to engage with their audiences (an interesting study that goes beyond the Western point of view).

Our research joins these studies, with the aim to build a current and more robust evidence-based understanding of audience engagement (Li et al., 2021), based on the analysis of the 80 news sites that compose our *corpus* from the eight different countries. This investigation is designed to give a broad picture of what resources news sites are currently making available for user engagement/participation. We conducted a thorough platform research (news site analysis) and desk research for each media organization of our sample from a documental perspective, as we also had to obtain data regarding the news organizations, such as history, type of business model,

stated policies and proposed relationship with the reader (membership, subscription, free access, etc.), which helped to understand how the range of opportunities for user engagement and interaction that has been made possible by internet and digital media interaction clash with how they are *actually* being used.

Thus, in this chapter, we investigated **what are the spaces created and hosted by news organizations to engage the user and encourage participation** through our in-depth cross-national analysis of the news sites we selected for our *corpus* – 10 from each country (United States, United Kingdom, France, Spain, Netherlands, Germany, Brazil, and Argentina). Our research shows a snap in time of how popular tools and features for interacting with the audience are being used by these news sites through an interpretation of quantitative data; and debate how they evolved in the past decades since journalism has gone online. We computed, for example, how many of these news sites use comments sections and how many provide links to share their stories on social networks and what networks are those. An ample perspective of several news sites and these resources they use, that allows us to consider how news sites in different countries, with a diverse range of business models and origins, are hosting spaces for the user in digital journalism and what kind of participation these spaces allow.

We note that we have a small sample of news sites for each country (10 per country), and we examined them quantitatively, considering their use of three primary features: *comment sections*, *newsletters*, and *share buttons* for social media. These features were selected to be studied in-depth in our *corpus*, because, as we conducted a preliminary mapping of the 80 websites³² of this study, these three were the tools used for user engagement that stood out for their repetitive use in multiple news sites. Though there were others features for engagement, such as quizzes and polls, they were far rarer within our sample. There are also numerous studies and reports that demonstrate the benefits of comment sections, newsletters, and share buttons for social media in engaging with readers and promoting content (American Press Institute, n.d.; Bélair-Gagnon and Agur, 2016; Marshall, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2021; ShareThis, 2015; University of Pennsylvania, 2016). While these features may not be present on every news website, they are certainly widely used and are considered important tools for engaging with readers and promoting content.

Our results can provide preliminary insights into the ways in which news organizations in each country are using these interactive tools. We have situated our research within the broader context of media systems and the political, cultural, and economic factors that may influence the

³² The process of media company and news site selection for the *corpus* of this research is described in detail in Chapter 5, section 3.

use of interactive tools in different countries. We believe this can provide a theoretical framework for the understanding of our findings and their potential implications for journalism practice and public engagement beyond our *corpus*.

However, it is important to note that these findings should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size and potential limitations in the representativeness of the selected news sites. We did not have the time or resources to use larger and more representative sample, which might have broadened the validity of our results, but we believe we can still contribute to academia and empirical research in the field of communication by providing valuable insights into the use of interactive tools on news sites in different media systems. We acknowledge the limitations of our sample size and the potential biases that may exist and recognize that our findings may only be applicable to the specific sample of news sites in our *corpus*.

1. Navigating the Landscape of User Interaction in Online News: Access, Interactivity, Engagement, and Participation

The changes in the relationship with the public are altering the production and circulation of journalistic information. The internet allows, in addition to greater freedom of production and massive circulation of content, an unprecedented level of interactivity and access to the most diverse discourses, increasing the possibility of critical exercise between producers and their audiences. As we conducted an exhaustive analysis of our *corpus* and mapped the tools they were continuously using to interact with the public. *Comment sections*, *newsletters*, and *share buttons* for social media were by far popular tools for engagement in the 80 news sites we studied, as they allow for tangible forms of interaction between the news site and its audience, providing valuable feedback, building brand loyalty, and increasing reach and influence. To understand and discuss the uses of these tools and how they allow news sites to build relationships with their users, it is important to understand the concepts of *access*, *interactivity*, *engagement*, and *participation*. These four concepts are intrinsically connected and often become interchangeable and synonymous in the panorama of digital and online journalism.

In simple terms, and in the context of this research, *access* refers to the ability of the audience to access and consume news content, in this particular case through websites or mobile applications; *interactivity* refers to the ability of the user to interact with the news content and the media organization, such as by leaving comments or participating in polls; *engagement* refers to the level of interest the audience has in the news content, such as how long they spend reading an article, and the level of involvement with the media organization; and *participation* refers to the

ability for the audience to actively contribute to the news process, such as through User-Generated Content or citizen journalism.

These concepts are inherently interconnected with User-Generated Content., which, for the purpose of this work, is considered as how and when ordinary individuals voluntarily contribute to the creation of data, information, and media content on the web (Krumm, Davies, and Narayanaswam, 2008). Users are commonly regarded as active contributors to the internet who employ their creative efforts to produce content outside the professional realm (van Dijck, 2009). In this section, these concepts will be explored from a practical user perspective, considering the analysis conducted on the 80 news sites from our *corpus*.

1.1 Access

If we consider that the main purpose of journalism remains provide citizens with the information, they need to be free and to govern themselves (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014), we must consider how the internet and digital technologies have affected the access to that information. Of the 80 news sites we analyzed, 8 had a hard paywall, 10 had a porous paywall (limited number of stories you can access), 23 had opens access to some stories while others were exclusive to subscribe or members and had 39 had fully open access. Though the access to devices with the ability to connect with the internet are ever more widespread, giving the technological and system conditions to look at news sites, can users everywhere actually have the opportunity to read (view, listen, etc.) credible information?

The matter of access, which becomes an essential part for there to be relationship between public and online journalism in the first place, touches several problematic questions that arose with the web, such as digital divide³³ and media literacy³⁴, and it brings a question: shouldn't access to information always be free? Paywalls have become limiting for the access of news and limit the options the public must read qualified and accurate information that is essential for existing in a

³³ The digital divide has been extensively studied and discussed (van Dijk, 2012; Warsawer, 2003; Norris, 2001; DiMaggio et al., 2004; Compaine, 2001; Livingstone and Helsper, 2008; van Deursen and van Dijk, 2014; Warsawer and Matuchniak, 2010; Bimber, 2000; Howard, Busch and Sheets, 2010). It is defined as the gap that exists between those who have reliable internet access and devices and those with very limited access or none at all. The digital divide is a problem that affects people from all walks of life. It is a multifaceted issue, but two main characteristics define this gap: access to high-speed internet and access to reliable devices. Many of the individuals who struggle from the digital divide face both. In some areas, internet access is either limited, unavailable, or unaffordable for those who could be equipped. Even with a reliable internet connection, access to certain digital spaces can remain a challenge, always just out of reach for those who can't afford costly tools like laptops and software. This leaves countless students and professionals to rely on public computers or their mobile devices as their only tools to exist in an increasingly digital world. It leaves many more, like those in rural areas or living under the poverty line, without even that.

³⁴ Media literacy provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and participate with messages in a variety of forms—from print to video to the internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy.

democratic society. If you can't afford to pay for news, does it not become easy to rely, for example, only on what you hear from others, or what you see on social media and messaging apps?

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, several news sites lowered their paywalls in stories regarding the crisis, because they considered this global emergency demanded people to be continuously informed, from reliable sources, about what was happening. And yet, the neologism “infodemic” was put forward on February 2, 2020, by the World Health Organization (WHO) to define the spread of disinformation regarding the pandemic and its dangers (WHO, 2020), as it come even from official sources, such as the Brazilian and American government, where populist presidents where in power, Jair Bolsonaro, and Donald Trump. This mix of facts, fears, rumors, and speculations provided fertile ground for the dissemination of misleading information and cybercrime on the internet and became an issue to deal with along with the pandemic itself (Pariser, 2012; Li and Wagner, 2020); and though fact-checking initiatives saw their jobs become more necessary than ever, they did not prove to be enough to fight disinformation.

We already have an established culture in which many people rely on messaging apps, such as WhatsApp and Telegram, and social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. Journalism is late to this party, and when access to news online, done by credible organizations, becomes prohibitive to many due to the price imposed for access, we see that participation in journalism has barriers far more difficult to overcome than companies' resistance to true interaction with users beyond marketing opportunities and economic value interactivity seems to provide.

Though this goes beyond the scope of our proposed work in this thesis, which proposed to look at the spaces hosted by news organizations for participation from the media companies' perspective, it seemed irresponsible to let this matter go unmentioned. Specially if we consider that the ideal of public participation and its democratization that arose with the internet found its failings not only because of the choices media companies make to remain financially viable; but in the pervasive capitalist system we exist, where social inequality, matters of race and gender, affect deeply the spaces for the public to enter and actively participate in the public sphere.

If we look at The Washington Post, which uses the slogan “democracy dies in the darkness” as a way to sell subscriptions to their news site – we have to wonder who is this democracy for if you have to choose a monthly or yearly plan to access the news? The New York Times says, “We believe that great journalism has the power to make each reader's life richer and more fulfilling, and all of society stronger and more just”, but you can only access it for a price. The Intercept Brasil stands on principle to provide free access to information, because of these same democratic ideals, but it struggles economically to continue producing journalism. So, what is the solution?

Media organizations have to financially survive to continue producing journalism, and paywalls, in their many forms, are a way that are being tried and, by many outlets, being proved true to stay economically viable. But it is undeniable that this creates yet another barrier for the access to information, and another push disinformation hardly needs to continue to grow on digital platforms. We consider that this is a fruitful and extremely complicated debate as we look at journalism, its purpose in society and the relationship with the public, especially in the current political context, and it is interesting and important line of research for future works.

1.2 Interactivity

Interactivity, in the traditional media, already involved a great deal of possibilities for the public to connect with media outlets, from contact with the newsroom to send suggestions to telephone participation in radio programs or the publication of letters in specific sections of the newspaper. These practices, exercised and transformed in digital networks, can be considered as continuation of the previous ones, which are boosted and expanded with the internet, when new the possibilities for public participation arise. Now, interactivity is a complex process, that involves relationships between people and the machine, people with other people (journalists or other members of the audience), through the graphic interface of the publication (news site), and the nuance of all relationships when participating in the creation of content.

In traditional media, before digital technologies took over, the main focus of the interaction was the audience with the journalist, as was the case with contacts for suggestions and participation in programs. Even when the proposal was to promote interaction between the public, the journalist or the outlet acted as an intermediary, as was the case of the sections of letters from readers in printed newspapers. Before online journalism and news sites, for the interaction relation to be established it was necessary to use another support: telephone, letter or, even later, the email. The adoption of interactive resources such as emails, chats and forums allowed the use of interactivity to be increased in journalistic publications in digital networks. Now, in addition to being able to interact through the same medium, the exchange with the public can exist without the action of the media outlet, of the journalist.

These new modalities of interaction between users that emerge on the internet increased the expression of personal opinions and the search for information; the user is potentially participative, being able to switch between consumer or producer of information. The interactive components of news website designs are prominently featured and allow an enhanced experience for the user. Therefore, interactivity starts to refer to the way in which new technologies were designed to respond to feedback from the audience and it became one of the keywords of journalism on the internet.

As shown in Table 40, the ideas of *continuity*, *pontecialization* and *rupture* (Palacios, 2002) can be used to think of the interactions between journalism and the public in different stages. Not all the characteristics of web journalism (hypertextuality, multimedia, interactivity, memory, personalization, and continuous updating) represent truly new aspects, as many had already existed in other media and its use is nothing more than a continuity in the new support (Palacios, 2002). In traditional media, there were already many possibilities for public participation to interact, from contact with the newsroom to send agenda suggestions to participation by telephone in radio programs or the publication of letters in specific sections of the newspaper. These practices, exercised in digital networks, would be considered only as *continuations*. The *pontencialization*, on the other hand, concerns the expansion of the possibilities for public participation. Participation has been extended to other resources. A situation of *rupture* would be in the breaking of a certain pattern, which is provided by a high degree of enhancement in the use of a certain characteristic that ends up resulting in a change of functions or creation of new possibilities.

Table 40 – Practices that express continuity, enhancement, and rupture of interactivity in online journalism.

ANALOG SUPPORT	DIGITAL NETWORKS (<i>BEGINNING</i>)	DIGITAL NETWORKS (<i>CURRENTLY</i>)
Interaction with the journalist.	Interact with journalists and with other actors.	Interact producing news.
Use another support	Interact on the same support	Possibility to create your own interaction channel
Simple resources (phone-ins, letters)	Simple resources from a new environment (email, chat, forums)	complex models: publication of own content and collaborative productions
Continuity	Pontecialization	Rupture (?)

The first column, analog support, refers to the previous supports when the focus of the interaction was on the public with the journalist, as was the case of contacts for suggestion of agendas, participation in programs. Even when the proposal was to promote interaction between the public, the journalist or the outlet worked as an intermediary, like the case with card sections of the reader in the printed newspapers. Another important aspect regarding analog support is that for the interaction to be established, it was necessary to use another medium: telephone, letter or email.

The adoption of interactive resources such as emails, chats and forums allowed the use of interactivity to be expanded in journalistic publications on digital networks. In addition to starting to interact through the same support, now the exchange between the public could happen without the necessary action of the journalist, owing to the rise of synchronous collective communication tools. This creates the perfect scenario for interactivity to be enhanced. In the current moment of digital networks, the Web 2.0 as a platform started to offer publishing tools and collective construction of texts, allowed the creation of proprietary channels in a very simplified way (in the case of blogs), a new dynamic for the publication of texts by the public on sites and the use of specific tools for the collaborative construction of texts.

Yet, it is worth questioning whether the transformations brought about by computer-mediated interactivity applied to journalism provoked such profound changes as to provoke ruptures in the field of journalism. We believe that it is still too early to tell. There has been a diversification of new solutions developed that build on what came before, but true innovation in manners for interaction still seem ways a way, as we cannot perceive an actual trend that can serve as a new model.

The problem of interactivity is that it has become a useful wildcard to define various models of connection between public and media organization (Rost, 2006). Therefore, Rost (2006) identified three models to facilitate the understating of these interactions: **selective**, which allows the user to interact with the content (Kenney, Gorelik and Mwangi, 2000; Pavlik, 2001) and that is directly interwoven with hypertext; the **communicative or participatory**, which enables interaction between individuals (Dahlgren, 1996; Deuze, 1999; Hall, 2001; Kawamoto, 2003); and the **productive** one, in which the reader can contribute their own content (Deuze, 1999; Bardoel, 1996).

These represent different degrees of interactivity made possible by communication technologies, and the resources enabled by news sites to create a relationship with users have blurred the distinctions between the concepts of interactivity, engagement, and participation. Engagement and participation do fall under the umbrella of interaction, especially in an online environment, but they are not synonymous, even if they are so often used as such. In an online environment, interaction between journalists and users can often be a form of engagement, particularly in the context of journalism-user relationships. This is because online interactions can be more dynamic and interactive than traditional forms of journalism, allowing users to actively participate in the news and engage with journalists and other users in a more direct and immediate way.

However, it is important to note that not all interactions in an online environment can be considered engagement. For example, a user simply clicking on an article or browsing a news website may be considered an interaction, but it does not necessarily indicate a higher level of engagement or investment in the content. True engagement in an online journalism context often involves users actively connecting to the news, such as commenting on articles or sharing content on social media. These types of interactions demonstrate a greater level of investment and interest in the content and can help to build stronger relationships between journalists and their audience. As for participation, it is shaped by cultural and social protocols; more unlimited and less controlled by the organization and the resources it offers (Jenkins, 2006). As such, tools can be interactive, but not provide an extensive participation, such as the case of share buttons; while others as comment sections, or a user joining in discussions with journalists and other members of the public can become a feature where true participation is had, depending on how the organization manages it.

Most studies of the media's adoption of participatory tools establish some form of typology of tools. Jönsson and Örnebring (2011) classified the tools according to users' levels of involvement, distinguishing between forms with a low of involvement (for instance, RSS or customization tools), and forms with high involvement, such as those that allow users to produce original content. Other authors, like Chung and Nah (2009) or Larsson (2012a; 2012b), created typologies based on the type of interaction between the individual and the medium developed by each tool. These typologies are designed to adapt to the extremely dynamic nature of the internet and attempt to create and understand what these tools may mean for the relationship being built between the user and the media organization. The different types of interactions can be used to group different features (Table 41).

Table 41 – Types of interactions per group of features.

TYPE	FEATURES	EXAMPLES
SELECTIVE INTERACTIVITY	Mechanisms for personalization	RSS feeds, email alerts or registration
PARTICIPATIVE INTERACTIVITY	Enables users to interact with journalists and other users	Evaluation, sharing tools, or comments on news items
PRODUCTIVE INTERACTION	Enables the user to contribute with original content	Sending stories, still images, footage, audio, questions for interviews and blogs

There are tools and services that allow users to interact with the system to adapt the content according to their preferences. This group refers to **selective interactivity** (Rost, 2006) and includes mechanisms for personalization. This type of interactivity enables the adaptation of the web content of the medium in line with the user's preferences, either explicitly or implicitly (Thurman, 2008). Examples of selective interactivity are RSS feeds, email alerts or registration.

A second group of tools is included under the term **participative interactivity** (Rost, 2006), which takes place in the context of a user–user or user–professional relationship, which enables users to interact with journalists and other users. This relationship is developed within the parameters previously established by the media organization's website and results in user contributions in the form of a comment, grade or any other input that does not involve genuine creative activity by the user. Within this type of interactivity, we can highlight mechanisms such as evaluation and sharing tools, or comments on news items.

Lastly, a third group of interactive features, is labelled **productive interaction** (Rost, 2006), and it also takes place in the context of a user–user or user–professional relationship, but with the purpose of the user contributing with original content. Wunsh-Vincent and Vickery (2007) propose three essential characteristics that content must possess to be classified in this group: publication, creative effort and creation outside of professional routines and practices. Six options are included in this group: sending stories, still images, footage, audio, questions for interviews and blogs. Here is where User-Generated content fits in, as part of digital journalism.

It is important that we emphasize the difference between *interaction on news sites* and the sense of *participatory engagement with the media organization and the content it produces*. Interaction on news sites can refer to the many ways in which users can engage with the presentation of news content on a website or platform. This includes interactive tools such as:

- **Infographics:** Infographics are visual representations of data and information. News sites use interactive infographics to present complex information in a user-friendly way. Users can interact with the infographic by clicking on different elements, changing the view, or zooming in and out.
- **Interactive maps:** News sites use interactive maps to show the locations of events or stories, display statistics or demographic data, or track the progress of a news story. Users can interact with the map by zooming in and out, clicking on different areas to view data, or using filters to refine the data.

- **Data visualizations:** News sites use data visualizations to help readers understand complex information or trends. Users can interact with the data by changing filters, viewing different charts, and drilling down into the data.
- **Virtual reality and 360-degree video:** Some news sites use virtual reality and 360-degree video to provide immersive experiences for their audience. Users can interact with the video by changing the viewpoint or exploring different areas of the virtual environment.

The goal of these interactive elements is to engage readers and provide a more immersive and informative experience. Participatory engagement, on the other hand, refers to the ways in which users can actively participate in the news process in the creation of content, and dissemination of news content, and engage with the media organization. This includes commenting on articles, sharing news stories on social media, submitting user-generated content, and participating in citizen journalism initiatives. The goal of participatory engagement is to involve readers in the news-making process and promote a relationship between user and media organization.

While both types of interaction can be seen as forms of engagement, they differ in their focus and level of participation. Interaction in news sites primarily focuses on the presentation of news content, whereas participatory engagement involves users with the news process and with the media organization. Ultimately, both forms of engagement are important for fostering a more informed and engaged public. In this research, we look at interaction from the perspective of participatory engagement, and that is from this perspective that the term should be interpreted throughout this work.

1.3 Engagement and Participation

Journalism varies constantly and continuously, taking many forms even simultaneously, depending on geographic and contextual factors, and is always subject to a set of social relationships and a dispute of forces from different fields (Carson, 2016). In that sense, even imbued with a commercial logic, media companies can continue to fulfill their duty to the public with reliable information and, why not, be perceived as service providers to a consumer audience. As such, Skaggs and Youndt (2004) state that service companies keep basically three types of relationships with their customers: 1) ‘Contact,’ related to the amount of interaction a business keeps with the consumer; 2) ‘co-production,’ which refers to the smaller or bigger amount of effort—even creative—a customer should make in the production of the service; and 3) ‘customization,’ explained by the extent a company is able to personalize the offer for individual

customers—by collecting, processing and analyzing data about their habits. Journalism Studies usually gathers contact and coproduction in a single set of practices labeled as ‘participatory journalism.’ Participation in the process of news making is not new, but it became a widespread practice with the emergence of the internet and social media (Singer, 2011).

While scholars agree that public participation has increased with the internet and User-Generated Content is at an all-time high with digital media and social networks (Shirky, 2008; Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013; Benkler, 2006; Castells, 2007; Rheingold, 2002; Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Singer et. al, 2011); it is still singularly difficult to define what that participation has come to mean *for* and *in* digital journalism. Depending on how you define and perceive interactions, engagement, and participation, these concepts can become interchangeable when talking about the user in online journalism. While we believe forms of participation can be a way to engage and interact with your public, for example, we also understand that participation implies taking it one step further. Participation implies the public being allowed to be truly active in the journalistic process, beyond likes, shares and feedback, such as contributing to the storytelling process (Hermida, 2010; Domingo, 2008; Singer, 2013; Thurman, 2008; Deuze, 2006).

Participation refers to the active involvement of citizens in the news-making process. It is a way for citizens to contribute their own perspectives and information, and to shape the news agenda. It allows citizens to actively participate in the democratic process by giving them a voice in the news. It is a way for the audience to be part of the news-making process, rather than just consuming it (Robinson and DeShano, 2014; Bruns, 2008; Dahlgren, 2005; Franklin and Carlson, 2011; Couldry and Curran, 2003). Engagement is how media companies encourage interactivity and participation; but it can also be publishing news and information that have a significant influence on people’s lives, that really impact them, that mobilize them, that involve them. Engaging the audience is part of media companies’ strategies that try to restructure business models, to keep it economically viable. It can be measured by things like the time spent on a site, the number of comments on an article, or the number of shares on social media. It is a way to measure the level of interest and connection readers have with the content. It is a way for the audience to consume and interact with the content provided by journalists.

While engagement is a measure of how the audience interacts with the content, participation is a measure of how the audience is involved in creating the content – both, refereeing in the end, to the level of involvement and interest that the public/audience will have with the journalism of a given media organization. Engagement and participation are undeniably important for media companies, as they can help to increase the reach and impact of their journalism, foster a more connected and active readership, and provide valuable feedback and insights for journalists.

The relative importance of each may depend on the specific goals and circumstances of the organization. Audience engagement refers to the level of interaction and involvement that a news organization has with its readers or viewers. This can include things like comments, social media interactions, and surveys. High audience engagement can indicate that a news organization is effectively reaching and resonating with its target audience, which can be important for building trust and loyalty among readers.

Public participation, on the other hand, refers to the level of involvement and input that members of the public have in the newsgathering and reporting process. This can include things like citizen journalism, crowdsourcing, and reader-generated content. Public participation can be important for ensuring that a diverse range of perspectives and voices are represented in the news and for promoting democratic engagement and accountability.

Audience engagement can be an important factor in the financial sustainability of news organizations. High levels of engagement can lead to increased readership, which can in turn lead to increased advertising revenue and subscriptions. Additionally, engaged audiences are more likely to share and recommend content to others, which can help to expand the reach of a news organization and bring in new readers. On the other hand, it is important to note that audience engagement alone may not be sufficient for the financial sustainability of news organizations. News organizations also need to have a diversified revenue stream, such as subscriptions, sponsorships, philanthropic support, and other forms of revenue generation. Additionally, they also need to have a good content strategy and a strong brand, as well as to adapt to the digital age by having an effective digital presence and a good understanding of the audience's consumption patterns.

That said, news organizations may prioritize audience engagement if their primary goal is to build a large and loyal readership, or they may prioritize public participation if their goal is to promote democratic engagement and represent a diverse range of voices in the news. Though the ideal would be for news organizations to strive to achieve both, and as such, they need to find a balance between both engagement and participation.


1.3.1 The nuance in the Online News Ecosystem

The concepts of engagement and participation become more nuanced and complex in the online context. Engagement may involve not only direct interaction with users but also indirect engagement through analytics and other data that can help media organizations understand user behavior and preferences (Bradshaw and Rohuma, 2011). Participation, on the other hand, may involve not only co-creation of content but also user-generated content that is shared and distributed through social media platforms (Hermida, 2010). Nevertheless, evaluating the level of

engagement and participation among media users can help to differentiate between the two concepts (Peters and Witschge, 2015; Masip and Suau, 2014; Domingo et al., 2008).

One way to evaluate these levels is to consider the degree of interaction between media users and media producers. For example, when media users are actively involved in creating or contributing to media content, they may be considered part of a public. Conversely, when media users are simply consuming media content without actively contributing to it, they may be considered part of an audience. Peters and Witschge (2015) understand that news organizations, in general look at participatory journalism only as an opportunity to derive economic benefits while journalists still maintain a far higher hierarchical level on the relationship, keeping most of the control over the editorial processes (Couldry, 2018). Therefore, participation generally tends to be minimal despite discourses of democratization and inclusivity (Table 42).

Table 42 – Scope and degree of participation according to Peters and Witschge (2015).

Scope of participation	Minimal		Maximal
Visibility and presence of audience	As respondents to certain items only	As authors of texts in designated areas	As structural contributors throughout the platform
Hierarchical level of interaction	Reply-based audience response (i.e., polls), detached from journalistic interaction	Interactions-based with other audience members and/or journalists, limited impact on production (i.e., audience photos, tweets for breaking news)	Dialogue and consultation-based input in news production at an editorial level
Stage of production	Post-hoc, after news is presented as finished product	Real-time, during the (on-going) creation of a story	During the planning stages to co-design the news agenda, news angles and stories

Peters and Witschge (2015) discerned five scopes of participation, which they based on the concept of “legitimate peripheral participation” (LPP) developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) in their seminal work on “communities of practice”. LPP describes how newcomers enter and participate in a community of practice, moving from the periphery to the center of the community over time. Peters and Witschge (2015) expand on this concept by defining five levels of participation that range from minimal to maximal engagement. They argued that this framework could be applied to a range of online communities and digital media practices, where individuals engage with others and contribute to shared goals in various ways.

Peters and Witschge (2015) framework emphasized the importance of recognizing and valuing different forms of participation within communities, including those that may not involve

active contribution or decision-making. It also highlights the potential for individuals to develop their skills and knowledge over time as they move from the periphery to the center of the community. Their five scopes of participation that range from minimum to maxima are:

- **Peripheral participation:** This is the lowest level of participation, where individuals observe and absorb information without actively engaging in the activity or community. It involves being a passive audience member and having limited opportunities to contribute.
- **Assisted performance:** At this level, individuals receive some form of guidance or support to actively participate in the activity or community. They may work alongside more experienced members or receive coaching and feedback to improve their skills.
- **Apprenticeship:** This level involves actively engaging in the activity or community as a novice or apprentice. Individuals learn from experienced members, and over time, gain more independence and responsibility.
- **Co-creation:** This level involves actively participating in the creation of content or products within the community. Individuals collaborate with others to develop new ideas and contribute to the community's overall goals.
- **Full participation:** This is the highest level of participation, where individuals have equal status and agency within the community. They can make decisions, influence the direction of the community, and fully contribute their skills and knowledge.

As Peters and Witschge (2015), who determined the scopes of participation from minimal to maximal to contend with participation in online communities, Masip and Suau (2014) defined three different participation models: catch-all model, user community and collaboration networks. The authors noted that each of these models reflects a different approach to user participation and has different implications for the role of journalists, the relationship between journalists and users, and the quality and diversity of news content. They also argued that news media organizations should carefully consider the goals and values that underpin their approach to user participation and should adopt tools and practices that align with these goals and values.

Their models are drawn not only by the type of tools adopted, but also by the type of participation foreseen for the users and the forms of relationship that are promoted between the medium and the user. Thus, the so-called catch-all model is defined by the presence, in general, of a wide range of participation tools, but without a clear strategy on the role that participation plays in the productive, relational, and marketing dynamics of the medium. On the contrary, the other

two models – community and collaboration networks – do require conscious decision-making and a certain application of participation mechanisms. Both draw clear participation strategies, although based on different assumptions: the first advocates the creation of a community of users around debate and the exchange of ideas, while the second strengthens a relationship based on the productive possibilities of the audience.

The **catch-all model** is characterized by the presence of a wide range of participation tools. The media concentrate their efforts on having the maximum number of interaction mechanisms under the umbrella of the headline. They call the user to participate in many ways, but with special emphasis on those that do not imply a high degree of commitment or effort for the user, or for the medium itself. Participatory and selective interactivity tools predominate, providing traffic and visibility, and avoiding productive interactivity options.

Although the focus of participation is on the forms of participatory interactivity, some options typical of selective interactivity are always offered, such as RSS, alerts, or registration. The requirements for registration are scarce and most of the media have adopted the possibility of registering through profiles on social networks, such as Facebook. This option allows any interaction that takes place on the media's website to be published on the respective profiles of social networks. The main tool to encourage the participation of users that these media websites have are the comments on news, blogs, or opinion articles, as well as the activity in social networks developed by the medium. In addition, media organizations included in this model offer tools such as the ability to vote and recommend news or contribute to multiple-choice surveys. The mechanisms of productive interactivity are scarce, usually being reduced to the possibility of sending letters to the editor. Thus, the forms of participation require low intensities of interaction (Masip and Suau, 2014).

The **user-community model** (Masip and Suau, 2014) has, as the name indicates, as a main characteristic, the adoption of a series of tools aimed at creating a community. The nature of these tools can be very different, but they all have in common that they are designed to increase user-user interaction. These instruments are included within those of participatory or, to a lesser extent, selective interactivity, while productive interactivity options are not a priority for the media that adopt this model. The objective is to create a community of users within the medium, facilitating the establishment of links between them and making the medium the central element of this user-user interaction process. In this model, the media attempts to replicate a horizontal relationship structure, similar to that of social networks, to facilitate the exchange of ideas and opinions (Masip and Suau, 2014).

User participation in this model is limited to comments on news and opinion pieces. Forums or other discussion spaces are not usually common, as well as productive interactivity tools. The comments in the news gather most of the available options: reply to previous comments, vote, or rate comments and report abusive comments. Some of the media even provide the option to follow other users, with a specific option for this purpose included in the comment bar, to facilitate the process of following users whose comments attract us. Direct user-user interaction beyond comments is usually not allowed. The influence of social media is evident in this model. The media have a high interest in creating a model of participation that attracts and connects audiences, in the same way that they connect on social networks.

The **collaborative network model** (Masip and Suau, 2014) pursues the creation of a community bond through production. Unlike the previous model, it seeks to build a feeling of affinity between users and the medium, involving the former in the information production process. The existence of this community often materialized in the presence of its own meeting space. Naturally, the forms of productive interactivity predominate, although different degrees of intensity are distinguished depending on the environment.

It should be noted that the presence of certain forms of interactivity and the development of one model or another does not imply a greater perfection or quality of one over the rest. Nor should the various models be understood as an evolutionary process, the last being the goal to be achieved. The *goodness* of each model is due exclusively to the strategies defined by each medium and their contribution to the achievement of the planned objectives.

Domingo et al. (2008) also provides a useful framework for evaluating the level of engagement and participation among media users. They suggest that there are three levels of user engagement: cognitive, behavioral, and affective. Cognitive engagement refers to the mental effort required to process and understand media content. This includes things like paying attention to the content, analyzing it, and interpreting its meaning. Cognitive engagement can be assessed through measures such as time spent consuming media, level of attention to media content, and recall of media messages.

Behavioral engagement refers to the active involvement in media production or consumption. This includes things like commenting, sharing, or creating media content. Behavioral engagement can be assessed through measures such as frequency of comments or shares, level of activity in online communities or forums, and level of contribution to media content. Affective engagement refers to the emotional connection that media users have with media content. This includes things like enjoyment, empathy, and identification with media messages. Affective engagement can be assessed through measures such as self-reported emotions while consuming

media, level of identification with media characters, and ratings of media content based on emotional response.

Domingo et al. (2008) suggest that these three levels of engagement are interdependent and can affect each other. For example, high levels of cognitive engagement can lead to higher levels of affective engagement, which can in turn lead to increased behavioral engagement. Though the framework does not provide a clear-cut answer as to when a user becomes audience *versus* public, we can infer that users who exhibit higher levels of cognitive, behavioral, and affective engagement are more likely to be considered part of the public, as they are actively engaging with media content and potentially contributing to public discourse. On the other hand, users who exhibit lower levels of engagement may be considered part of the audience, as they are passively consuming media content without actively contributing to public discourse.

Whichever method can serve to evaluate the level of engagement and participation among media users (Peters and Witschge, 2015; Masip and Suau, 2014; Domingo et al., 2008) and help in identifying when the user shifts from public to audience and vice versa. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the distinction between audience and public is context dependent. For example, a group of people who are highly engaged with a particular media outlet or social media platform may function as an audience in some contexts but could also come together as a public in other contexts, such as in response to a shared event or issue. Similarly, a group of people who are initially viewed as a public may shift to become an audience if they become less engaged or active over time. This might happen if a particular issue or event loses salience, or if there are changes in the media landscape that reduce opportunities for participation and engagement. Therefore, a nuanced approach will always be necessary to understand the complexities of these of audience and public in journalism, their intrinsically connected relationship with engagement and participation, and the ever-changing roles they take in the evolving online environment of news media.

1.3.2 Ethical Implications of Engagement

There is often a divergence between the theoretical ideals of journalism and the realities of its practice in contemporary society. The ideal of journalism is grounded in principles such as objectivity, accuracy, and fairness, which are meant to ensure that the news is presented in a way that is informative and trustworthy for audiences. However, in practice, journalism is often subject to a range of pressures and constraints that can make it difficult to live up to these ideals. For example, economic pressures and the need to attract audiences can lead to sensationalism, bias, and a focus on clickbait-style headlines. Journalists may also face pressure from political or corporate interests, which can influence the way that stories are covered and reported. Moreover,

the rise of digital media has made it easier than ever for misinformation and propaganda to be disseminated, creating challenges for journalists who are trying to present accurate and reliable information to their audiences. All these factors can lead to a divergence between the ideal of what journalism could and should be, and the reality of what it is in practice.

Balancing the various functions of journalism in a complex capitalist society is an ongoing challenge. On the one hand, journalism must fulfill its primary function of informing the public about important events and issues. This requires journalists to be independent, objective, and dedicated to seeking out the truth, regardless of external pressures.

At the same time, journalism is also a financially dependent organization that must generate revenue to sustain itself. This often requires news organizations to adopt a business model that relies on advertising or other forms of revenue generation. This can sometimes create a conflict of interest, as news organizations may be hesitant to report on issues that could potentially harm their relationships with advertisers or other sources of revenue.

To balance these competing priorities, many news organizations strive to maintain a clear separation between their news reporting and their business operations. They establish codes of ethics and other guidelines that help to ensure that their reporting is fair, accurate, and objective. They also seek out diverse sources of revenue, such as reader donations or foundation grants, to help reduce their dependence on advertising or other potentially compromising revenue streams.

In addition, some news organizations have experimented with new business models, such as subscription-based or membership-based models, that prioritize serving the needs of their audience over the demands of advertisers or other external interests. By building a direct relationship with their readers or viewers, these organizations can better align their financial interests with their journalistic mission.

Ultimately, balancing the various functions of journalism requires a constant commitment to transparency, ethical reporting practices, and a willingness to adapt to changing circumstances. By staying true to its core mission of informing the public and holding those in power accountable, journalism can continue to serve as a critical component of democratic societies, even in the face of complex and evolving economic and social pressures.

The concept of the public interest in journalism has been a subject of debate since its early days (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014). However, the challenges facing journalism in today's media landscape have added to this complexity. With audiences fragmented across platforms and sources, it can be challenging for journalists to know what information their audiences are consuming (Hermida, 2010). The rise of clickbait-style headlines and sensationalism can also conflate the public interest with what generates the most clicks or views (Singer, 2013).

Despite these challenges, many journalists and media organizations continue to strive for a conception of the public interest grounded in traditional journalism values (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014). This may involve rethinking news production and consumption and developing new strategies for audience engagement and trust-building. Overall, the public interest remains a critical component of journalism, even as its definition and application may evolve (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014). By continuing to work towards an effective and trustworthy form of journalism, practitioners can ensure that the public interest remains at the forefront of their work (Hermida, 2010).

In this context, Couldry (2011) argues that media organizations have a responsibility to ensure that their practices are transparent and accountable, and that they serve the public interest rather than narrow commercial or political agendas. He suggests that media organizations should be more inclusive and diverse in their staffing and decision-making processes, and that they should seek to build more collaborative and reciprocal relationships with users and other stakeholders. Overall, Couldry's (2001) work offers a critical perspective on the relationship between media organizations and users in the online context, highlighting the ongoing power imbalances and the need for greater transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in media practices.

Strategies and the trade-offs between editorial and audience engagement goals mark (online) journalism. As researchers found in the past decades of study, citizen participation in and through the media (Carpentier, 2011) remains conceived as a strategy to generate traffic, attract visitors and, as far as possible, retain them. Now, it is essential to view the phenomenon of participation as extending beyond the media's democratic role, looking pragmatically at what spaces are open for participation and why. There may be a lack of enthusiasm of the majority of media and journalists in applying formats that facilitate participation more direct of the citizens in the news process (Borger et al., 2013; Masip et al., 2015), but if we look at the current context of the profession, with shrinking news rooms, over worked professionals, firings and closures with stiff competition and lack of funding, what would be the motivation to add the public into the news process beyond the possibility of financial return?

In the end, after over 20 years of being online, changes in journalism continue to be focused on a technological level (i.e. as new forms of content distribution) rather than in cultural or relational levels (Bruns, 2012; Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton, 2012; Hermida, 2013; Ekdale et al., 2015; Boczek and Koppers, 2020), as the profession continues to hold on to its role of gatekeeper, preaching the ideal of public interest, while being limited by economic constraints and having to more often than not prioritize financial sustainability over everything else. We are sceptic that in a time of cuts and innovation being made to the point of profit, that we will see the scenario change

for traditional journalism in the short term. We have a profession that is still trying to keep up with fast-paced transformations brought on by new technologies, which lead to a demand for new business models, causes new user behaviors, makes it necessary to understand new platforms and reach younger audiences; all while newsrooms continue to see staff and budget cuts, and media companies have to understand how to position themselves in competitive markets in Western-countries facing political and financial crisis.

Through this period of crisis, journalism focuses on surviving, however that may be, so it can eventually thrive, holding on to the basis that granted it the title of an institution: what is always necessary and has proven to continue so, is a basic commitment to the values of professional journalism, broadly understood as the independent provision of accurate, timely, and fact-based interesting and relevant news that help people navigate the world and be part of the public life. And though we do note there is not one way or a right way to reach your public; creating a lasting relationship – if not a meaningful one – may be essential for the ultimate survival of news organizations, and beyond earning their loyalty, that also means understanding their needs in ever changing world contexts, as the primary function of journalism remains, in the end, mediating our reality.

1.3.3 Participation: A Moral Imperative?

The idea of participation as a moral imperative of journalism has been a subject of debate among scholars and practitioners in the field. While some argue that participation has always been an implicit part of journalism's mission, others see it as a more recent development that has emerged in response to changes in technology and society. Historically, journalism was often seen as a one-way process, with journalists serving as the gatekeepers of information and the public consuming their reports. However, with the rise of digital media and social networking platforms, the relationship between journalists and their audiences has become more interactive and participatory. Today, many news organizations see participation as an important part of their mission, encouraging their readers, viewers, and listeners to share their perspectives, experiences, and insights.

One of the keyways in which the internet and digital media have changed the nature of participation in journalism is by making it possible for audiences to engage in a more horizontal manner. Specifically, social media platforms have created new spaces for conversation and collaboration, allowing people to share information and opinions in a way that was not possible with traditional media. Nevertheless, it is important to note that not all news organizations have embraced this new model of participation. Some still adhere to a more hierarchical model, where journalists are seen as the experts and the public is viewed as passive consumers of information.

This can be seen in the continued dominance of traditional media outlets and the challenges faced by new, community-based models of journalism. Overall, while the rise of digital media has certainly enabled new forms of participation in journalism, the degree to which this is seen as a moral imperative remains a subject of debate. Nonetheless, there is growing recognition that engagement and participation are critical to building trust and legitimacy in a rapidly changing media landscape.

The debate over the role of participation in journalism can be traced back to the early 20th century, when scholars like Walter Lippmann (1922) and John Dewey (1927) were grappling with questions about the relationship between the press and democracy (Chalaby, 1996; McChesney and Nichols, 2010). Lippmann argued that the press should act as a filter, selecting and interpreting information for the public, while Dewey believed that journalism should be more participatory, with the public actively engaged in the production and dissemination of news (Dewey, 1927; Lippmann, 1922).

In more recent years, the debate over participation in journalism has been fueled by the rise of digital media and social networking platforms. Some scholars and practitioners argue that these new technologies have made participation a moral imperative of journalism, allowing the public to have a greater voice in the production and dissemination of news (Gillmor, 2004; Rosen, 2006). For example, Jeff Jarvis (2009) has argued that the rise of participatory media has ushered in a new era of journalism that is more collaborative, more transparent, and more accountable to the public. Similarly, Jay Rosen (2008) has called for a “pro-am” approach to journalism, in which professional journalists work alongside citizen journalists to produce news that is more diverse, more accurate, and more responsive to the needs and interests of the public.

However, others have questioned whether participation is truly a moral imperative of journalism, or simply a reflection of changing technological and societal norms. As Mark Deuze (2007) has noted, the rise of participatory media has coincided with a broader shift toward a culture of participation and self-expression in many areas of society, not just in journalism. Moreover, some scholars have raised concerns about the potential risks of participatory media, such as the spread of misinformation, the erosion of journalistic standards, and the exploitation of citizen journalists by powerful interests (Bruns and Highfield, 2012; Singer and Ashman, 2009). The discussion over the role of participation in journalism will continue as the media landscape evolves. While there is broad agreement that engagement and participation are important for building trust and legitimacy in journalism, there are still many questions about how best to balance the benefits of participation with the risks and challenges that it presents.

If participation is a moral imperative of journalism or simply a reflection of changing technological and societal norms is an ongoing debate among scholars and practitioners in the field. Some argue that participation has always been a part of journalism's mission, and that digital media have simply expanded the range of opportunities for public engagement and collaboration (Deuze, 2007; Hermida, 2010; Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton, 2012). Others suggest that the rise of participatory media is part of a broader cultural and societal shift toward greater democratization and self-expression (Jenkins, 2006; Boyd, 2014).

There are also those who question whether participation is always desirable or beneficial for journalism, and who raise concerns about the potential risks and challenges associated with greater public involvement in news production and dissemination (Gillmor, 2004; Domingo, 2008). These concerns include issues of accuracy, credibility, and journalistic independence, as well as the potential for digital media to reinforce existing power structures and inequalities (Tufekci, 2017). Ultimately, the answer to this question is likely to depend on a range of factors, including the specific goals and values of different media organizations, the needs and preferences of different audiences, and the broader political, economic, and cultural contexts in which journalism is produced and consumed (Singer, 2013; Lewis and Usher, 2013; Lewis, Holton and Coddington, 2014).

If each media organization produces its own type of journalism, has its own practices (though based in the historical establishment of the professional), is it up to each one of them if participation is a moral imperative of the profession? If they want to be included, how, how much and why? Yes, media organizations have significant discretion in determining whether and how to incorporate participatory practices into their journalistic work, as well as the specific goals and values that guide these efforts. Some organizations may see participation as a core part of their mission and adopt more extensive and ambitious strategies for engaging with their audiences, while others may take a more cautious or limited approach or decide that participation is not a priority for their work.

Nonetheless, other media organizations may have different priorities or face constraints that limit their ability to engage in participatory practices. For example, some traditional news outlets may be more focused on maintaining their traditional role as gatekeepers and authoritative sources of information, while newer digital media startups may face pressures to prioritize audience engagement and User-Generated Content over traditional journalistic values (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, 2013). Ultimately, the decision of whether and how to incorporate participatory practices into journalism is likely to depend on a range of factors, including the specific goals and

values of individual media organizations, the needs and preferences of their audiences, and the broader cultural, social, and political contexts in which they operate.

2. Tools for Interaction, Engagement and Participation

The adoption of interactive tools by journalism has evolved since it went online two decades ago. While there have certainly been technological advancements that have led to the creation of new interactive tools, the use of such tools by journalists has also evolved over time as they have become more familiar with the medium and as audience expectations have shifted. For example, in the early days of online journalism, interactive tools were often used simply to enhance static articles with multimedia elements like photos, videos, and audio clips. However, as audiences have become more accustomed to interacting with online content, journalists have begun to incorporate more dynamic elements like interactive maps, data visualizations, and polls that allow readers to actively engage with and explore the news. Furthermore, the rise of social media has given journalists new opportunities to interact with their audience in real-time, such as through live-streaming events, conducting Q&As, and engaging in discussions through comments and social media platforms. So, while the adoption of interactive tools by journalism has certainly been driven in part by technological advancements, it has also been shaped by changes in audience expectations and evolving journalistic practices.

Our thorough analysis of the 80 news sites noted the presence of the three primary features that propose interactivity with the user, in terms of engaging him with the news site and its content, that appeared repeatedly and consistently throughout our *corpus*: *comment sections*, *newsletters* and *share buttons for social media*. The three tools represent different modes of engagement and, as such, allow for different types of relationships to be encouraged and formed with the user. In this section, we will investigate in detail these three tools for public engagement and their uses by the news sites of our *corpus*.

Comment sections in journalism are, in fact, participatory because they allow readers to actively engage with the content by sharing their thoughts and opinions, however, the level of participation can vary greatly, as some comment sections may be more active and engaged than others, depending on the topic and the readership. Newsletters and social media sharing buttons are tools used for engagement and not participatory *per se*, but they are a stepping stool to participation in the news site. Newsletters provide a way for news organizations to communicate directly with their audience and to build a relationship with them over time. By signing up for a newsletter, readers are indicating that they are interested in receiving regular updates from the news organization, which can lead to increased engagement and with the content. As for social media

sharing buttons, they allow readers to easily share content with their own networks. This encourages participation by giving readers the ability to share their own perspectives and opinions on the news, even if in platforms that go beyond the news site.

As shown in Table 43 and Figure 19, comment sections were only present on 49 out of 80 news sites, which is somewhat surprising, as they have traditionally played a crucial role in encouraging discussion and engagement among readers of news sites since interactive tools for the web first arose. The fact that only approximately 60% of the media organizations examined included comment sections could indicate a move towards more carefully managed and regulated forms of audience interaction. Alternatively, this could be due to apprehensions about moderating comments and the possibility of harmful conversations. Moreover, newsletters were present on 73 news sites which indicates that media organizations are trying to establish a more direct relationship with their readers by offering them the option to receive regular updates and curated content via email. This could be seen as a strategy to build a loyal readership base and increase engagement with their audience. Finally, share buttons to social media were present on 77 out of the 80 news sites, indicating that these organizations prioritize the ability of their readers to share their articles on social media platforms. This suggests that these media organizations recognize the importance of social media in driving traffic to their sites and increasing their reach.

Table 43 – Main Participation Features per Country and Media System.

MEDIA SYSTEM	COUNTRY	COMMENT SECTION		NEWSLETTER		SHARE BUTTONS	
Liberal	United States	5	13	10	17	10	20
	United Kingdom	8		7		10	
Polarized Pluralist	Spain	10	16	10	20	10	20
	France	6		10		10	
Democratic Corporatist	Netherlands	4	10	9	19	10	17
	Germany	6		10		7	
Peripheral	Brazil	7	10	10	17	10	20
	Argentina	3		7		10	
		49		73		77	

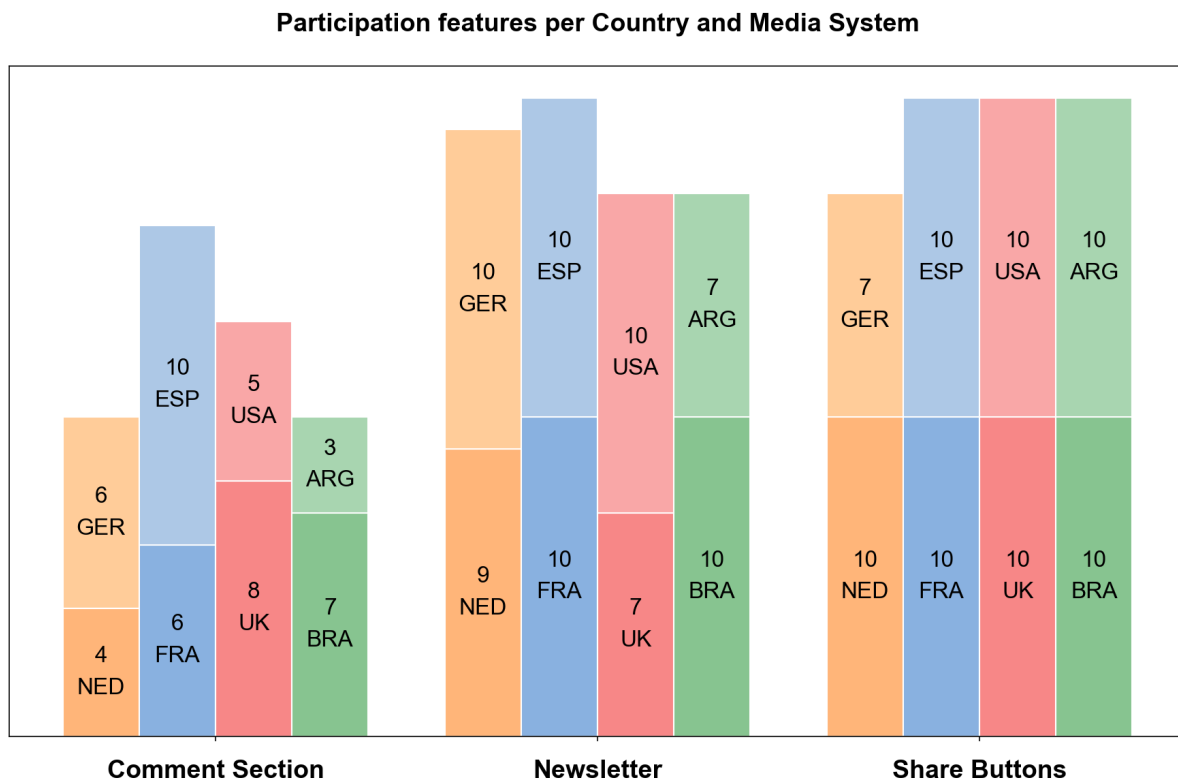


Figure 19 – Main Participation Features per Country and Media System.

We can see that the most popular tool is share buttons, being used by all news sites in every country but Germany, though newsletters are not far behind, not being fully adopted by news sites in Argentina, UK, and Netherlands.

Nonetheless, all the analyzed media organizations adopted at least one of these three tools, though they are generally used in combination. To visually compare the utilization of tools across different news websites, we employed Venn diagrams for each country, segmented by media system (Figure 20, Figure 21, Figure 22 and Figure 23). In these diagrams, the overlapping sets represent the three tools of our analysis: *comment sections*, *newsletters*, and *share buttons*. This method allows us to discern patterns of tool usage across the 10 news websites per country.

As can be seen in the diagrams, 48 news sites adopted all tools. It is interesting that in Spain, all the 10 news sites studied, being five digital natives and five legacy media, used all three tools to engage the user. Only one new site used a combination of comments and newsletters, the German Krautreporter, and one a combination of comments and share buttons, the Britannic Daily Mail. The second most popular combination, present in 22 (27.5%) news sites, are share buttons and newsletters. As per the use of a single tool, no sites chose to use only comments, but 6 (7.5%) adopted only share buttons and 2 (2.5%), both from Germany, Corretiv and Stern, only newsletters.

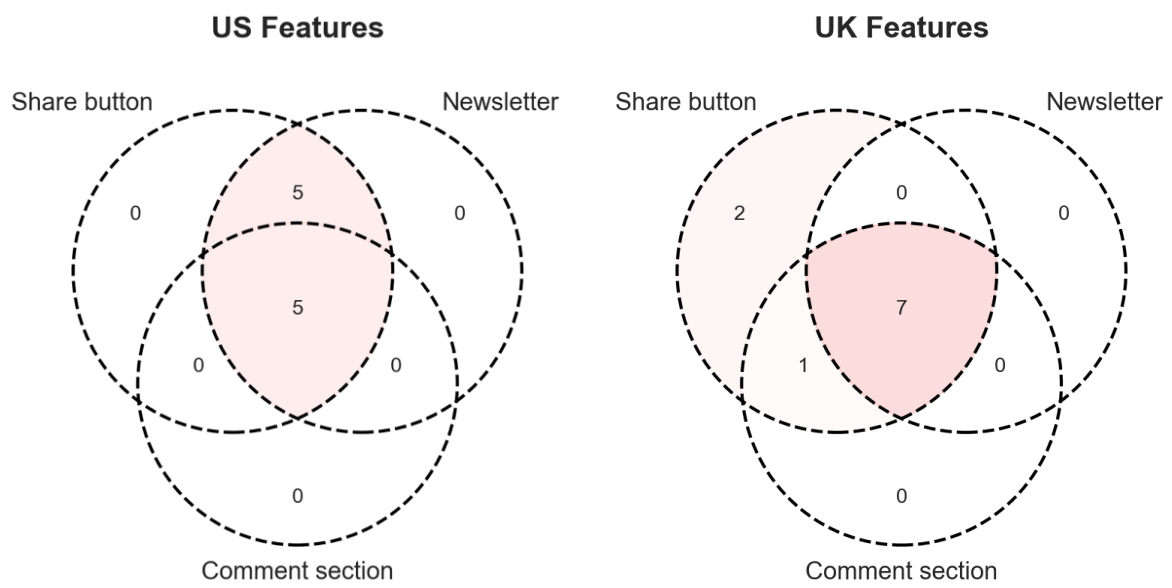


Figure 20 – Venn Diagrams of Tool Utilization in the Liberal Media System.

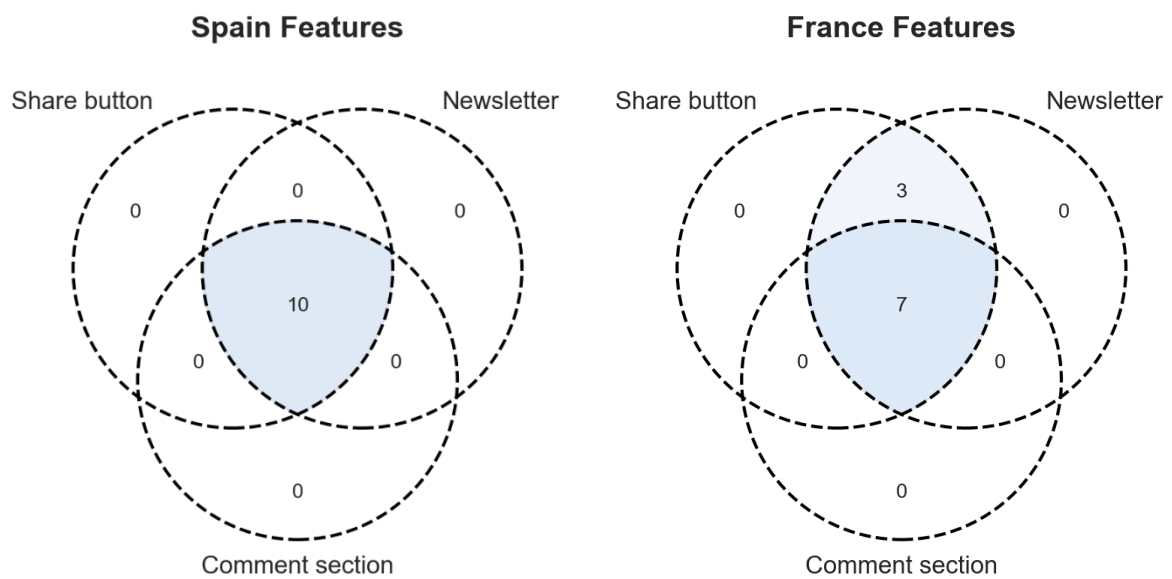


Figure 21 – Venn Diagrams of Tool Utilization in the Polarized Pluralist Media System.

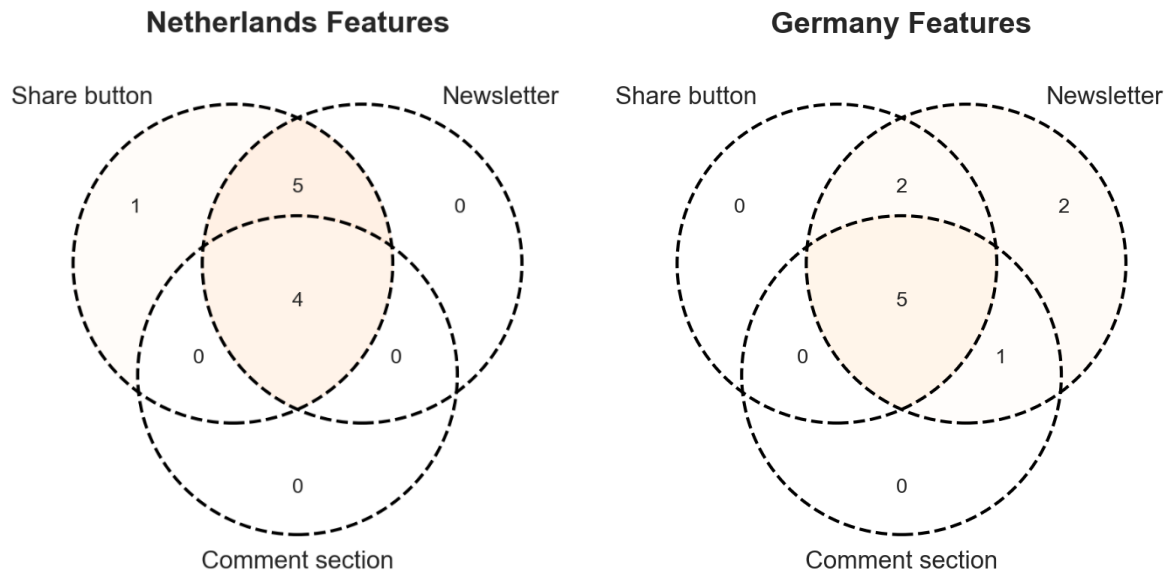


Figure 22 – Venn Diagrams of Tool Utilization in the Democratic Corporatist Media System.

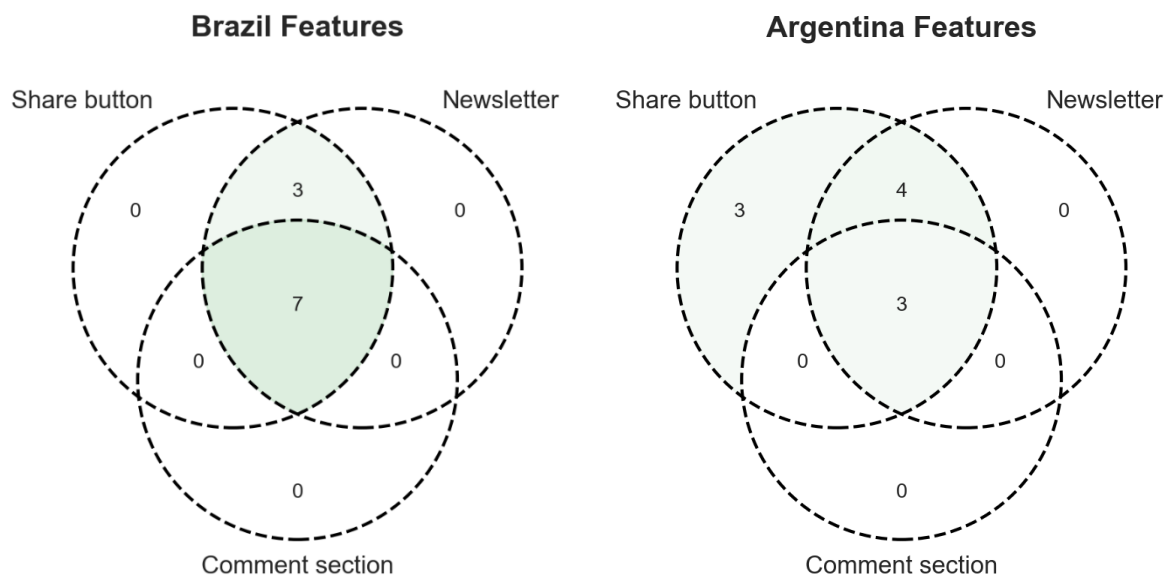


Figure 23 – Venn Diagrams of Tool Utilization in the Peripheral Media System.

Our analysis of 80 news sites revealed interesting cross-national differences in the adoption of tools to interact, engage, and encourage public participation by media organizations. The data highlights the differences in the implementation of interactive tools by media organizations across different countries. While some tools such as shared buttons are universally adopted, other tools such as comment sections and newsletters vary significantly. Nonetheless, the use of interactive features by media organizations seems to remain a crucial pillar of their relationship with the public, their attempts to build a loyal audience and to stay relevant in the digital age.

Among the three tools, comment sections were the least adopted by media organizations, with only 49 out of 80 news sites using them. Spain was the only country where all 10 news sites adopted comment sections, followed by the UK with eight, while Argentina and the Netherlands had the lowest adoption rates with only three and four news sites, respectively. In contrast, 73 out of 80 news sites used newsletters to engage their audience. All ten news sites from the US, Spain, France, Germany, and Brazil adopted newsletters, with the Netherlands (NOS.nl was the exception), the UK (Daily Mail, The Sun, and Sky News were exceptions), and Argentina (La Prensa, Diario Popular, and Cronica were exceptions) having slightly lower adoption rates. Newsletters seem to be a popular tool with media organizations as they provide a way to establish a direct connection with their audience and increase brand loyalty.

The differences in adoption rates of comment sections, newsletters and share buttons across countries may reflect cultural and technological differences, but the overall trend towards interactivity and user engagement can be a positive sign for the media industry (Anderson, 2013). Firstly, as traditional forms of media like print newspapers and broadcast television continue to decline in popularity, interactive and engaging online content can help media outlets attract and retain audiences (Quinn, 2017). By providing users with the ability to interact with and shape the news, media outlets can build a loyal following and increase their reach (Witschge, Anderson, and Domingo, 2016).

Secondly, interactivity and user engagement can also help media outlets to build trust and credibility with their audience (Chen, 2016). By providing opportunities for readers to ask questions, share their opinions, and participate in the news-making process, media outlets can demonstrate a commitment to transparency and open dialogue that can help to build a positive reputation (Friedman, 2015). Finally, interactivity and user engagement can also be a valuable tool for journalists in terms of generating new story ideas, identifying emerging trends, and connecting with sources (Kawamoto, 2017). By engaging with their audience through social media, comments sections, and other interactive tools, journalists can gain valuable insights into the issues that matter

most to their user and develop a more nuanced and informed understanding of the world around them (Lee, Lewis, and Powers, 2014).

Overall, the fact that media organizations across different countries are making efforts to provide spaces for interactivity and user engagement – as through the ones we outline on our *corpus*: comment sections, newsletters and share buttons – represent a positive opportunity for the media industry to adapt to changing audience expectations and build a more sustainable and engaging form of journalism (Mitchell, Holcomb, and Shearer, 2016).

2.2 Comment Sections

Of the three primary interactive features that we outlined in our *corpus* as frequently present in news sites, comment sections are the ones that can be perceived as User-Generated Content *per se* in online journalism. Usually, they are a partial form of participation in journalism at best, as users may contribute to the news process after the fact in the form of feedback, and they may facilitate the creation of a debate amongst users. Through the evolution of comment sections, we can see their paradoxical place in digital journalism, as they became a fundamental and yet disputed feature of news sites. 49 of out 80 newsletters used comment sections, a feature that has traditionally been key for fostering discussion and engagement on news sites. The fact that only around 60% of the analyzed organizations had comment sections may suggest a shift towards in news sites toward more curated and controlled forms of engagement with their audience.

Distribution of Comment Section by Country

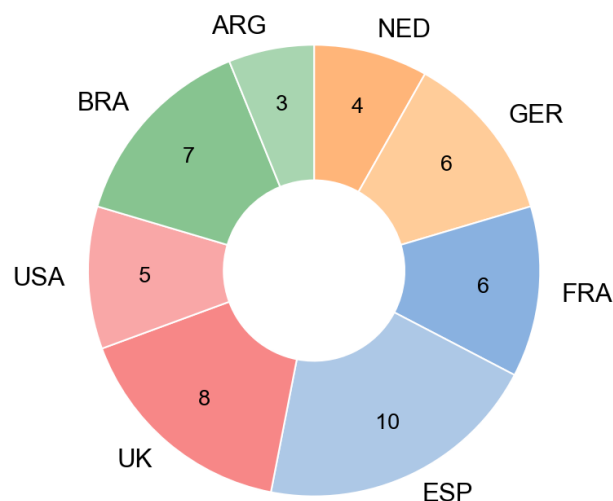


Figure 24 – Adoption Rate of Comment Sections by Country.

Figure 24 shows the adoption rate of comment sections on news sites across different countries, even if comment sections remain a standard tool for engagement and interactivity among online news audiences. There could be several reasons why there is a variation in the implementation of comment sections in news sites across different countries. One possible reason for variation in the adoption of comment sections across cultures and countries is differences in attitudes towards online engagement and discussion (Perrin, 2019). Some cultures may be more inclined to engage in online discussion and debate, while others may prefer to consume news content passively without participating in discussions (Kim et al., 2019). Additionally, legal, and regulatory frameworks may also play a role, as some countries may have stricter regulations around online UGC that could impact the adoption of comment sections (Buchanan et al., 2018).

Spain had the highest adoption rate with all the news sites utilizing comment sections. The high rate in Spain may be due to the strong tradition of free expression and open debate in Spanish society (Soler-Adillon and Domingo, 2014). Spain has a long history of political and social upheaval, and the right to free expression and open debate has been fiercely defended. Additionally, Spanish society places a high value on community and public discussion, and there may be a cultural preference for open dialogue and public debate (Munoz-Gonzalez, 2021). We cannot discard, however, the competitive media landscape in Spain and the fact that news organizations may see comment sections to increase engagement and foster a sense of community among their readers (Piedras and Brouard, 2016). The UK closely followed Spain, with 8 (17%) news sites. In the middle ground, Brazil with 7 (14%), while Germany and France had 6 (12%). There is an increasing importance of audience engagement and participation in the digital media landscape, and news organizations may be responding to the growing demand from readers for the ability to engage with and comment on news articles (Hermida, 2011).

The lowest rate of adoption was from the US, with 5 (10%) news sites, Netherlands with 4 (8%) and lastly Argentina with 3 (6%). The United States sitting on the fence may be a picture of the highly polarized and politically charged environment of the country (Perrin, 2017). News organizations may be hesitant to allow comment sections due to concerns over the potential for inflammatory or abusive comments that could harm their reputation or lead to legal issues. Additionally, the United States has a highly litigious culture, and news organizations may be cautious about allowing User-Generated Content on their platforms due to concerns over potential liability issues (Fuchs and Trottier, 2016).

In the case of the Netherlands, the lower adoption rate, compared to other countries, might be attributed to the Dutch society's strong emphasis on privacy. Concerns regarding user privacy and data protection, especially in the context of comment sections, could be a contributing factor

(Helberger and Hugenholtz, 2017). Furthermore, the Dutch media landscape is dominated by a few large media companies, which may have different strategies and priorities for their online presence compared to news organizations in other countries. This could be two of the factors contributing to the lower adoption of comment sections in Dutch news sites, and it is more than likely that a combination of various factors that have led to this trend.

In the context of Argentinian news sites, the notably low adoption can be attributed, in part, to the nation's political and social backdrop. With a history marked by political instability and contentious press freedom, news organizations might exhibit caution in facilitating UGC, including comments, to sidestep potential legal or societal fallout. Moreover, given Argentina's significant prevalence of online harassment, these organizations could be reluctant to establish a platform for public discourse that might amplify abusive or detrimental interactions (Albornoz and Tandoc, 2018). For all eight countries, news organizations must constantly consider the implementation and moderation of comment sections, which can be a resource-intensive task, and they also need to balance the benefits of the resource against the costs and risks associated with its adoption. For all media organizations, technical infrastructure, and resources (such as personal and the necessary financial investment) available to them play a role, and news organizations may prioritize other aspects of their online presence over comment sections. These factors, among others, could contribute to the differences in the adoption of comment sections across different countries.

2.2.1 The rise and fall of comment sections

As newspapers ventured online, adapted to the digital, and began integrating interactive features available on the internet, comment sections quickly became one most popular form of User-Generated Content for news online (Trost and Schwarzer, 2012). This type of venture and its impact on journalism gained increased interest in academic research just as the decision of a publication to include a comment board, which provides a space for readers to post and discuss criticisms and concerns regarding the news story, invites an interactive journalistic response.

Commentaries are the oldest form of UGC in journalism. Though when they came as letters in the mail, they did not present as such a polemic form of participation, as the moderation was implicit – a journalist, most likely the editor, would receive the letter and decide what to with it: Would it, firstly, be read? Would it merit an answer? Would it have the privilege of being published in the section of the paper designed for public participation? Choices that were privately made in the confines of the newsroom. Letters to the editor evolved, with the use of computers and the internet in newsrooms, to electronic mail, which was soon a popular form of feedback from the journalists' perspective, as emails facilitated conversation with readers, but could also be moderated away from the prying eyes of other readers.

The comment section became a feature in most news websites in the mid-2000s onward; though it was soon after disabled by many media outlets or only enabled in determined stories by others. User-Generated Content in the form of comments constituted a way of capturing the degree of the users' commitment to the news, as there is a very deliberative component to such interaction. Through the choice of deciding to leave a contribution below a story (or not), the user is showing an interest in its content, the newspaper's brand (Hermida, 2011; Ksiazek, Peer and Lessard, 2016; Meltzer, 2015; Ruiz et al., 2011; Springer, Engelmann and Pfaffinger, 2015; Weber, 2014; Ziegele, 2016).

Providing the opportunity to comment on the news has been one of the most consistent and widely implemented strategies of the mainstream media (Graham and Wright, 2015; Stroud, et al., 2015; Ziegele, 2016), mainly because comments contribute to attracting users, promoting brand loyalty, and encouraging engagement (Goodman and Cherubini, 2013). Comments allow users to participate in a discussion on the topics covered in the news stories, in addition to voicing their opinions and sharing ideas (Ruiz et al., 2011).

Online news sites have incorporated reader comments into their stories more than any other multimedia or interactive feature (Santana, 2010). Comments made online on news sites accompany a specific news story in the section ideally dedicated to the opinions and reactions of readers. Readers' comments, theoretically posted as a response to news articles published online, became a form of participatory journalism that gave the public a space to express their perspectives on current issues (Chung, 2008; Manosevitch and Walker, 2009). For journalists, comment sections can be a very comfortable way to open up their websites to participation, as it frames the audience as audience and does not challenge the professional identity of journalism (Domingo et al., 2008; Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Noci et al., 2010).

Websites have solicited comments for a long time. Comments were seen as Search Engine Optimization (SEO)³⁵ gold because they were free content that could add barely related keywords without affecting your keyword density. A constant stream of comments shows new visitors that the website is relevant and popular, while the comments can cause the search engines to see the site as updated without any work on the web administrator's part. You could comment on the page to engage customers without making it as public as a social media discussion, and it lets you add links to internal sites to answer someone's question without having to put the internal crosslinks on the site of the website. Commenters learn from each other and may network with

³⁵ SEO stands for "search engine optimization." In simple terms, it means the process of improving your site to increase its visibility when people search for products or services related to your business in Google, Bing, and other search engines. The better visibility your pages have in search results, the more likely you are to garner attention and attract prospective and existing customers to your business.

each other, the beginning of customers becoming followers of the brand. We must consider that online news is a competitive business, and many sites encourage comments to create conversation with readers and to gauge which stories resonate most with their readers (Goldberg, 2010). There is the matter that stories with comments attract more page views, and page views are a strong selling point in luring advertisers to spend more money (Goldberg, 2010). However, the effort to develop ways of interacting with users was not accompanied by the introduction of mechanisms to control and moderate participation in a consistent manner (Reich, 2011). The studies carried out leave no room for doubt (Ruiz, et al. 2010, 2011; Richardson and Stainer, 2011; Diakopoulos and Naaman, 2011; Manosevich and Walker, 2009), participation through comments sections was highly discredited by spam comments, insults, and organized campaigns, but with little debate and exchange of ideas (Masip and Suau, 2014). Comments published in the media have hardly lived up to the expectations of the theorists who defend the deliberative character of public opinion construction online (Stroud et al., 2015).

Comments that are bad for your SEO take moderation to remove, and spam bots made this an uphill battle for websites. Comments sections are prone to spambots that post unrelated links, and even with moderation, if you don't work fast enough, these bad links can hurt your site's rankings with search engines. No following comment links reduces the negative value of those links, but the placement of comment spam on your site can still look bad to readers. If people are arguing with each other and insulting each other in the forum, the website faces the growing risk of legal liability for providing the forum for it to occur in the first place. The website doesn't have to sanction the doxing of people, insults, or threats. It may be sued simply for letting such information be posted and doing nothing about it.

With all these issues, many news sites took the easiest route and removed the comments section altogether. Many news sites found that it is simpler to remove the feature entirely than allow it to be abused. From the news sites we studied, we have cases such as Vice (US), that dropped its comments section, opting to replace it with an old school "letters to the editor" feature, showing that not all traditions have been abandoned with digital news, they have merely been modernized, as now you can submit it via email without the need to go to the post office; and The LA Times (US), after many trials and errors, guidelines, and rules, also gave up on the comment sections for the "sticking with what worked" – and proved to be a lot less work – opening the session "Submit a Letter to the Editor".

2.2.2 The usage of comment sections

Usually placed at the end of the news story, where users are invited to respond, the comments often take the form of a dialogue between readers, and, on the odd occasion, between

journalists too (Loke, 2011). Certain websites allow commentaries to receive likes from other users; often the most liked comments are then placed on top of the comment section. Although the technical structure of comment boards varies across news organizations, post boards share an important feature: they allow more users than ever the chance to publicly post feedback on the same page as the journalist’s story. Unlike letters to the editors, which are often placed separately and published days after the original articles have been published – if ever, user comments can become visible to others instantaneously, especially where comments are left unmoderated (Craft, Vos and Wolfgang, 2016).

Table 44 describes the process of commenting on a news site, enumerating the pathways a user might navigate and the type of moderation they would encounter before posting a comment.

Table 44 – Path to Comment on a news site.

CAN YOU COMMENT? <i>(Feature not always enabled)</i>	YES	
	NO	
	ONLY ON DETERMINED NEWS STORIES	
WHAT DO YOU NEED TO COMMENT?	NOTHING	
	INSERT PERSONAL DATA	without verification (i.e., name)
		with verification (i.e., email)
	CAPTCHA (yes, you are human!)	
	AGREE TO “TERMS AND CONDITIONS”	
	LOGIN	Created on the website
		With a social network
	SUBSCRIPTION	

What is necessary to post a comment varies from site to site, how they are built, how they are administrated, and they often combine different demands. For example, the need to prove you are human and not a machine, that is, clicking the Google “CAPTCHA” button or inserting a determined combination of numbers and letters, is generally needed as well as the insertion of

personal data or a login to post a comment. By clicking “okay” or “submit” when you insert this data, there is also generally a phrase that says that by doing so you are agreeing to the “terms and conditions” of the page; or you may even have to check a box to say you agree to these “terms and conditions”.

Of the 49 news sites we analyzed that had comment sections, all demanded for the user to login to comment. They all also had the user agree to the terms and conditions of the news site to be able to participate, be by the stated understanding that by engaging in the comments you were bound by the rules of the website, be it by ticking a box saying you agree to these terms. Making users create a login to comment on the sites is a form of pre-moderation, for it demands an initial effort from the user to be able to participate, as well as some sort of identification (some websites are stricter about the information they demand, while others limit it to an email and a name, for example, which can be a pseudonym/fake). As the user has a login, moderators can monitor their comments and suspend/ban user profiles that break the rules of their sites.

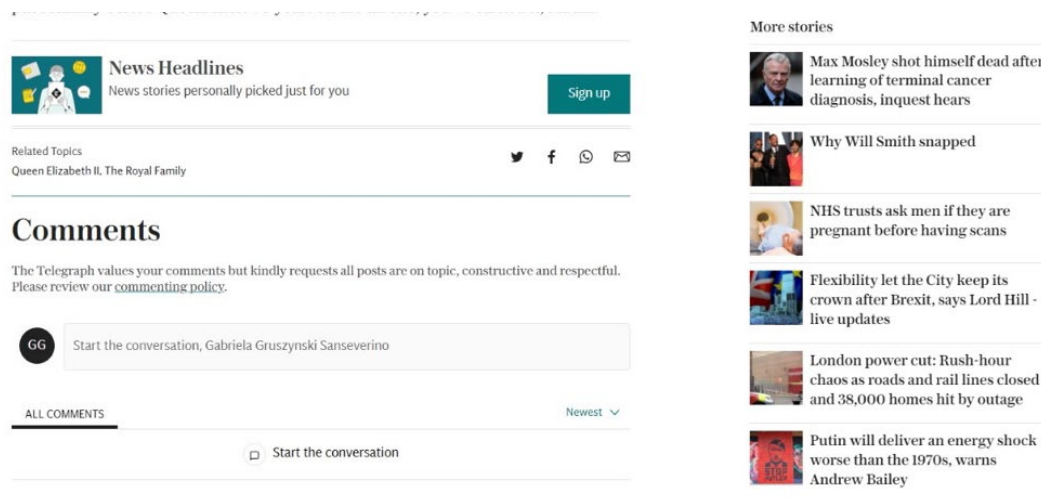


Figure 25 – Example of comments below the news story from The Telegraph.

We examined whether the placement of comment sections influences user interactions on news sites. Out of the 49 news sites surveyed, a significant majority — 43 organizations — opted to position their comment sections traditionally, below the news story (Figure 25). In contrast, only six sites placed comment sections in a sidebar (Figure 26), allowing users to view comments while scrolling through the story. However, all six of these sidebar comment sections required users to initiate a click to view them. Additionally, of those positioned below the story, 16 mandated a click to reveal comments, whereas 27 did not. This is the extent of the variety of the design of a comment box, so we do have to wonder if changing how you build comment box matters to making it better, as much as questioning *what is the comment box for* and *what do news organizations want from it*.

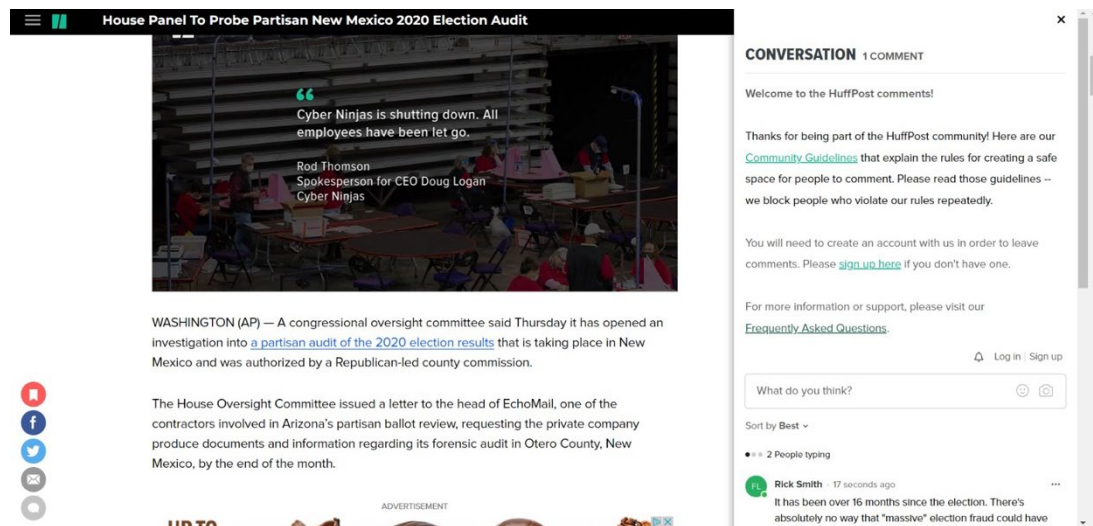


Figure 26 – Example of comments in a side bar from HuffPost.

To make the best use of online comments, an investment in resources is required, which is challenging at a time when many news outlets are struggling to establish a sustainable digital business model. Though the news sites we studied had many names for their comment sections, trying often to label them as discussions and conversations, in practice, their use was the same: users sharing their opinions, one on top of the other, without much interaction with each other. They were news sites allowed users to like or dislike each other's comments (Figure 27), and the biggest promise of conversation/discussion was the possibility one user could respond to another (Figure 28). Journalists tended to remain outside of debate, beyond news sites, such as The Guardian (UK) and The New York Times (US), that highlighted comments deemed interesting by the *abstract* newsroom at the top of the section (Figure 29); and, in fact, it became clear that many of the actual interactions between users were arguments, making comment sections that lack previous moderation, a breeding ground for negativity, hostility, and hate speech.

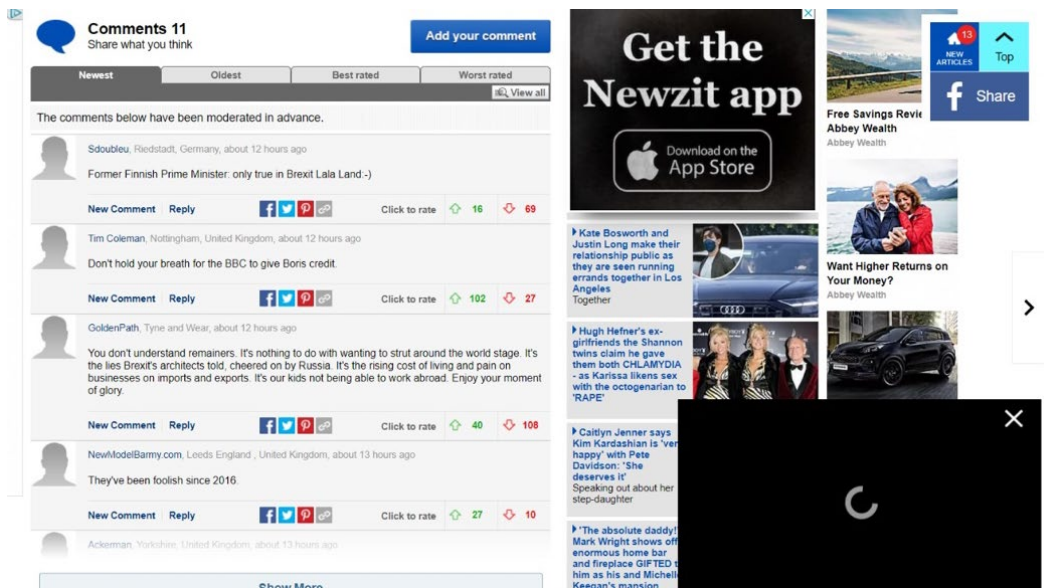


Figure 27 – Example of likes and dislikes in comments from Daily Mail.

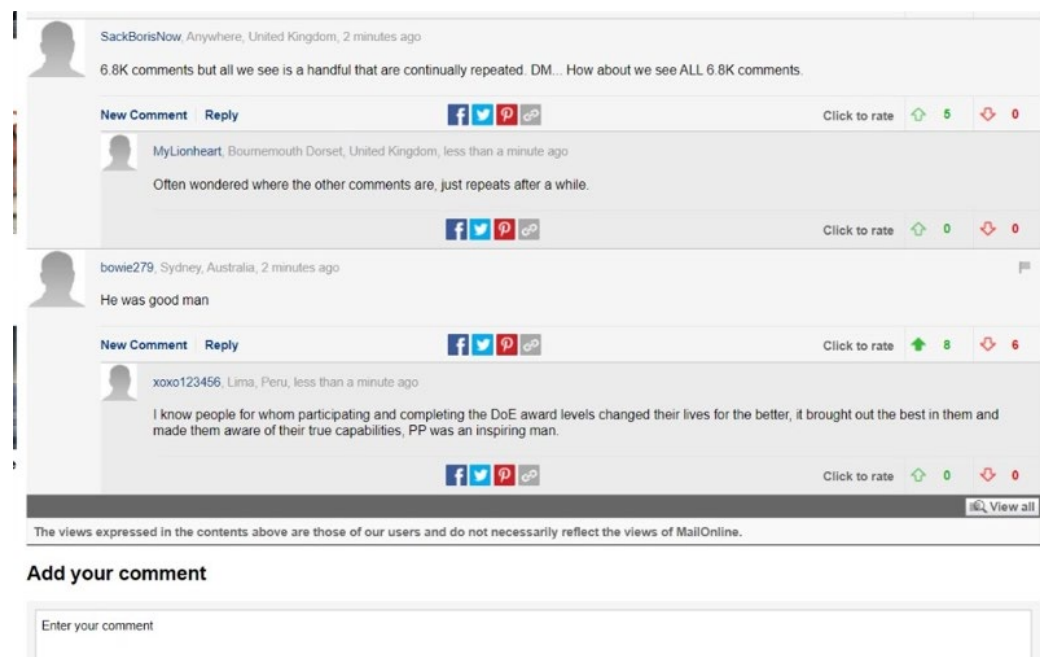


Figure 28 – Example of conversations in comments from Daily Mail.

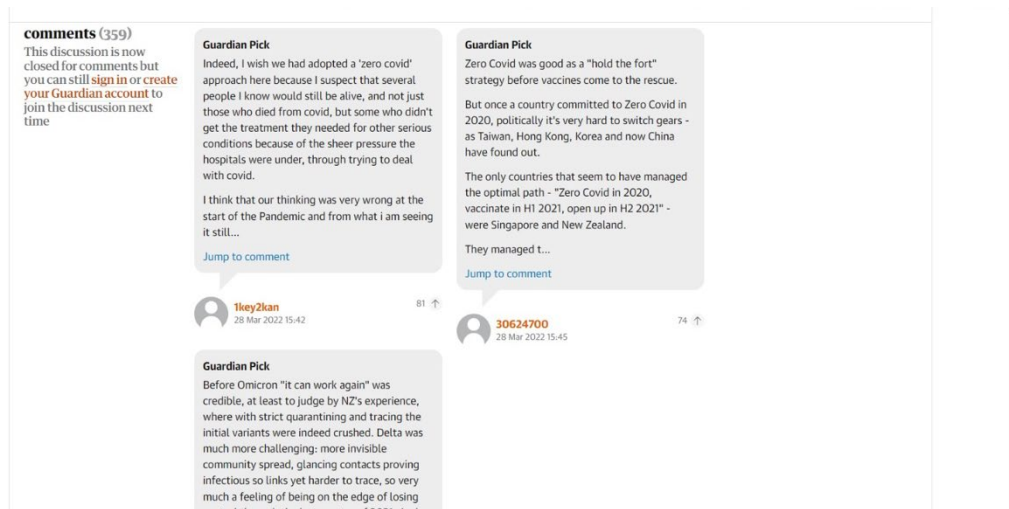


Figure 29 – Example of picked comments from The Guardian.

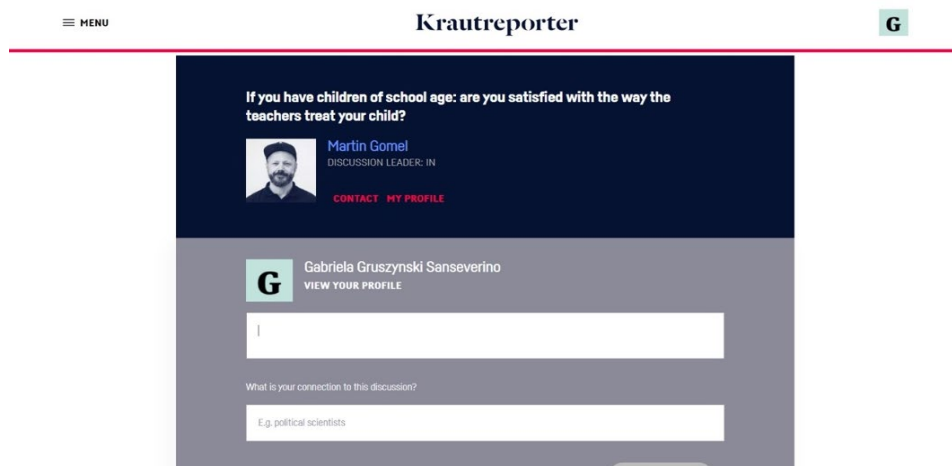


Figure 30 – Example of reporter's interaction from Krautreporter.

We did find two remarkable uses of comment sections amongst our 49 cases, the digital news natives Krautreporter (Germany) and The Correspondent (Netherlands). The German organization Krautreporter has created a whole strategy around its comments section (Figure 30). Every reporter must be active in the comments section and respond to a comment within 30–60 minutes to show users that they are present: “When you publish you must think about how to continue the conversation. You need to know what you ask for.” (Sweet and Cananea, 2019). Instead of asking for opinions, the media organization works by asking people for their knowledge, experiences or reasonings. For example, for a recent story, Krautreporter asked its members why they eat meat even though they know animals are suffering. Almost 200 people answered, and their replies were very nuanced. The resulting story was one of the most discussed articles on the platform, attracting a number of new members.

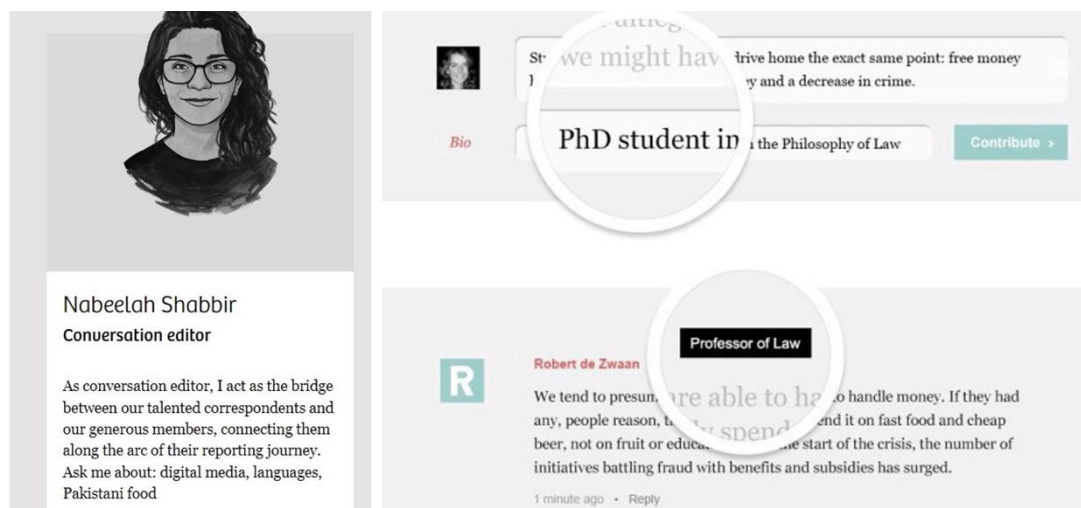


Figure 31 – Example of conversation leader and expertise title from *The Correspondent*.

The Correspondent, from the Netherlands, followed a similar logic (Figure 31). Nabeelah Shabbir³⁶, a journalist that joined The Correspondent from the start as a Conversation Editor, was responsible for making *actual* conversations happen in their contribution sections, between users and between journalists. Her job was to make conversations happen through every new story they published, thinking who could contribute, how to turn the comment sections into a conversation and dig into their members different expertise for each topic – an active effort to turn member comments into contributions and to make exchanges happen, beyond feedback.

Ms. Shabbir was also responsible for connecting their members with their journalists: “when one of our correspondents had an idea for a new project or story, they shared it with readers. By sharing ideas *before* they got started, they gave readers the chance to be involved in the reporting, to help them figure out where to look, what to ask, and what to make of what they found” (Nabeelah Shabbir, October 2020). Any member could share what they knew in response to an author’s callout in their contribution section – what would the comment section be by any other name under the news piece – if not by Ms. Shabbir’s presence and the encouragement she gave to members and her fellow journalists to converse about the topic in vogue. The Correspondent went as far as giving their members “The expertise title”, a block next to the reader’s name (Figure 31), that was meant to put their members in the mindset that it is all about sharing knowledge, and that they were seen as potential experts, explained Mrs. Shabbir. This title meant readers no longer

³⁶ Nabeelah Shabbir is a British-Pakistani journalist, based out of the UK, that worked on The Correspondent until it is closure, in December 2020. An exchange was conducted with the journalist for this research in October 2020 via videocall system. Further emails were exchanged with the journalist in December 2020 and January 2021. Statements from Ms. Shabbir will be used throughout this thesis from this point forward, always between quotations mark, and, if necessary, information she provided will be followed by the reference (Nabeelah Shabbir, October 2020).

had to explain why they are an authority in the subject; it simply showed other users that their peers were taking part in the discussion, often motivating them to join in. An “The expertise title” was not static. For instance, a member who was a doctor and had two kids in high school, when contributing to an article about bureaucracy in health care, she could share “Physician” as her expertise, but when participating in a discussion about smartphones in classrooms, she could call herself a “Parent of two high school students”.

For Correspondent founder, Ernst-Jan Pfauth, the participation of members in these sections showed “they don’t just want to support journalism financially, they also want to contribute their knowledge and experience. It is our responsibility as journalists to help them do that.” (Pfauth, 2018). An idealistic perception that did work for these two member-based news sites and their proposal for comment sections; but that were clear exceptions amongst the organizations we studied. Though there was one gem hidden hiding in the traditional comment sections of the legacy news media, The New York Times, in their mobile application called NYT Games, that is worth notice.

The New York Times states they aim to foster a community in their comment sections. In their guidelines, they say that they “believe that comments are a valuable space for discussion and debate” (NYT Community Guidelines, n.d.). In practice, their approach to comment sections is quite traditional. The company has taken what they say is every step to improve the quality of their comment sections and increase community engagement: in 2017, they launched the NYT Picks program, which highlights some of the best comments from readers and encourages constructive discussion – “NYT Picks”; and in 2020, they introduced a new system that ranks comments based on their quality, as determined by moderators and algorithms (NYT Commenting Changes, 2020).

Systems of likes, rankings and algorithms reflect their perception of their relationship with the reader: “our priority is *servicing* our readers and that’s why we keep an eye out for our *engagement and traffic metrics* and an *ear open to readers’ comments*, wherever they are: by email, on the commenting section or on social media” (Elda Cantú³⁷, March 2021, italic applied by the author). A transactional relationship where users get to interact with the news site via the comment sections, and the organization can continuously check the popularity of their news stories via metrics, far from their aim to foster a community through these spaces.

³⁷ Elda Cantú is Senior News Editor for Latin America in The New York Times. An exchange was conducted with the journalist for this research in March 2021 via Google Docs. Statements from the journalist will be used throughout this thesis from this point forward, always between quotations mark, and, if necessary, information Ms. Cantú provided will be followed by the reference (Elda Cantú, March 2021).

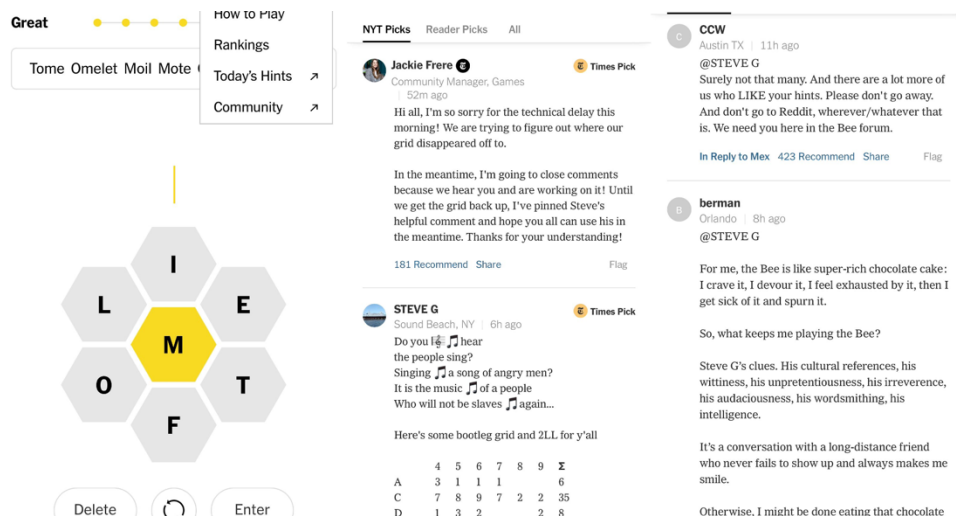


Figure 32 – Example of Spelling Bee game from The New York Times.

And yet, The Times has a mobile application called NYT Games, which requires a subscription to access all its features, and it is available for both iOS and Android devices, where they offer a variety of puzzles such as crosswords, Sudoku, and Spelling Bee, with new games being posted daily. This escapes the scope of journalism, and it enters the realm of entertainment, but it is where their idea of fostering a community in the comment sections has flourished. With new games published every day, the regular players for the game Spelling Bee, for example, that offers a space named community, players formed bonds, elect their favorite commentors, give tips for how to solve the days challenge, etc. (Figure 32). Always, of course, having to follow the community guidelines of the website.

Changing the design or how you refer to a comment section, as we have observed in our *corpus*, is meaningless, if you don't have an internal proposal to make a regular effort to actually turn them into productive conversations and debates, that involve the newsroom and the public, going beyond the possibility of feedback, leaving your opinion in the void of the internet, or at most arguing with other readers, hoping for recognition with likes and upvotes, and perhaps a highlight from the newsroom. Kratrepourter and The Correspondent are and were small member-based communities, one which imposed rules for the journalists to continuously engage in their comment sections and turn them into meaningful debates, and the other which had a designed conversation editor, whose only job was to make debates happen between members and journalists. And our peculiar space in the New York Times seems to be formed by repeated interaction in the exact same space around the exact same theme – the Spelling Bee game comment section – which encouraged its regular players to bond and form a community.

Can the failure of comment sections to promote a community be due to the large number of participants or the constant change of space/theme (every time a brand-new story)? When there are a significant number of participants in comment sections, it becomes challenging to foster meaningful interactions and build a sense of community. The high volume of comments makes it difficult for individuals to engage in focused discussions or receive personalized responses, which can discourage active participation and hinder the development of connections within the community. Additionally, if comment sections are associated with constantly changing spaces or themes, it can disrupt the formation of a stable community. Building a community requires continuity and familiarity. Frequent changes in the space or theme can disrupt the sense of belonging and shared identity among participants. This disconnection makes it harder for people to engage in ongoing conversations or establish relationships with others.

It is important to note that these factors are not the only determinants of the failure of comment sections to promote community. Other factors, such as the quality of moderation, level of toxicity, and overall design and functionality of the comment platform, also play significant roles. Furthermore, the nature of the content and the motivations and behaviors of the audience can impact the dynamics within comment sections. To foster a thriving community within comment sections, it is beneficial to address these challenges. Effective moderation strategies, encouraging constructive and respectful dialogue, and providing a stable and consistent environment that allows for deeper connections and ongoing conversations are essential. By considering these factors and implementing appropriate measures, it is possible to create a more engaging and community-oriented comment section experience.

The future of comments looks to be all social logins and filtering algorithms; but these are tools for putting a lid on commenting culture's excesses, not rethinking the relationship between creators and commenters in more fundamental ways (Erard, 2013). In the end, are organizations promoting comment sections to contribute to the journalism they want to produce or to their bottom line? Though that duality does seem harsh, as we study news sites from different countries, nature and with diverse methods of funding, we perceive that threading the line between those extremes is what ends up defining the relationship companies build with their public. We have to be pragmatic when looking at news sites, for they don't exist in a bubble: they are part of a company, they depend on employees to be kept up and updated, they require continuous funding, and, in that, they are also a business.

The intention behind comment sections in their origin might have been noble, a place to foster public debate, but as journalists and editors make themselves scarce from these spaces, and moderation becomes a task of keeping the speech palatable, they are relented to a source of

headache for newsrooms that must manage them and a discussion board between users who rarely go beyond repeating their own opinion. So why keep these sections up? What are their benefits? You engage the audience and give them a space to have their say, they get to feel heard and as they have a place inside this organization; this also enhances views and clicks, which is a plus with advertisers and for SEO.

In terms of participation, outsourcing does not change the pattern of comment sections we see with most of the outlets who have in house systems – in the end what companies usually seek is the called ‘healthy debate’, which looks more like one user opinion on top of the other, with the option of likes and replies to add flare, than an actual meaningful discussion or conversation. What we understand, in the end, is that, either way, how successful newsrooms are in connecting with readers has to do with the initiative that news organizations themselves take, whether they are proactive in using the space they chose to host for their users – and rare organizations are.

2.2.3 *The moderation*

As interactivity becomes an increasingly large draw for news sites and comment sections are integrated to news stories, some form of comment moderation is both deeply necessary and unavoidably messy; as major news organizations find themselves needing to be pragmatic about how best to handle user contributions, while justifying their choices in terms of their journalistic mission. Moderation is both implicit and explicit in news sites, and it matters as, what can be published or not, what can be removed and why, and what the technical architecture allows and prohibits, shapes public discourse, and defines what they believe to be allowed in the public sphere.

The concept of gatekeeping, a process used to control the information flow to the public (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009), has been challenged by the participatory nature of digital media (Lewis, Kaufhold and Lasorsa, 2010). The metaphor of gatekeeping can be applied to the moderation of user’s comments, and more importantly the justifications for doing so, as it draws a parallel between the significance of deciding what to report to the significance of deciding which user contributions to keep and which to delete. The process of comment moderation is also affected by the choices made so far regarding how comment sections are presented and what do you need to participate on them; so, we outline the basic logic of comment moderation (Table 45).

Table 45 – Basic Logic of Comment Moderation.

	NO
--	----

MODERATION	YES	BEFORE	Artificial Intelligence (program)	
			Outside the newsroom (outsourcing)	Journalists
				Other type of professional
			Inside the newsroom	Journalists
				Other type of professional
		AFTER	Artificial Intelligence (program)	
			Outside the newsroom (outsourcing)	Journalists
				Other type of professional
			Inside the newsroom	Journalists
				Other type of professional

As shown in Table 45, there are three pivotal decisions in the realm of moderation revolve around (1) whether to implement moderation at all, and if affirmative, then (2) when, and (3) how the news organization will undertake the moderation of user comments online. Our assessment reveals that news sites employ a spectrum of methods to accomplish this, encompassing:

- **Manual moderation:** This involves hiring a team of moderators to review and approve or reject each comment manually based on the site's moderation policy. Moderators may also respond to user inquiries or reports of inappropriate behavior.
- **Automated moderation:** Some news sites use automated tools, such as filters, to scan for and flag comments that contain certain keywords or phrases. These comments may then be reviewed by a human moderator before being published or removed.
- **User-based moderation:** Some news sites allow users to report comments that violate the site's moderation policy. The "Flag", a button which users can click to mark a comment they find inappropriate, is a popular tool amongst all websites, especially those who opt for singularly for post moderation, as it makes readers police

one another and facilitate the job of the moderators. Flagged comments are not automatically removed from the sites, but they are marked for further review by a moderation team. If enough users flag a comment, it may be removed or reviewed by a moderator.

- **Pre-moderation:** In this approach, comments are reviewed and approved by a moderator before they are published (Reich, 2011). This can slow down the commenting process, but it ensures that only appropriate comments are displayed. This entails more responsibility and investment from media outlets, but it can cut problematic and controversial commenting, keeping comments always on topic.
- **Post-moderation:** This approach allows comments to be published immediately, but moderators review and remove any inappropriate comments after they have been posted (Reich, 2011). It is the method used by most news organizations, mainly due to newsroom budgets and staff (Singer, 2014), as outlets intervene in comments due to their content or complaint by other users.

In truth, many news sites use a combination of the approaches above, depending on the nature of the site, the volume of comments and the resources they have available to dedicate to moderation. From the 80 news sites we analyzed, 14 solely used a system of pre-moderation, 21 of post moderation, and 14 did not state their moderation policy, such as BuzzFeed News (US), which leads us to question if there is one, or said they moderated, but never made clear what their process and policy was, such as the Daily Mail (UK). If you scan through the organizations policies for comment sections, or their rules for engagement, most outlets appear to combine a system of pre and post moderation, being the pre moderation done by Artificial Intelligence software that scans comments for what they establish as red flags, and the post moderation done by humans. Several websites appear to have this automate pre-screening of comments, that reviews for inappropriate content, such as The New York Times and Metro.UK.

Manual moderation³⁸ has become quite rare for news sites, as it is a resource-intensive task, and it may be difficult to maintain consistency and fairness in the moderation process. Anaïs

³⁸ Although the scope of this work does not verse within the boundaries of digital labor, it would be irresponsible not to mention it given the discussion of manual moderation of comment sections. Digital labor refers to the work that is involved in producing, managing, and moderating digital content, such as websites, social media, and online communities. It is often invisible labor, which leads to the undervaluing and undercompensating moderators, who may be paid low wages and lack job security and benefits. Recognizing moderation as a form of digital labor can shine a light on the burdens of the job, the lack of support the rights and well-being of moderators, who play a crucial role in maintaining healthy and respectful online communities. There are several criticisms of digital labor that highlight the need for fair and ethical practices in the digital economy, including fair wages, job security, and protection of workers' rights and well-being. The discussions on topic range around, for example, (1) Precarity, as

Ferrer, a moderator for Mediapart, with whom I conversed about the challenges of her job, embodied the duality that comes with handling the public in journalism. While she was proud to work for Mediapart and believe that comment sections are an important venue for the user to participate, having to single-handedly moderate the comments left her fatigued: “I am only human” (Anais Ferrer, February 2020)³⁹. The journalist works in the so the public can participate serenely in the discussions and debates on the site, but Ms. Ferrer says her day-to-day work is far from serene, having to read through flagged comments, exclude those that violate the policy of the news site, and respond to angry emails from users who think they had their contribution wrongly excluded.

Mediapart is proud to be a *participation-forward* media, that puts their member front and center as part of their journalism, but in the end this participation finds limits in the resources they can dedicate to managing their users. Ms. Ferrer is clear that working alone, without a system of pre-moderation, leaves her to rely on other users flagging comments as inappropriate to be able to maintain the sections civil, and often, inappropriate contributions “fall through the cracks” (Anais Ferrer, February 2020). Manual moderation is a burden for the journalist responsible and has become a rare strategy for a reason – with many users and comments, it is impossible for a person to keep them all under control.

Currently, The New York Times (US), uses mostly human moderators to review their comment sections. While Mediapart relies solely on Ms. Ferrer to manage their comments, The NYT have a large team that manages the task, and, still, they have a limited number of comments that they can moderate each day. Typically, comment threads are open for only 24 hours now. After that point, commenting is closed and moderators are moved to newer articles: “While this means that some of these discussions do not have the chance to further evolve, it ensures that we are able to *host a civil comments section* on a wide range of articles” (The New York Times, Comments,

many jobs, such as content moderation, are low-paid, temporary, and lack security and benefits; (2) Exploitation, as some critics argue that digital labor relies on workers in developing countries or vulnerable populations, who are paid low wages and have little bargaining power; (3) Unpaid labor, as it includes work that is done voluntarily, but it can contribute to the profits of digital platforms without providing fair compensation to the workers; (4) Algorithmic bias, as automated systems may make decisions based on biased or incomplete data, leading to unfair outcomes for workers; and (5) Psychological effects, given that some digital labor jobs, such as content moderation, can expose workers to harmful or offensive content, leading to psychological distress and trauma (Gillespie, 2010; Ross, 2013; Huws, 2014; Scholz, 2016; Srnicek, 2017; Graham, 2019; Gray and Suri, 2019; Roberts, 2019). Further empirical work which focuses on the impacts and burdens of moderation as digital labor would be enriching to the field and to add to the rich theoretical discussion that is already happening.

³⁹ Anais Ferrer is a French journalist for Mediapart, that works as a community manager and moderates comments for the news site. An exchange was conducted with Ms. Ferrer in February 2020 in the newsroom of Mediapart; and further emails were exchanged with questions for this research. Statements from the journalist will be used throughout this thesis from this point forward, always between quotations mark, and, if necessary, information provided by Ms. Ferrer will followed by the reference (Anais Ferrer, February 2020).

2022, italic applied by the author). More than forming a community, they are concerned with the liability of problematic comments.

The BBC has an interesting take on what we call pre and post moderation, which they call “reactive moderation” and “pre-moderation” (BBC, Using the BBC, 2022). Most comments or uploads from users are reactively moderated, which means they are checked if 1) they are reported by someone else); or 2) a moderation filter alerts them there may be a problem. Their system of pre-moderation applies only to a user’s first comment on their website or if, at any time, someone keeps breaking the rules for commenting or uploading, they get their account set to constant pre-moderation, when the moderator checks every comment before it appears.

In their legal texts, online newspapers treat their users both as clients and as authors (Noci et al., 2012). They acknowledge that users are now potentially a content provider for the website. The terms of service try to protect the media companies from the actions users may do within the websites, stating that all responsibility for those actions is solely for the user, whom will have to bear with any costs derived from legal suits to the medium. In that, the presence of a higher degree of controversy and uncivil behavior among readers cannot be considered generalized in the comment sections today, since the moderation and user registration policies developed by the media contribute to ensuring that the general tone of the debates does not exceed the discourse limits (Domingo, 2015; Ksiazek, Peer and Zivic, 2015).

“Comments are moderated for civility” have become the model for most news sites who chose to keep their comment sections open for users to participate. The terms “civil” and “community” go together in the participation guidelines of news sites:

THE TELEGRAPH

At The Telegraph, we believe that your opinions are your own business. But informing them, challenging them - and most importantly respecting them - is ours. That’s why *we’ve taken positive steps to create a better, closer online community*. One that encourages healthy debate, fosters mutual understanding, and welcomes all opinions, no matter what they might be. Where you can communicate with one another - and with our journalists, comfortably and confidently. (...) We also have a friendly new moderation team who will ensure *all conversations are civil and on topic*. And we have published a *common-sense set of principles*, which all comments need to follow. In these complex times, *community is more important than ever*. Our journalists are looking forward to welcoming you into a better, safer and more respectful online comment section (Reporters, 2020, italic applied by the author).

THE HUFFPOST

Our *community is about connecting people through open and thoughtful conversations*. We want our readers to share their views and exchange ideas in a safe space. In order to do so, we’ve created a simple set of rules that will improve your experience. *Simply put, keep it civil*. (HuffPost, Community Guidelines, 2022, italic applied by the author)

THE WASHINGTON POST

Here at The Washington Post, we want *to foster a community* for insightful, inclusive and — most importantly — *civil discussions* around the news and our journalism (Staff, 2020, italic applied by the author).

Now rare are the comment sections that can become free for all, but amongst our 49 news sites that adopted this feature, we still saw one specially interesting example, the Daily Mail. The Daily Mail (UK) comment section is a phenomenon in itself and has a famous and noteworthy relationship. In 2012, a twitter account⁴⁰ that was active up to 2021, highlighted the bizarre and terrifying comments found in the Mail comment section, in a sarcastic and parodic manner. The account had over 80 thousand followers. In 2020, a change.org online petition⁴¹ was started to close the section that had over 50 thousand signatures, after Caroline Flack, a British TV actress, took her life, which people believe was, amongst other reasons, the bullying she received in the comment in Daily Mail stories that featured pictures and judgments of her body.

The organization has often rejoiced and promoted the chaos of their section (that made other news sites fully close theirs), framing it as a place of free public participation. In 2005, the established the model of their comment section, which persists today:

Do you want to make your voice heard on today's biggest stories? Mail online's reader comments service is now bigger and better than ever before. Reader comments allows you to share your views with all our readers on anything from Tony Blair's performance at Number 10, to Michael Owen's performance in an England shirt to Keira Knightley's performance in *Pride and Prejudice*. (...) You can also see how many people have commented on each story straight from our homepages, giving you an instant indication of the big talking points of the day (Daily Mail, 2005, italic applied by the author).

But while in 2005 they pre-moderated their comment section – “All comments will continue to be moderated, so you can rest assured that nothing unsuitable for a family website will be published” (Daily Mail, 2005) – now they state on top of their comment sections if the section has or not been moderated, depending on the topic of the news story. They have community guidelines for participation on their comment sections that preach civility, but on the sections that are not moderated, you can see how easily the rules are ignored and forgotten. Also, it is not made clear how moderation happens: is it via Artificial Intelligence services that scan the comments before they are posted in the certain stories or is there a moderation team? And in the stories that they state are not moderated, in which you can flag comments you find improper, is there someone who reviews the comment and excludes it?

The Telegraph (UK), in 2016 started on a path opposite to the Daily Mail. First, they suspended all comments, with the promise to review if they would be reinstated:

The Telegraph has suspended the facility for readers to comment on stories and features “until further notice” as part of a review of the way the newspaper engages with its

⁴⁰ Source: <https://twitter.com/bestofthemail> Access on: 29 Mar. 2022.

⁴¹ Source: <https://www.change.org/p/people-remove-the-comments-section-from-the-daily-mail-website> Access on: 29 Mar. 2022.

audience. As part of the relaunch of Telegraph.co.uk, the company is also researching whether to reinstate the feature. (...) It is also undertaking research to *understand the best way to support reader engagement*, but in the meantime, they can continue *to comment on and share articles through Telegraph Facebook pages, or via Twitter, in the usual way* (Sweeney, 2017, italic applied by the author).

For years, comment boxes have been a staple of online experience, but as online audiences have grown, the pain of moderating conversations on the web has grown, too. And in many cases, conversations about a particular article or topic are happening on sites like Facebook and Twitter. So, many media companies have given up on comments. Engagement with the public for Telegraph, as their comment section was suspended, was delegated to what they deemed “the usual way”, on social networks, which now not only include Twitter and Facebook, but also Instagram.

CNN (US), already in 2014, concluded that, as social media had continued its robust growth, and the bulk of discussion of their stories was increasingly taking place in these networks, the best was to close the comment sections of their news sites, arguing that on site comments were less and less used and less and less useful (Gross, 2014). CNN maintained the decision to abandon on site comment sections, while The Telegraph reopened their comment sections, but, just as The Wall Street Journal, which shares the model of a hard paywall, limits comments exclusively to their subscribers.

In 2015, due to the unruliness brought on by comments that was becoming far too hard to manage, BBC was one of the outlets that questioned if this was the beginning of the end for online comments. The duality of the comment section is always present – “Vibrant online communities? Or cesspools of abuse? Have comments had their day?” (Trending, 2015) – but the BBC decided that, for them, comments were still useful, as they believe they have used comments sections to make real connections with their audiences, find stories, and turn what was once a one-way street into a multi-headed conversation; but they still make the usual, though more direct request for civility of their audience: BBC: “We love you posting comments and uploading creations. But *please don’t do anything horrible, rude, or illegal*” (BBC, Using the BBC, 2022, italic applied by the author).

In 2016, The Guardian released a research piece called “The dark side of Guardian Comments” (Gardiner et al., 2016), in which they looked into the 70 million comments left on its site since 2006. The Guardian wanted to understand more about the types of below-the-line comments they receive from readers on the site with a view to fostering the best possible discussion and limiting abuse. This led to a series in 2017, called “The Web We Want”⁴², with articles that attempted to tackle the problem news sites everywhere have faced when it comes to

⁴²Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/series/the-web-we-want> Access on: 29 Mar. 2022.

interacting with their public online: “How can we end online abuse, and have better conversations on the web?” In response to that question, The Guardian stopped allowing them underneath articles about race and immigration, for example, as they believed that some conversations on their site had become a toxic space (Loughnane, 2016).

The Guardian has already taken the decision to cut down the number of places where comments are open on stories relating to a few particularly contentious subjects, such as migration and race. This allows moderators to keep a closer watch on conversations that we know are more likely to attract abuse. However, unlike many news sites, *the Guardian has no plans to close comments altogether. For the most part, Guardian readers enrich the journalism. Only 2% of comments are blocked (a further 2% are deleted because they are spam or replies to blocked comments)*; the majority are respectful, and many are wonderful. A good comment thread is a joy to read – and more common than the “don’t read the comments” detractors believe (Gardiner et al., 2016, italic applied by the author).

Facing the same problems with abuse and unruly comments, The Sun tried to revamp their comment sections in 2018 by having representatives of the organization joining in with discussions more, asking what users thought or replying to their opinion; while also offering rewards for the public who participated aggregating to the discussion, featuring some of the comments at the top of threads if they were deemed valuable, and giving badges to users whose comments others enjoyed (people liked and reacted to comments granting the titles of Influencer, Contributor or Leader), so the more you commented and interacted with others, the more you earned a special status on the site (Sun, 2018).

That model worked up to 2021, when their community guidelines were last updated to ask for respectful and civil collaborations in their comment sections; and while you can still access those guidelines and they continue state that “Our service is all about you – our readers. We want to engage you and hear your views, and we ask for your participation and vigilance” (Sun, 2021), The Sun (UK) announces at the top of the page that they have now fully disabled their comment sections throughout the website.

Clearly, “there’s no magic recipe for moderating news comments, and news websites have explored different moderation strategies over time, mostly by trial and error” (Domingo, 2015, p. 164). Whichever way a news outlet chose to moderate its comments, they must develop guidelines to do so; policies for moderation, that must not only be practical and enforceable, but also balance the economic, professional, and ideological aspirations of the news organization. The degree of control or freedom that can be allowed is an ongoing debate (Trygg, 2012).

Even though the great majority of online publications seek to control user contributions, to protect the newsroom reputation and prevent themselves from legal liabilities through legal and ethical guidelines (Singer, 2014; Braun and Gillespie, 2010), the diversity of management options adopted by news organizations reflects the absence of a core strategy when dealing with readers’ comments. The content policies and their enforcement must toe the line between avoiding legal

liability, keeping an eye on the economic bottom line, and some kind of commitment to protecting their users' freedom of speech and the vibrancy of the public discourse they produce.

This realm of comment sections, brimming with User-Generated Content, is influenced by an intricate web of factors. Smyrnaios and Marty (2017) identified four primary logics that steer the direction and methodology of comment moderation. Let's delve deeper into these four pillars, understanding their individual significance and their intertwined relationships.

- **Socio-political Context:** Every comment, criticism, or commendation made in the virtual world is rooted in the tangible reality of our socio-political environment. This logic pertains to the zeitgeist — the dominant set of ideals, beliefs, and sentiments prevalent at any given time. Political upheavals, cultural shifts, or even global events can drastically influence the tone, tenor, and type of comments generated. Understanding this context is pivotal, as it sets the backdrop against which user interactions occur and are evaluated.
- **Legal Framework:** Digital platforms, though borderless, are not beyond the reach of the law. This logic is defined by two core components: the cherished principle of freedom of speech and the legal liabilities that publishers must shoulder. While freedom of speech champions the right to express, legal stipulations ensure that this expression doesn't transgress into realms of hate, misinformation, or incitement. Publishers are often held accountable for the content they host, making this framework a critical aspect of moderation.
- **Editorial and Marketing Strategies:** Media outlets, beyond being mere platforms for news dissemination, often have distinct identities, missions, and business objectives. The editorial strategies dictate the nature of content they produce, while marketing strategies determine the audiences they cater to and how they engage with them. Both play a crucial role in shaping the guidelines for what kind of user interactions align with their brand and what might tarnish it.
- **Economic and Technical Strategies:** The rubber meets the road when strategies transition into action. Here, the service providers who offer moderation services wield significant influence. Their technical infrastructure, algorithms, and manual processes stem from a blend of economic considerations and technological capabilities. Cost-effective solutions might opt for automation, while premium services might promise meticulous human oversight.

Interestingly, the demarcations between these logics are not rigid. The socio-political milieu often triggers legislative changes. For instance, a surge in extremist ideologies might spur tighter regulations, leading to a conundrum where the lines between regulation and censorship blur. Such shifts, especially in our contemporary volatile environment, challenge the very essence of public freedoms (Smyrnaio and Marty, 2017).

Conversely, the business and technological dynamics of media outlets and their service providers are inextricably linked. The moderation approach for a global news conglomerate, concerned with safeguarding its reputation, might differ starkly from a local publication that views comment sections as extensions of community engagement (Smyrnaio and Marty, 2017).

The journey of a comment from submission to visibility is influenced by these multifaceted logics. The final appearance of a digital discourse space is a mosaic, with each tile shaped by socio-political realities, legal bindings, editorial intentions, and technological constraints. In this intricate dance of factors, predicting the final picture is always an adventure, making each comment section a unique canvas of collective expression.

2.2.4 The outsourcing

There are two types of hosting systems for comment sections – native and non-native. The first are unique to the website where they appear, and they tend to require users to provide personal information and to create a unique login name. They are embedded in the website's content itself. The native systems have the primary benefit of giving the site's operators greater creative and editorial control over user comments, for both practical and ethical reasons. The second, non-native systems, are operated by a third-party, such as Facebook, outside of an individual news website. Though some non-native systems can be controlled, appropriated, and managed by the news outlets; others have their own management policies which limit the decision-making capability of the media company.

A news organization choice between a native and a non-native system, which can depend on a variety of factors, from practicality to economic viability, can affect how users comment on stories, users' likelihood to post comments and the content of the comments they post, depending on the level of accountability required of users. Balancing the quality of conversation and likelihood for people to comment has proven difficult.

In recent years, the media landscape has undergone a seismic shift in how it manages and moderates user-generated comments. This transformation, often termed the "industrialization of moderation," is intrinsically tied to a multitude of factors ranging from socio-political influences on economic considerations (Smyrnaio and Marty, 2017). At the core of this shift is the widespread adoption of technical methodologies aimed at enhancing the process of identifying

and eliminating unlawful comments. Additionally, there is an increased emphasis on classifying comments based on their quality through systems of recommendations and annotations. An offshoot of this is the strategic effort to reward and retain prolific commentators, thereby adding another layer to the evolving comment moderation landscape (Morrison, 2017).

As technical expertise blends with marketing objectives, it inevitably impacts editorial decisions. The end product is a material system that imposes certain constraints on the operations of news websites, altering the way they function and present content to their audience (Cabrolié, 2010). A pivotal aspect of this industrialized moderation is outsourcing, which necessitates a formalized structure for the comment selection process. This structure often takes the shape of an editorial charter. It sets forth the moderation principles chosen by the publisher and which the external service provider is bound to adhere to. However, the application of these well-defined rules is not straightforward. They operate in a hypercompetitive economic environment marked by mounting financial pressures related to moderation costs. Moreover, the political landscape is increasingly tainted by aggressive, xenophobic, and sexist discourses, further complicating the moderation process (Coe, Kenski and Rains, 2014).

From the 49 news sites that adopted comment sections, 13 openly stated that they used an external service, which are related to two (2) projects, The Coral Project and Jigsaw, three (3) companies, Spot.im/OpenWeb, Netino and Viafoura, and the use of the external plug-ins for comment sections, such as those from Facebook and Disqus, to fully outsource moderation or to get help with managing the public. While some only provide the tools to do so, through plugins for example, others, like The Coral Project and Jigsaw arise from a partnership with news outlets to rethink audience engagement.

The services of Viafoura were used by 06 companies – from the US (1) by the HuffPost, from the UK (2) by the Independent and the Mirror, from France (1) 20 by 20 minutes, and from Argentina (2) by La Nacion and Clarin. Metro.uk used the services of OpenWeb, as well as La vanguardia from Spain. Le Monde used the services from Netino and partnered with the Jigsaw Project. The New York Times was, alongside The Washington Post, on the ground floor of the The Coral Project; and, today, The New York Times, as well as El Pais, are also involved in Jigsaw. As for the use of plugins, Okdiario from Spain used Disqus, as well as Correio Brasiliense from Brazil; BuzzFeed News adopted the Facebook plugin when we began studying the site, but now has changed to an in house-system for comments. In Netherlands and Germany, no companies outsourced services of moderation or public management.

2.2.4.1 The Coral Project and Jigsaw

The Coral Project and the Jigsaw Project are both initiatives created by Google to support online journalism and facilitate better online discussions. The Coral Project collaborates with The New York Times and the Mozilla Foundation to develop open-source tools and strategies to improve the quality of online comments on news websites. It aims to help publishers engage with their audiences and foster healthy discussions that are respectful and productive. The Jigsaw Project, on the other hand, is a technology incubator that is part of Google's parent company, Alphabet. Jigsaw's mission is to use technology to make the world a safer place, particularly by addressing the problem of online abuse and harassment.

Both projects are aimed at improving the quality of online discourse and making online spaces safer and more inclusive. The Coral Project focuses on developing open-source tools and resources that can be used by any news organization, while Jigsaw partners with a range of companies to implement solutions to address specific issues related to online harassment and abuse. For example, Perspective, Jigsaw's machine learning tool for identifying toxic comments, is available for integration into a variety of platforms, including news websites, social media platforms, and discussion forums.

The Coral project is now a project of Vox Media⁴³ – a name because of the natural coral, which is an intricate reef system that protects shorelines and gives cover for organisms to connect and evolve. Like this natural coral, they say they create the structures that let communities thrive. Initially founded in 2014 as a collaboration with the Mozilla Foundation, The New York Times and The Washington Post, with a grant from the Knight Foundation, the project moved entirely to Mozilla in 2017 and then to Vox Media in 2019. The idea around is always remaining the same: to support journalism and improve online dialog around the world through privacy-centered, open-source software.

In its core, The Coral Project is planned and expected to be a step to rethinking how to help the audience to publish their content in a way that integrates with publishers' sites. A defense of the utopian idea with each the internet arose, where public participation would become a natural part of journalism. The project would help news organizations see themselves as facilitators for the publication of content by the broader public in a way that is still in line with professional quality expectations, becoming, essentially, a platform for democracy (Franklin and Eldridge, 2016).

In practice, over the years, and through its multiple associations, The Coral Project developed two software tools, a series of guides and best practices. They successfully developed the platform "Talk", which became its main tool responsible for powering the comment sections

⁴³ Source: <<https://corp.voxmedia.com/>> Accessed on: 21 Nov. 2022.

for nearly 50 newsrooms in 12 countries, including The Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, The Intercept, and the New York Magazine. Since 2019, after the addition of Coral to the Vox Media portfolio, there has been a continued investment into community and audience engagement products.

On the other side of the spectrum, we have Jigsaw, a technology incubator created by Google, to apply technical solutions that counter online censorship and cyber-attacks and protect access to information. The incubator leveraged the resources to build a sophisticated product, called Perspective, launched in January 2017. The application was promoted as a new tool for web publishers to identify toxic comments that can undermine a civil exchange of ideas. Using machine learning technology, Perspective offers a score from zero to 100 on how similar new comments are to others previously identified as toxic, defined as how likely a comment is to make someone leave a conversation. Publishers can use Perspective in several ways, from offering readers instant feedback on the toxicity of their comments to giving readers the power to filter conversations based on the level of toxicity they'd like to see⁴⁴. In June 2017, *The New York Times* announced⁴⁵ that because of the partnership with Jigsaw, they would offer comments on all top stories and scale comments to 80% of its articles by the end of the year.

Collaborating with these The Coral Project and adopting Jigsaw's creation Perspective have a number of implications for media companies. On the positive side, partnering with these organizations can help media companies improve the quality of online discourse and combat online harassment. Though a point of criticism for this type of outsourcing may be that media companies are relying on external organizations to manage their online communities, while others may criticize them for partnering with an organization that have been accused of censorship or infringing on free speech.

There can also be negative implications for media companies that collaborate with these projects, given their relation to Google, one of the big five technology companies in the world, with a major and influential in the tech industry, and that have significant impact on how people interact with technology and consume media. If media companies rely heavily on these projects for moderation and community management, it may be seen as ceding control over their own online communities to a large tech company. This could lead to concerns about the independence and credibility of the media organization.

⁴⁴ Source <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/23/technology/google-jigsaw-monitor-toxic-online-comments.html>> Access on: 11 Nov. 2022.

⁴⁵ Source <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/13/insider/have-a-comment-leave-a-comment.html>> Access on: 11 Nov. 2022.

A considerable concern exists around data privacy. The big five tech companies, which include Google, collect massive amounts of personal data from their users, including information about their search history, browsing behavior, and location data, with one of the key concerns being how these companies use and protect the data that they collect (Nissenbaum, 2010; Zuboff, 2019; Mantelero, 2019; Turow, 2016). As media organizations partner with Google to moderate their relationships with the audience, there is apprehension around how their user data is being protected. There has also been unease about the independence and credibility of news organizations that partner with tech companies like Google for public moderation, particularly if the moderation policies implemented by outside companies does not fully align with the values or priorities of the media company (Vaidhyanathan, 2018; Bell, 2019; McChesney, 2013; Wu, 2016).

Another potential implication of these types of partnership is that media companies may be seen as contributing to the increasing consolidation of power in the tech industry. By partnering with Google, media companies may be seen as endorsing the company's dominance in the tech industry, which could be perceived as antithetical to the principles of a free and diverse media (though their dominance in the market is, as of now, unquestionable). Moreover, media companies may also have to consider the risks of over-reliance on a single tech platform or partner. While collaborating with Google can bring valuable resources and expertise, media companies may want to avoid becoming too dependent on a single partner, particularly given the fast-paced and constantly changing nature of the tech industry.

In the end, media companies will always have to carefully consider the potential benefits and risks of collaborating with projects, such as these created by Google, and ensure that any collaboration aligns with their values and priorities as a news organization, while maintaining their independence and credibility in the eyes of their audience. Ultimately, the success of media companies' involvement with the Coral Project and Jigsaw will depend on a variety of factors, including the specific tools and strategies they implement, how effectively they are implemented, and how transparently media companies communicate with their audiences about their moderation policies. Nevertheless, given the importance of improving online discourse and combating online harassment, many media companies may see collaborating with these organizations as a worthwhile risk.

2.2.4.2 The Companies: Spot.IM / OpenWeb, Netino and Viafoura

Spot.IM/OpenWeb, Netino and Viafoura are third-party service providers that offer a range of tools and services to help news sites and publishers manage and moderate user-generated content. These companies aim to provide an effective moderation solution for news sites and publishers, helping them to balance free speech and user engagement with the need to maintain a

safe and respectful online community. By leveraging technology and human moderation, they can effectively filter out spam, hate speech, and other harmful content, while promoting productive and respectful dialogue among readers.

Spot.IM, which offered a platform for publishers to manage their user comments, announced it rebrand as OpenWeb in June 2020. Founded in 2012, it has been working with publishers since then to bring conversations back from social media to publisher sites. Their intention is to improve the quality of conversation online. Their efforts take two distinct approaches to produce this outcome: a) their technology strives to incentivize and promote healthy conversations; b) They endeavor to demote and remove toxic conversations. For this, they build and implement tools such as: language detection, user reputation scores, community signals, sorting algorithms, and more to help detect and remove or reduce the prominence of toxic content. As it became OpenWeb, the company unveiled an upgraded version of its platform, which includes features like scoring the overall quality of conversation for a specific publisher, incentivizing quality comments by allowing users to earn reputation points and even asking users to reconsider their comment if it appears to violate a publisher's standards.

Netino was impressively founded in 2002 by Jean-Marc Royer, in Paris, as the boom of the internet and social interactions online was just starting. The company became a provider of an online platform for social content moderation and customer relationship management services, specialized in the technical implementation of forums for dialogue on websites and ensures appropriate responses on around the clock basis⁴⁶. The company uses their own proprietary tool, Moderatus, developed to allow a first level of filtering and prioritization to facilitate the moderation of millions of contents. Their main services are social listening, content management; and working on moderation and engagement.

Viafoura was founded in 2012 with the mission to help brands activate their digital audiences. They work with brands intending to build direct relationships with their audiences, reducing dependency on social media. Their socially immersive tools, which includes topic and author follows, real-time conversations, personalized notifications, and alerts, intend to engage, convert, and retain visitors right on customer websites. The company says their solutions can be customizable and their conversations tool provides the audience the opportunity to become engaged with the content. Using their moderation system, the tool can supposedly provide a civil environment for users to interact in real-time discussions while maintaining brand image.

⁴⁶ Source: <<https://pitchbook.com/profiles/company/54561-34>> Access: 21 Nov. 2022

While third-party moderation services like Spot.IM/OpenWeb, Netino, and Viafoura can assist news sites and publishers with managing comment sections, there are some potential drawbacks to consider. These include the risk of inaccuracy or over-reliance on automated moderation, which can lead to legitimate comments being incorrectly flagged or removed if algorithms are relied on too heavily. This can negatively impact user experience and decrease trust in the platform. Another potential downside is limitations on free speech, with some users perceiving moderation as censorship if their comments are removed or censored. This can lead to criticism of the platform and reduced user engagement. Additionally, the cost of third-party moderation services can be expensive, which may limit access to moderation tools for smaller news sites or publishers and leave them vulnerable to abuse or spam in the comment sections.

Ultimately, outsourcing moderation to a third-party company can also result in a loss of control over moderation policies and rules. It is important for news sites and publishers to carefully consider the potential risks of engaging third-party companies for moderation, including data privacy and security concerns, such as the risk of data breaches or unauthorized access to user data. Effective moderation requires a balance between technology, human intervention, and community engagement. Therefore, it is important to choose a moderation service provider that aligns with the values and priorities of the news site or publisher.

2.2.4.3 The Plugins: Facebook and Disqus

Plugins for comment sections, such as Facebook and Disqus, are third-party tools that allow websites to easily integrate commenting functionality into their pages without having to develop their own system. These plugins usually provide features such as moderation tools, social media integration, and user profiles. As with all outsourcing, data privacy becomes a concern: the use of these tools can give these companies unfettered access to user data.

Among third-party social media commenting options, the most widely used is the Facebook Comment Plugin, which allows users to use their Facebook account to leave comments on a website. A growing number of news websites have adopted this feature since its introduction in 2011. For news websites, the use of the Facebook Comment Plugin lowers the burden of comments management, including the accompanying ethical, ideological, and financial issues. Thus, users' choices on commenting on news website content have expanded from the site's comments section to include posting through social media plugins and posting on the news organization's official Facebook page or account within the boundaries of the social media platform (Ben-David and Soffer, 2019). Between the newspaper's website and its Facebook page, the Facebook Comment Plugin presents a hybrid environment. Within this platform, the

comments appear on the news website, are exposed to a mass audience and at the same time are written within the environment, culture, and affordances of Facebook.

Gillespie (2018) has argued that platforms like Facebook have significant power over online discourse and shape the ways in which users engage with each other. He notes that by outsourcing commenting systems to Facebook, news sites are giving up control over key aspects of the user experience, including moderation and data privacy. This can have broader implications for the public sphere, as it reinforces the power of dominant platforms at the expense of a more diverse and decentralized web.

Disqus, an American blog comment hosting service founded in October 2007, has also faced material concerns surrounding data privacy. Like other plugins and companies that make provide this type of service, privacy issues have been noted as inherent in its use, as the Disqus widget acts as a bug which tracks a user's activities, even when they are not logged in, across different sites that use their commenting system. Despite this issue, Disqus consider themselves the internet's favorite comment plug-in which makes it easy for publishers to bring their content to life, fuel discussions, efficiently moderate comments, and build engaged communities. The company operates on the ad-supported freemium financial model, which means that the service is free to use for both commenters and small websites, but displays ads, like on other plugins, though websites can pay fees to hide ads and unlock additional features.

2.2.4.4 The implications

In this era, where digital journalism frequently employs third-party expertise for comment moderation, it becomes crucial to weave in the implications of these decisions into our understanding of the "industrialization of moderation." Relying on a pre-established network to take over the responsibility of hosting a space of public participation is as important feature to look at when news sites hire outside companies to manage their spaces of public participation.

Outsourcing comment moderation to third-party agencies, in some ways, acts as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, external agencies often bring in specialized technical know-how, reducing the burden on news organizations to manually filter out harmful content. This ensures a more civil discourse and could potentially elevate the quality of public interactions. Yet, it is impossible to ignore the potential pitfalls. When news organizations outsource their comment sections, questions arise about accountability and detachment. Comments, while user-generated, appear alongside journalistic content. In the eyes of the public, the proximity implies an implicit endorsement, if not a direct association. This intertwining can blur lines of responsibility and raise concerns over journalistic integrity.

This brings a discussion upon whom the comments belong and, therefore, who should be held accountable for any problems. So, what does it mean, utilizing outside companies to host their comment sections? Can this provide more meaningful interactions if there is a company specialized in moderating the discourse allowed and making sure they are not invaded by trolls and hate speech, with this burden taken out of the hands of the newsroom? Or when you outsource your public, are you also removing it from your responsibility and henceforth its place in your journalism? But isn't it better to outsource and have a civil comment section, then leave it open to it all, or depend in user self-policing each other?

This option seems to take away the responsibility of moderating their comment sections from the media companies and putting that duty upon, for example, a moderation company or a social network. But it is still the media company's website and their news stories that share a space with the public's say-so. While you may establish in your terms and conditions that each person is responsible for their own words – it is still your outlet that is providing the space, in partnership with a social media or with another outside service, for those words to be said. They become related to your news site, your stories, your journalists as the public can see them sharing that space.

Moreover, the use of automated systems, while efficient, can occasionally lack the nuanced understanding of human moderators, potentially leading to the omission of genuine, valuable feedback or the inclusion of subtly problematic content. The widespread adoption of technical methodologies enhances the identification and removal of unlawful comments. There's a heightened focus on classifying comments by quality, through recommendation and annotation systems, leading to efforts to reward and retain prolific commentators.

The experience of the French newspaper, *Le Monde*, is enlightening. Rooted in their journalistic mission to host and encourage debate, *Le Monde* adapted their comment sections over time. Established in 2005 and reserved for subscribers, this section was initially overseen by an internal team but was later outsourced. While successful in terms of participation, the tone of reactions shifted towards negativity over time. As a response, *Le Monde* revisited their comment spaces like many other media outlets. Instead of closure, they chose to revamp them, strengthening their charters and moderation capabilities. Their collaboration with Jigsaw, an Alphabet/Google incubator, exemplifies the effort to enhance moderation and provide clear guidelines for contributors.

As they state in their journalistic mission, hosting the debate, whether on its website, in the columns of the newspaper or during public events, is one of the missions of *Le Monde*. Encouraging constructive, nuanced, respectful discussion is another. In order to better reconcile

these two commitments, Le Monde decided to modify the rules and operation of comments. Created in 2005, reserved for subscribers, reactions to articles aimed to open up, in addition to the traditional readers' mail, a shorter and more immediate form of questioning the editorial staff. This immediacy was from the outset conceived as supervised and controlled, since these reactions are moderated before publication, originally by an internal team, today by an external service provider. In terms of participation, their implementation was a success. In 2018, almost 900,000 comments were posted on our site, almost 3,000 a day. And of our approximately 180,000 digital subscribers, more than 20,000 posted at least one reaction in 2018, and about half consult them, making it one of the services most used by our subscribers.

However, over the years, the tone of these reactions, and of the debate they are supposed to carry, deteriorated. Many subscribers, often joined by the editorial staff, have rightly complained about it. In this space, Le Monde did not escape the evils of the time: eruptive expressions, irreconcilable visions of the world, influence campaigns. A finding corroborated by the trend increase in the share of unpublished reactions by the site's moderators. The "rejection rate" has been able to reach 14%, 15%, or even 18% in recent months, even if the average, at the start of 2019, is "only" 12%. Insults, racist remarks, defamation, even calls for violence: according to the figures provided by their service provider, Netino, 42% of the rejected reactions fall into one of these categories which, it should be remembered, can constitute offenses under the law.

Le Monde is not the only media to have encountered these difficulties. In recent years, in France and abroad, most major sites have revisited their comment spaces. Some have closed them, others have tried to improve them, strengthening their charters and their moderation capacities. Le Monde has chosen this second option, wishing not to deprive its subscribers of this service, and to continue its efforts to contribute to the existence of online spaces where public debate can take place. To this end, a working group has drawn up a new reaction charter, which everyone can consult, and which all contributors must now approve. This text sets out more clearly the principles to which we are committed and explains the new operating rules: encouragement to offer more detailed reactions, extended moderation, establishment of a limited number of "reactions to reactions", elimination of the possibility of associate multiple signatures to the same subscriber account.

Le Monde explored ways to strengthen their moderation and make it clearer to contributors. To this end, they started a partnership with Jigsaw, an Alphabet/Google incubator, whose collaborations, with sites such as the New York Times (US) and El Pais (Spain), within the framework of the "Perspective" project, that seemed appealing for their new goals. They established this partnership to help them better detect potentially problematic comments and

gradually refine their rules. It will also allow each contributor to be informed if the comment he is writing risks being rejected by Netino moderators.

In Argentina, digital comments are less popular, being the country with the lowest adoption of comments, with only three news sites using comment sections. Yet, leading news platforms like La Nación and Grupo Clarín have outsourced their comment moderation to Viafoura's digital experience platform. Integrating their Conversations Solution. This enables automated comment moderation on the websites, while also capturing data and analytics about the companies' registered users. The Conversations Solution also includes a community feed, the option to follow topics and/or authors, and a trending content carousel. This move is indicative of the media outlets' ambition to foster community dialogue while relying heavily on automated moderation. La Nación focuses on cultivating community interactions, while Grupo Clarín prioritizes improving user experience, blocking up to 90% of offensive comments automatically, facilitating positive discussions.

With 46 million monthly users and 343,000 paid subscribers, La Nación wanted to cultivate and nurture its community, while making it easy for readers to express themselves: "One of our objectives is to increase our registered users' interactions," said Juan Alvarez (2021), product manager at La Nación. "By switching to Viafoura, only our registered users can comment, so we hope it promotes a civil dialogue while helping our users have more mindful interactions."

Replacing its previous audience interaction tool, Grupo Clarín joined Viafoura in order to improve the user experience on its websites, and as a consequence continue growing in registrations and subscriptions. Clarín did not have an effective way to moderate conversations on its digital properties, the moderation technology used by the company now allows the news site to automatically block up to 90% of offensive comments, thus facilitating positive and interesting conversations. "We were looking for more than just a basic commenting platform; we needed a solution that could consistently handle friendly interaction and site loyalty," explained Marcelo Rizzi (2022), Chief Technology Officer and Big Data at Grupo Clarín. "We found it attractive how Viafoura could bring an intuitive social experience directly to our websites, with real-time interaction features such as *likes*, *shares*, *personalization* and *notifications*."

The act of outsourcing and the use of automated systems introduce new challenges and considerations. As comment sections increasingly resemble social networks, they risk becoming echo chambers. News organizations need to strike a balance, staying connected to their audiences while ensuring the quality and integrity of discourse. As we look at the practical examples of outsourcing, we see that it is a solution to maintain the comments sections civil, as a tool that brings them positive engagement from the public, without being a hassle to the newsroom. And

while the solutions seem to work by the numbers, they don't propose a change in the traditional logic of the comment section going beyond a space for feedback, as interactions remain between the users, looking evermore like the principles of a social network, then a meaningful conversation and debate that involves the newsroom.

2.3 Newsletters

The newsletter is older than one would think. A precursor of regular newspapers, that even predates the term journalism by about two centuries, the term was introduced in the English language in the 1830s. Newsletters first emerged in the early 15th century as written and printed translations of foreign events, natural disasters, and supernatural occurrences (Rubery, 2010). The notion of providing news about the contemporary world at regular intervals eventually evolved into the current multiplatform mass-media age. Interestingly, while roughly 400 years old, newsletters have far from disappeared as a useful means of disseminating curated news content to audiences (Hendricks et al., 2020).

Newsletters are not some hip new platform or technology, in fact, they are about as old school as it gets, but news organizations seem to have discovered that a newsletter might just be the most effective way to efficiently deliver news online. For digital journalism, they represent emails with a summary of the news of the day, or segmented news, sent directly to the inbox of consumers, are a personalization feature currently used by media organizations to engage the public. A newsletter, in its traditional sense, is typically not considered an interactive tool. It is typically a one-way communication that delivers news, updates, and other information to a subscriber's email inbox or physical mailbox. However, it is possible to make a newsletter more interactive by incorporating elements such as clickable buttons, surveys, polls, and interactive media like videos or animations. Additionally, including calls-to-action and encouraging feedback or responses from readers can also make a newsletter more interactive. So, while a newsletter is not inherently interactive, it can be designed and structured to encourage interaction and engagement with its audience.

In recent years, the production of email newsletters has sharply increased, both by legacy newer digital media publishers. The trend mirrors the continued strength of emails in daily life, and their widespread use in marketing, despite the advent of more sophisticated and proprietary digital tools (Jack, 2016). They have the benefit of being easy to manage, reaching users effortlessly, and demanding no form of moderation. Out of the 80 news sites analyzed (10 per country), a substantial 73 (91%), implemented newsletters for user interaction and engagement. Figure 33 provides a country-wise breakdown, presenting the adoption rate on a scale of 1 to 10.

Distribution of Newsletter by Country



Figure 33 – Adoption Rate of Newsletters by Country.

In the US, Spain, France, Germany, and Brazil, all 10 news sites used newsletters, while 09 adopted it in the Netherlands (NOS.nl was the only exception), and 07 using it in the UK (Daily Mail, The Sun and Sky News were the exceptions) and in Argentina (La Prensa, Diario Popular and Cronica were the exceptions). Newsletters are a popular tool for media organizations for several reasons. First, newsletters provide a direct line of communication with audiences, allowing news outlets to engage with their readers and viewers more effectively. By offering a regular, personalized digest of news and information, newsletters can help build stronger relationships with audiences and foster a sense of community around a news brand. Additionally, newsletters can be a valuable source of revenue for media organizations, as they can be monetized through advertising or subscriptions.

However, the lower adoption rate of newsletters in the UK and Argentina may be due to several factors. One possibility is that media organizations in these countries may be focusing on other forms of audience engagement, such as social media or mobile apps. Another possibility is that newsletters may be perceived as outdated or less effective in these markets, particularly if audiences are more accustomed to receiving news through other channels. It is also worth noting that the specific media outlets mentioned as exceptions in the UK and Argentina are well-known for their tabloid-style reporting and may prioritize breaking news and sensational headlines over more curated, personalized content. This could make newsletters a less natural fit for their audiences. Overall, the popularity of newsletters among media organizations reflects the value of building strong, direct connections with audiences. However, the lower adoption rate in some countries highlights the importance of tailoring engagement strategies to the unique preferences

and habits of local audiences. If comment sections were once the most popular feature for participation in new sites and social networks had the biggest appeal for reaching the public, this panorama shows us that publishers now seem more excited by the engagement their email newsletters can produce.

In 2010 social networks were at their highest point. They were innovative, modern, fresh and it seemed that they were going to destroy the rest of the communication channels. Email was one of its first victims. Sending emails seemed like something old, from another time. In the years that followed, inboxes were filled with commercial emails and spam to the point of rendering them useless. But something changed in the following years. Email managers managed to order and classify the content we received every day and social networks began to face the logical problems of channeling all the information that circulates in such a polarized world: lack of trust, noise, and verbal violence. Reason why many readers returned to take refuge in a more personal, controllable, and orderly means of communication such as email.

Also, while leveraging search engines and social media for wider reach and for promoting news stories to audiences, media organizations are becoming ever more conscious of the risks of being too dependent on external platforms who may change their priorities over time, which is why the email emerges a valuable non-intermediated channel to communicate directly with readers. Against the tyranny of algorithms, and their desire to capture attention rather than inform, the newsletter emerged again.

I thought newsletters were an outdated technology, something for old people. The Washington Post was quite popular on Facebook, but suddenly they changed their algorithms, and we lost a lot of readers. I realized that I needed to find something where I can control the means of production. Newsletters were one way of doing it (David Beard, director of digital content of The Washington Post *in* Fagerlund, 2016).

The 2020 Digital News Report indicated that the feature became a convenient form for news organization to counter the move to various platforms. The renaissance of newsletters has thus been realized not in spite, but because of social media. It is a means to direct traffic to news websites and to ensure consumers are not locked into ecosystems of Google, Amazon and Facebook. This feature makes them a key component of news media's conversion funnel: they form an attractive entry point for new readers, turn casual readers into engaged ones by offering curated content, convert engaged readers into paying customers and keep loyal subscribers interested to reduce churn (Boltik et al., 2017).

As such, beyond simple content distribution, newsletters are being used to strengthen ties with members and reinforce their importance for the business models adopted (Carpes da Silva and Sanseverino, 2020), as emails have proved effective in attracting potential new subscribers, as well as encouraging existing users to come back more frequently (Newman et al., 2020). An email

newsletter is like a friend who checks in every day like clockwork, you don't have to seek it out, it is as familiar as a morning cup of coffee. Your loyalty to it grows over time. It is often brief and respects your time. It makes you smarter. It gives you something to talk about. And for a news organization, it is relatively inexpensive to produce, it connects you directly with your readers, it builds brand loyalty, and it is a pathway to a subscription or membership. They allow media companies to build direct connections with consumers via email and mobile alerts.

An engaged email newsletter list enormously aids in newsroom fundraising appeals, membership appeals, sponsored content packages, classified ad opportunities, and more monetization potential for newsrooms and independent newsletter writers. The Intercept Brazil, for example, continually uses its newsletters to appeal to their users to help fund their journalism when they are in need (Figure 34). Some readers who are not ready to buy a subscription will willingly provide their email addresses for a free newsletter. This breaks a significant barrier and makes it much easier to start working to make them paying customers. Mediapart from France and Nexo from Brazil, for example, who have paywalls, offer free newsletters for you to get to know their journalism (Figure 35).



Figure 34 – Example of fundraise newsletter from The Intercept Brazil.

Newsletters

Nos lettres sont gratuites et vous pouvez vous désinscrire à tout moment.
Profitez du meilleur de Mediapart dans votre boîte mail !

1. Choisissez vos newsletters



Quotidienne

Tous les jours

Les principaux titres de l'actualité

☐ Je choisis

Exemple >



Hebdo

Tous les vendredis

Notre sélection d'articles à ne pas manquer

☐ Je choisis

Exemple >



Alerte

À chaque révélation

Les informations qui ne peuvent attendre

☐ Je choisis

Exemple >



Politique

Tous les débuts de semaine

La politique en France : ceux qui la font, ceux qui la contestent, ceux qui s'en éloignent

☐ Je choisis

Exemple >

Figure 35 – Example of payroll newsletter from Mediapart.

As an engagement feature, newsletters offer you a direct connection with your audiences. This potential may legitimise and justify, in a sense, its growing popularity. When a newsroom posts a new story on its website, it is up to the reader to 1) visit the website and see the story or 2) come across the story via social media. An email newsletter allows newsrooms to send new stories and coverage directly to readers — a notification and nudge that helps direct the reader's attention. Lintern@ute France uses newsletters as their big draw to engagement, having different modalities and providing examples for the user to view online before he decides if he wants or not to sign-up to receive these types of emails in his inbox (Figure 36).



Figure 36 – Example of newsletter notifications from lintern@ute France.

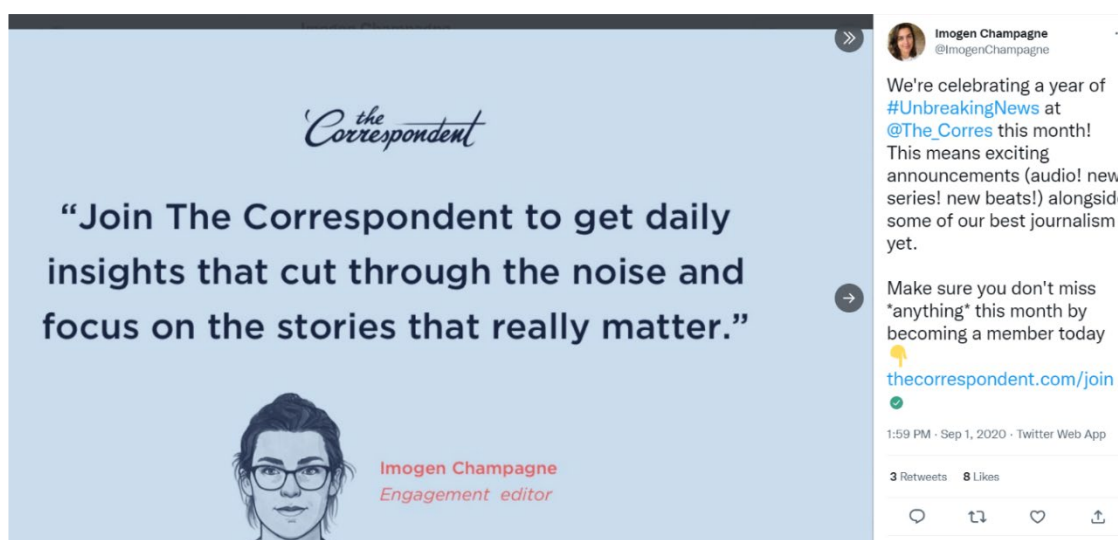


Figure 37 – The Correspondent newsletter call out by Imogen Champagne.

Imogen Champagne⁴⁷, based out of Australia, was The Correspondent’s engagement editor (Figure 37). She was a part of the project’s two-pronged approach in reaching out to the public and keeping their members inside of their journalistic process. From Monday through Friday, from the launch of the news site in September of 2019, to the final newsletter on the 31st of December of 2020, Ms. Champagne reached out to members in their inboxes 394 times.

Ms. Champagne (October, 2021) explained that, in the Correspondent, they believe in making the newsletter cool again, but also “make it far more than a curation of top stories”. The Correspondent transformed the newsletter into an essential tool to interact with their members and to call them to contribute to the stories written by their correspondents. Under the title of “Engagement Editor”, Ms. Champagne use their members inboxes to interact with them, connect them to the stories of news site, becoming the first to open the door to engagement between their users and the newsroom staff.

Journalism is no longer a one-size-fits-all-solution in which one newspaper is printed for the entire population. Personalized news is clearly here to stay, and newsletters can play a key part in this approach. Newsletters can be tailor-made to cater to very niche groups and communities, ranging from age groups, cities, towns, and neighborhoods to interests and types of news content. Specific newsletters have millennials, women, businessmen and-women, football enthusiasts and fans of lifestyle and/or fashion as target audiences. They can be a complimentary service offered

⁴⁷ Imogen Champagne was Engagement Editor for The Correspondent. Exchanges were conducted with the journalist for this research between October 2021 and January 2022. Statements from the exchanges will be used throughout this thesis from this point forward, always between quotations mark, and, if necessary, information she provided will be followed by the reference (Imogen Champagne, October 2021).

to subscribers by providing overviews of articles behind paywalls, can contain coupons, discounts and contests and can be curated by individual editors or journalists offering handpicked selections of articles, just as the original online newsletters of the 1990s and early 2010s. This allows news outlets to diversify their output to the people who will most likely read it, bringing their journalism closer to its intended core audience. The ability to personalize the news you get in your email is a big plus for users when it comes to newsletters, and it can be done in different forms, but it is present in most of the websites.

2.3.1 The Substack Future?

In the ever-evolving world of digital journalism, the internet, while democratizing access to information, has also disrupted traditional media's longstanding business models. This disruption led to a whirlwind of debates about the very future and viability of journalism. Yet, amidst this uncertainty, a seemingly archaic form of communication—the newsletter—has re-emerged as a beacon of hope.

Platforms like Substack, introduced in 2017 by Chris Best, Jairaj Sethi, and Hamish McKenzie, have offered more than just a nod to nostalgia. These platforms have transformed newsletters from mere tools of engagement into primary vessels of journalistic content. For many digital-age writers and journalists, the newsletter has become their main product, delivered directly to the inboxes of their subscribers. Interestingly, for the majority of readers, this direct line of content often comes free of charge. Yet, much like the principles of crowdfunding, many platforms offer a 'supportive' model, allowing readers to financially back and invest in the creators they value, fostering a unique sense of community and shared stake in the journalism they consume.

This shift towards newsletter-focused journalism signifies a broader movement from mass content aimed at general audiences to more niche, specialized content tailored for specific reader segments. Traditional media, driven largely by advertising metrics, often leans towards content with mass appeal. In contrast, the direct subscription models of modern newsletter platforms encourage writers to cater to dedicated, engaged communities. This focus on niche content not only allows for deeper, more investigative journalism but also re-establishes a direct trust line between the writer and reader, a trust that seems ever so crucial in today's era of misinformation.

Beyond the mere delivery of content, newsletters, with their inherent format, encourage a sense of community among their readers. The direct interactions, feedback loops, and comments often seen on these platforms create a tighter knit, engaged reader community. This sense of community, combined with a direct subscription model, could very well represent the future of sustainable journalism, prioritizing substance over the mere pursuit of virality.

So, where do newsletters stand in the broader online news ecosystem? Their resurgence suggests a significant shift towards the decentralization of content. Gone are the days dominated solely by centralized news conglomerates; now, individual creators, with their distinct voices, have a platform to be heard. This model's beauty lies in its ability to amplify diverse voices, ones that might otherwise be drowned out in the cacophony of mainstream media. However, this explosion of voices does bring challenges. The vast digital space is becoming even more crowded, and discerning quality becomes paramount. As readers, there's a need to navigate this space wisely to ensure exposure to diverse viewpoints and avoid falling into information echo chambers.

As newsletters continue to gain traction, it is only a matter of time before mainstream media outlets take notice. Some may integrate similar models, while others might pivot to unique content avenues, but one thing is clear: the re-emergence of newsletters isn't a mere trend. It is a testament to the ongoing, dynamic evolution of journalism in the digital age.

2.3.1.1 Leandro Demori: from The Intercept to Substack

The Intercept Brasil was established in 2016 during the impeachment proceedings against former Brazilian president, Dilma Rousseff. This venture was an initiative of Glenn Greenwald, the co-founder and editor of the platform. He saw the political turbulence in Brazil as an opportunity to highlight and promote The Intercept Brasil, which had its origins backed by First Look Media—a philanthropic entity founded by Pierre Omidyar, the creator and head of eBay.

Since its inception, The Intercept Brasil had been heavily reliant on the unwavering support of American allies. This backing enabled them to undertake daring investigations that would be beyond the reach of other media entities. This support system was the backbone of The Intercept Brasil for six transformative years. In 2023, The Intercept became an independent non-profit organization, and then left the First Look Media group. The objective of the separation was to pave the way to raise external financing and build a long-term sustainable business model.

To ensure financial stability, The Intercept made necessary adjustments to its workforce and financial strategies. While specific figures remain undisclosed, there was a reduction in staff members. The initial founders alongside Greenwald, and now directors of the news site, Andrew Fishman and Cecília Olliveira, are steering the platform into its new phase, reiterating their dedication to producing critical journalism Brazil needs most at this juncture. They emphasize their allegiance to a non-profit model, ensuring that all proceeds are funneled directly into journalism rather than personal profits.

Leandro Demori⁴⁸, former Executive Editor of The Intercept Brasil, left the news site months before the change happened. Persecuted by members of the public, having suffered threats of violence for him and his family, the journalist left the country and his position at the news organization; but he did not forgo of his coverage of what he considered to be the mission of the Intercept, and now his mission as a solo journalist through his newsletter “The Great War” (“A Grande Guerra, in Portuguese”) on Substack (Figure 38): to “raise my voice against abuses of power and explain the gears behind the confusing smokescreens of politics” (Leandro Demori, July 2023).

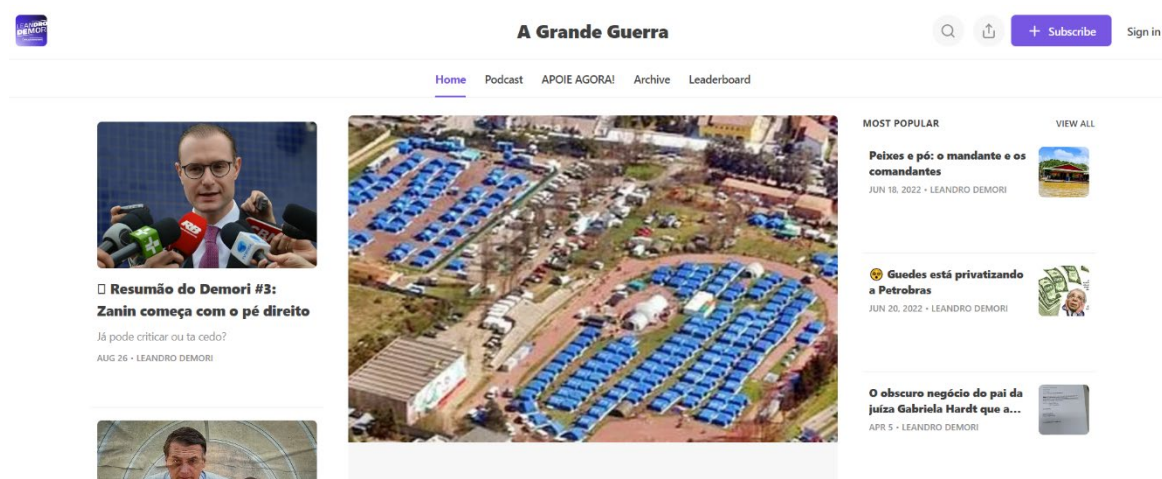


Figure 38 – Homepage of “The Great War” on Substack.

In the ever-evolving digital media landscape, every journalist’s path is uniquely carved, but few transitions stand out as boldly as Leandro Demori’s leap from The Intercept Brasil to Substack. It is not just a personal transition for Demori but symbolic of an industry undergoing transformation. At The Intercept Brasil, Demori built a reputation as a pillar of investigative journalism, digging deep into stories, unearthing truths, and often challenging the status quo. The digital-native news outlet, backed by crowdfunding and driven by the mission of fearless, adversarial journalism, provided Demori a robust platform.

In need of a platform to continue producing journalism, Substack emerged on the horizon for Demori as a beacon of something profound: editorial independence combined with direct audience engagement. For seasoned journalists like Demori, Substack’s allure wasn’t just in its monetization model, which shifts focus from advertisers to readers, but in the unique tools it offers

⁴⁸ Leandro Demori is the former editor-and-chief of The Intercept Brasil. Exchanges were conducted with the journalist for this research in July 2023 via Telegram text messages. Statements from the exchanges will be used throughout this thesis from this point forward, always between quotations mark, and, if necessary, information he provided will be followed by the reference (Leandro Demori, July 2023).

for fostering a sense of community. Journalism is not just about relaying facts; it is about stories, conversations, and community. Substack enables writers to create an intimate space where debates, discussions, and interactions transcend the superficial and delve into the profound. It promises a space where journalists can nurture a community of readers who are not just passive consumers but active participants.

But the Substack model isn't without its challenges. With freedom comes responsibility. The direct financial backing from readers turns journalism into a two-way street. Demori, like his peers on Substack, finds himself in a nuanced dynamic of user dependency. It is a dance between delivering high-quality journalism that readers are willing to pay for and ensuring that the content remains true to the journalist's core values. A solo venture means every decision, every piece of content, and every interaction carries the weight of sustaining reader trust.

Other journalists have embarked on similar journeys, seeking refuge from the confines of traditional media outlets to the expansive freedom of the web. Matt Taibbi's exit from Rolling Stone, Glenn Greenwald's own venture into independent journalism post-The Intercept, and Andrew Sullivan's move to Substack are all reflective of a broader trend. They showcase a shift from mass media's "some information for everyone" to a more personalized "all the information an individual wants."

In this brave new world, traditional tools of engagement still retain their importance. Comment sections, newsletters, and social media share buttons remain vital. Newsletters, in particular, have evolved into powerful tools, serving as gateways for new users, keeping them engaged, and eventually leading them down the path of financial support. Yet, with platforms like Substack, participation also takes on new forms. Direct emails, virtual community events, and exclusive content become pivotal, allowing readers to feel valued, seen, and heard. Social media plays a dual role in this new ecosystem. For journalists striking out on their own, platforms like Twitter and Facebook become essential lifelines to disseminate content, engage with audiences, and grow their subscriber base. The symbiotic relationship between a journalist's personal brand and their content becomes more pronounced than ever.

In the grand tapestry of digital journalism, Demori's transition stands out as more than just a forced career move—it is a testament to his unwavering commitment to journalistic ideals and his adaptability in a rapidly changing media landscape. At The Intercept Brasil, he was at the forefront of crucial investigations, holding power to account, and pushing boundaries in a crowded space. His decision to embrace Substack wasn't merely about seeking a new platform but about redefining his relationship with his audience: "At the Intercept I already had to make personal appeals to the audience to keep it going, to keep our crowdfunding going. But now it is even more

personal, I have a direct relationship with my audience. I have a Telegram channel with all those who support me. I speak to them on a daily basis, and they answer with support. With supporting my crowdfunding and with sharing what I write, sharing my journalism” (Leandro Demori, July, 2023).

Demori’s move epitomizes the evolving nature of journalism in the digital age. It underscores the growing importance of a direct, unfiltered line of communication between a journalist and their audience. By stepping out of a well-established newsroom into the uncharted waters of Substack, he not only showcased his confidence in the merit of his work but also in his belief in the discerning nature of his readership. This decision signifies a conscious choice to prioritize depth over breadth, personal connection over mass appeal, and quality over quantity. It is a declaration of trust in an audience that craves substantial, in-depth reporting, and is willing to directly support it.

Furthermore, Demori’s journey offers a glimpse into the future of journalism, where the emphasis shifts from the brand power of news outlets to the individual reputation and credibility of journalists. His choice speaks to a world where the story behind the news and the *ethos* of the storyteller become central to the narrative. Leandro Demori’s path from The Intercept Brasil to Substack is more than just a career transition. It is a poignant reflection of a journalist’s intrinsic desire for editorial freedom, a deeper bond with readers, and the courage to navigate uncharted terrains in the pursuit of truth.

2.3.1.2 *Adrian Bono: from The Bubble to The Tapas*

In the annals of digital journalism, The Bubble emerged as a beacon of adaptability, resilience, and community-building. However, its journey took an unexpected turn when, in late 2020, the decision was made to bring down the virtual curtains, ultimately leading to the site’s offline status by January 2021. Nonetheless, The Bubble’s story continues to resonate as a testament to the evolving landscape of online media and the enduring power of journalism to connect people across borders and cultures.

Founded in May 2013 by Adrian Bono⁴⁹, a seasoned editor for the Buenos Aires Herald, The Bubble was conceived to cater to the burgeoning demand among English-speaking residents and visitors to stay informed about Argentina in a language accessible to them. “I started The Bubble because it was something I thought was missing from the news scene in Argentina. There

⁴⁹ Adrian Bono was the founder of the news site The Bubble. Exchanges were conducted with the journalist for this research in May 2023 via email. Statements from the exchanges will be used throughout this thesis from this point forward, always between quotations mark, and, if necessary, information he provided will be followed by the reference (Adrian Bono, May 2023).

were a lot of expatriates like me in Buenos Aires who wanted to find information about life, the city, things to do in English. With my experience and the support of my friend Emily (Hersh), we launched the website.” (Adrian Bono, May 2023). The Bubble emerged as a passion project closely tied to Bono’s personal journey and journalistic aspirations.

The Bubble’s mission was unequivocal: to puncture the language barrier and offer a vibrant, engaging, and accessible window into Argentine culture and society. Covering a wide spectrum of topics, from sports and politics to economics, pop culture, entertainment, local events, and even Pope Francis-related content, the site aimed to create a sense of connection between its readers and the rich tapestry of Argentine life.

Its name, The Bubble, ingeniously encapsulated the distinctive expatriate community that thrived within Buenos Aires—an enclave often perceived as insular and challenging to penetrate. “The name The Bubble was not random, or meant to be cute,” Bono (May 2023) explains. “It was really about the bubble we were trying to reach, the expatriates that wanted English news in Argentina. We were definitely a niche site, producing content for a niche public. Writing in English in a Spanish-speaking country made us different from the start and made the people we could reach limited.”

Over time, The Bubble rapidly gained popularity among the English-speaking population in Buenos Aires, cultivating a dedicated readership eager to explore Argentina through the lens of pop culture. However, an unforeseen phenomenon emerged, one that would shape the site’s evolution. Argentinians themselves, drawn to the site’s distinctive tone and content, began reading The Bubble in significant numbers. By 2019, “approximately half of The Bubble’s readership were Argentinians who liked the unique perspective we offered” (Adrian Bono, May 2023).

As The Bubble continued to expand its reach, it found itself resonating not only with individuals but also with influential circles beyond Argentina. The site became a trusted source of information for think tanks like the Wilson Center in Washington, the United States government, and various NGOs seeking insights into Argentina. These entities recognized the value of The Bubble’s content and yearned for more in-depth coverage, especially in the realms of politics, economics, business, and markets.

In response to this demand for specialized content, Adrian Bono and his team took a bold step by launching The Essential in 2019. This premium, subscription-based news platform was designed to provide high-quality journalism and comprehensive coverage in English, focusing specifically on the intricate changes in Argentine politics and economics. This new venture complemented The Bubble’s original mission while catering to a distinct audience interested in deeper insights into Argentina’s political and economic landscape.

Reflecting on the journey of The Bubble, Adrian Bono shared lessons learned. One key takeaway was the value of persevering in the face of skepticism. Despite initial doubts and perceptions that The Bubble might be a mere vanity project, the platform not only thrived but also evolved to meet the needs of its growing readership. Bono's experience underscored the significance of daring to pursue innovative media projects that defied conventional expectations.

Yet, Bono also acknowledged a sense of unfulfilled ambition. First, on the dream of expanding The Bubble beyond Argentina to Mexico and Brazil remained unrealized, primarily due to the challenging circumstances within Argentina. This, in Bono's eyes, stood as a company-level shortcoming and represented a source of disappointment. "You could say it was a personal and passion project for me. I was invested in it, and I relied on it for my life in the city. As we met other people from outside of Latin America and talked, we saw the need for websites like this in other places. We had plans to expand, to have a version for Brazil... but in the end, it just didn't happen." (Adrian Bono, May 2023).

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 marked a turning point, both in Adrian Bono's personal life and The Bubble's trajectory. The pandemic triggered a series of events that reshaped the digital journalism landscape. "With the pandemic, everything closing, people going home, The Bubble lost its purpose." In response, efforts were made to sustain the platform throughout 2020. Yet, as the world changed and needs evolved, the closure of The Bubble became inevitable. "Supporting a project, and I don't mean just financially, that feels like it doesn't work anymore, doesn't have a purpose... well. We shut the website off. The world moved on, and eventually we did too." (Adrian Bono, May 2023).

The Bubble's story, while marked by closure in late 2020 and offline status by January 2021, continues to resonate as a testament to the evolving landscape of online media and the enduring power of journalism to connect people across borders and cultures. "I don't know now if there is a need for The Bubble in Buenos Aires now, but I am guessing yes. Maybe another expatriate in the country will take up the torch and open another site" (Adrian Bono, May 2023). Nevertheless, the end of The Bubble marked the beginning of a new chapter for Adrian Bono. Swiftly embracing the Substack platform, Bono launched The Tapa.

The Tapa, much like its predecessor, became a weekly newsletter that retained some of The Bubble's elements. It served as a testament to the adaptability and resilience of journalists in the digital era, as Bono shifted his focus from Argentina to Spain. This transition highlighted his adaptability and resilience in navigating the ever-evolving digital journalism landscape. The Tapa, a weekly newsletter, carried forward some of The Bubble's elements while focusing on Spain instead of Argentina.

Adrian Bono's journey, from *The Bubble* to *The Tapa*, offers a unique perspective on the challenges and resilience of personal passion projects in digital journalism. It underscores how such projects differ from traditional media companies and how they can face criticism when continuity is disrupted. Ultimately, it highlights the dynamic nature of modern journalism and the complex relationship between journalists and their audiences in an evolving media landscape. While *The Bubble* was a comprehensive online media platform, *The Tapa* emerged as a weekly newsletter. The transition demonstrated how online journalism can pivot swiftly to align with the changing needs and interests of its audience. *The Tapa*, much like its predecessor, played a role in bridging the information gap for English-speaking readers, albeit in a different geographic context. Notably, Adrian Bono's experience mirrors a broader trend in digital journalism. Journalists worldwide are increasingly utilizing platforms like Substack to publish and distribute their work independently. These platforms offer a degree of editorial freedom and a direct connection with readers, bypassing traditional media outlets. This shift exemplifies the democratization of journalism, where journalists can amplify their voices and reach a global audience with ease.

The ever-evolving digital journalism landscape has given rise to a diverse array of platforms and approaches, reflecting the multifaceted nature of the industry. A striking illustration of this dynamism can be found in the journeys of journalists Adrian Bono and Leandro Demori within the realm of Substack, a platform that has gained prominence as a hub for independent writers and news creators. Their experiences shed light on the remarkable versatility and adaptability of Substack, which can morph into a tool with distinct meanings, serving various purposes in the hands of different journalists.

Adrian Bono's venture into Substack with *The Tapa* demonstrates how this platform can facilitate a transition from ambitious online news projects to more personal and niche endeavors. *The Tapa*, while a side project in Bono's professional life, carries echoes of the once-ambitious website, *The Bubble*, which had envisioned expansion to other countries. This transformation underscores the fluidity and adaptability demanded by the ever-evolving digital journalism landscape.

In stark contrast, Leandro Demori, a steadfast champion of investigative journalism in Brazil, harnesses Substack in a unique and powerful manner. He leverages crowdfunding to finance his in-depth news reports, which he then publishes and disseminates through Substack. For Demori, Substack transcends its role as a mere dissemination tool; it becomes a symbol of editorial freedom and a vehicle to fulfill what he perceives as journalism's core mission: reporting on power

and unveiling the truth for the public's benefit. Substack evolves into a platform for Demori's voice, his investigative narratives, and his fervent advocacy for democracy.

These two divergent approaches to Substack not only reflect the platform's flexibility but also illuminate its capacity to adopt distinct roles within the broader digital journalism context. For Demori, Substack serves as a powerful instrument for investigative journalism and an agent for societal transformation. Conversely, in Bono's case, Substack acts as a vehicle to share his new passion project, *The Tapa*, which may not bear the same weighty mission but nonetheless enriches the digital news landscape. Together, the experiences of Bono and Demori offer compelling insights into the malleability and adaptability of digital journalism platforms and how they can harmonize with the unique aspirations and values of individual journalists.

The dynamic nature of the news ecosystem is also exemplified by the experiences of Bono and Demori within the realm of Substack. Their shed light on how it influences the relationships between media entities and their audiences compared to singular journalists and their readers. Media companies often face the pressures of capitalism within the online news ecosystem. They rely on advertising revenue, which incentivizes click-worthy headlines and sensationalism to boost user engagement and revenue. This can sometimes compromise journalistic integrity and lead to concerns about the prioritization of profits over quality reporting. In the era of globalization, media conglomerates can span multiple countries, enabling them to cover global events comprehensively. However, this can also lead to homogenized news coverage that may prioritize stories with broader international appeal, potentially overlooking local or niche interests.

On the other hand, singular journalists like Demori on Substack have the freedom to pursue their investigative passions without the influence of corporate interests. This enables them to maintain a strong commitment to journalistic integrity and independence, as they are directly accountable to their readers and not shareholders. Journalists who operate independently can engage more directly with their readers, fostering trust and accountability. They can interact with their audience through comments, newsletters, and social media, creating a more personal and immediate connection.

While media companies and individual journalists both contribute to the online news ecosystem, their relationships with users differ significantly. This dichotomy reflects the broader landscape of online news, where users must navigate between traditional media outlets driven by corporate interests and independent journalists pursuing their unique journalistic missions. In this multifaceted online news ecosystem, discerning readers have the opportunity to explore a diverse range of voices and narratives. However, it also places the onus on consumers of news to exercise critical thinking and media literacy to differentiate between sources and appreciate the unique value

that both media companies and individual journalists bring to the evolving digital journalism landscape.

2.3.2 WhatsApp and Telegram Channels: The New Frontiers in Modern Newsletter Dynamics

In the contemporary age, newsletters have seen an unexpected resurgence, acting as a bridge between content creators and their dedicated audiences. But as we progress further into the digital era, even the notion of newsletters is evolving, blending seamlessly with our everyday communication platforms. Two giants in this transformative phase are WhatsApp and Telegram with their Channels features.



Figure 39 – Promotional Image of Whatsapp Channels. Source: Whatsapp Official Webpage.

WhatsApp, one of the world's leading messaging platforms, made a significant leap on June 8th, 2023, with the introduction of "Channels". Positioned as a simple, reliable, and private way to receive important updates, Channels are housed in a new tab called Updates, distinct from personal chats (Figure 39).

Through Channels, admins can engage in one-way broadcasts, sending everything from text, photos, videos to polls. Users can tailor their experience, choosing which channels to follow based on their interests. WhatsApp has strategically ensured privacy by anonymizing the personal information of both admins and followers. In addition, the transient nature of content, with channel history lasting only up to 30 days and features to make them disappear faster, further emphasizes the platform's commitment to privacy. Furthermore, monetization is on the horizon, with plans to support channel admins in building a business around their channels through integrated payment services and promotion strategies.

In comparison, Telegram has had its Channels feature since September 2015. Operating on a similar one-way broadcast paradigm, Telegram Channels have been powerful tools for organizations and public figures to maintain direct communication with vast audiences. The feature's charm lies in its unlimited subscriber capacity, with only admins having the right to post. The content is made easily accessible, even to non-Telegram users, as it's viewable on the web and indexed by search engines. But how do these Channels fit into the modern newsletter landscape?

1. **Blurring the Lines Between Messaging and Broadcasting:** While newsletters typically reside in our email inboxes, platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram are morphing into multi-dimensional spaces that cater to both personal conversations and public broadcasts. Users can now consume curated content without leaving the comfort of their favorite messaging apps.
2. **Immediate Reach and Engagement:** One of the primary advantages these platforms offer over traditional newsletters is instant notifications. Each post can potentially trigger an immediate reaction, ensuring timely and high engagement.
3. **Monetization and Professional Development:** With WhatsApp looking to integrate payment services, these channels are set to become not just communication tools but potentially profitable ventures. Content creators can monetize their audience, blending commerce with communication seamlessly.
4. **Accessibility and Indexing:** Telegram's web accessibility feature makes the content available to an even broader audience, surpassing the constraints of app ecosystems.
5. **Diverse Content Delivery:** With the ability to send multimedia—images, videos, polls—these platforms redefine content delivery, making it more interactive and diverse than traditional text-based newsletters.
6. **Privacy and Transiency:** The emphasis on privacy, with features like anonymized data and transient content, caters to the modern user's demand for digital privacy.

The modern newsletter's face is changing, and it's looking less like an email and more like a channel update. With media giants like The New York Times, BBC, and CNN hopping onto the WhatsApp Channels bandwagon, the trend is clear: the future of newsletters may not be in our inboxes but nestled between our daily chats. In essence, while traditional email newsletters are far from extinct, these dynamic shifts indicate a broader landscape of opportunities for content creators and consumers alike. The digital age of journalism is not just about creating content but finding innovative, immediate, and interactive ways to deliver it.

2.4 Share Buttons for social media

Share buttons matter when it comes to the relationship between users and news organizations. They deserve our attention as a basic, yet effective tool to engage the user, while also growing your audience and the views of your stories. From the 80 news sites we studied, 77 (96%) used shared buttons (Figure 40), with only Germany having 3 organizations that did not adopt the feature – Krautreporter, Corretiv and Stern. The high adoption rate of share buttons across all countries suggests that media organizations recognize the importance of social media in driving traffic to their sites and expanding their audience. This trend may also reflect a growing preference for social media platforms as a primary source of news for many people.

Distribution of Share Buttons by Country

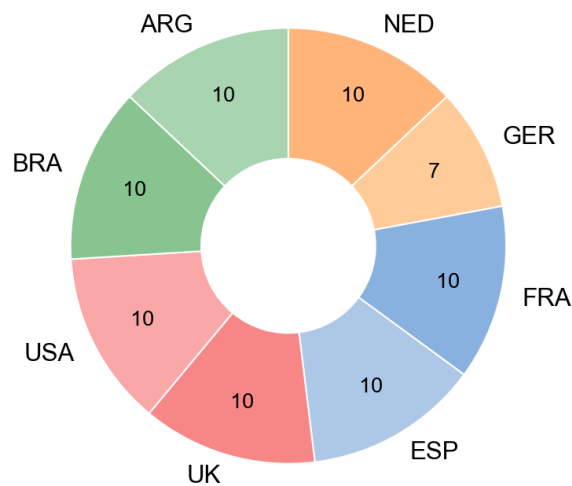


Figure 40 – Adoption Rate of Share Buttons by Country.

Share buttons are popular tools as they provide an easy and convenient way for users to share content, they find interesting or valuable with their social media networks. By clicking a share button, users can quickly post the article or story to their social media profiles, thereby increasing the reach and visibility of the content. This can help news organizations to expand their audience and increase the views for their stories, as well as enhance their brand awareness and credibility. In addition, share buttons can also help to foster engagement and build stronger relationships with the users. By providing users with an easy way to share their content, news organizations can encourage more active participation from their audience, who are more likely to share stories that they feel passionate about, or that align with their interests or beliefs. News organizations have sought to facilitate the dissemination of content by adding social networking functionality to websites, encouraging users to *like* or *tweet* a story (Singer et al., 2011).

Share buttons are usually placed below the headline, or though some opt for a bar, which follows the user as they scroll through the story (Figure 41). Journalists have also adopted social media tools to promote their content to extend audience reach and foster brand loyalty. A prevailing practice is sharing a headline with a link back to its website (Lasorsa et al., 2012).

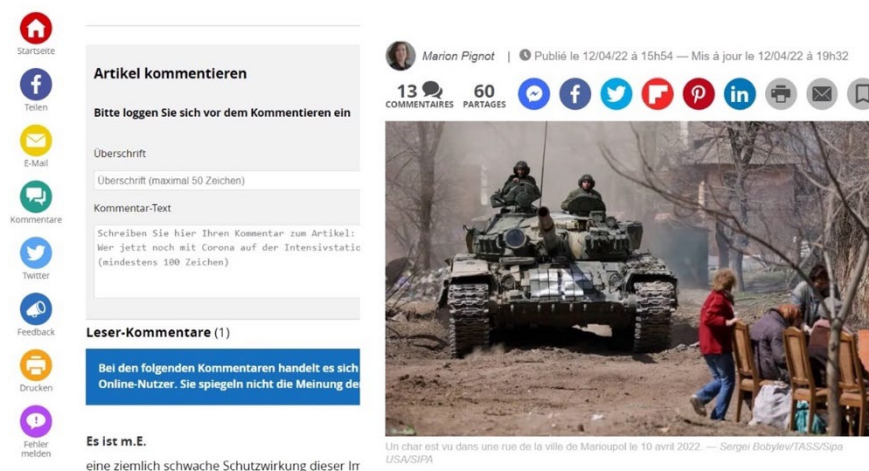


Figure 41 – Examples of share buttons locations from Focus (left) and 20minutes.fr (right)

In certain mobile browsers, like the one utilized by The Sun (UK), the functionality of the share button undergoes a transformation, while its fundamental purpose remains unchanged. Illustrated by a singular share icon (Figure 42), this feature facilitates actions such as sharing with their frequently contacted individuals via WhatsApp or email, all through a seamless process.

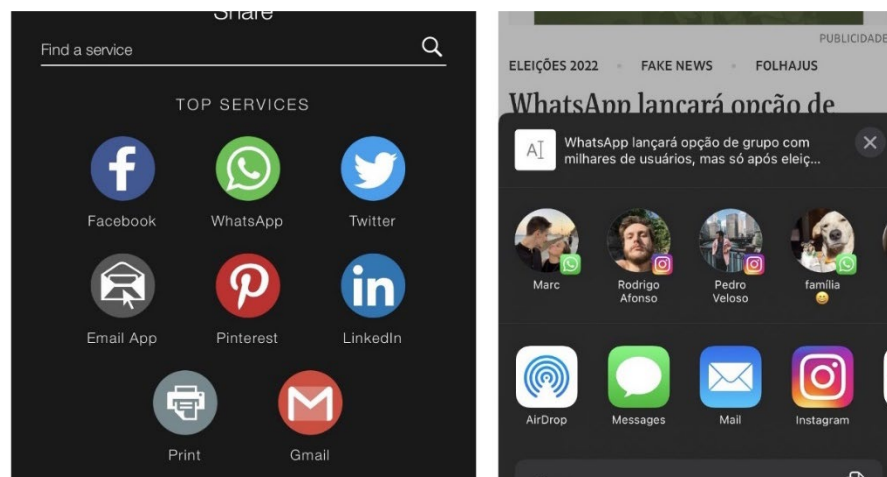


Figure 42 – Examples of share buttons on mobile apps.

We outlined the 10 most popular share buttons on the news sites we analyzed (Figure 43). The most popular ones are social networks: Twitter, used by all 77 news sites that adopt share buttons, and Facebook, used by 76 of them. At least one news site from each country uses the professional networking platform LinkedIn as a share button, but it only appears 23 times. Email

is still a traditional button, used by 55 news sites, while the messaging application, WhatsApp, appears to be growing in popularity, being used 47 websites. Its competitor, Telegram, does not have the same reach on the countries we studied, appearing more as a share button in Spanish speaking countries, Spain, and Argentina, that some 7 of the 9 news sites in which the application appears. Messenger, Pinterest, Reddit, and Flipboard complete the list of the ten most popular share buttons but appear scarcely compared to the others.

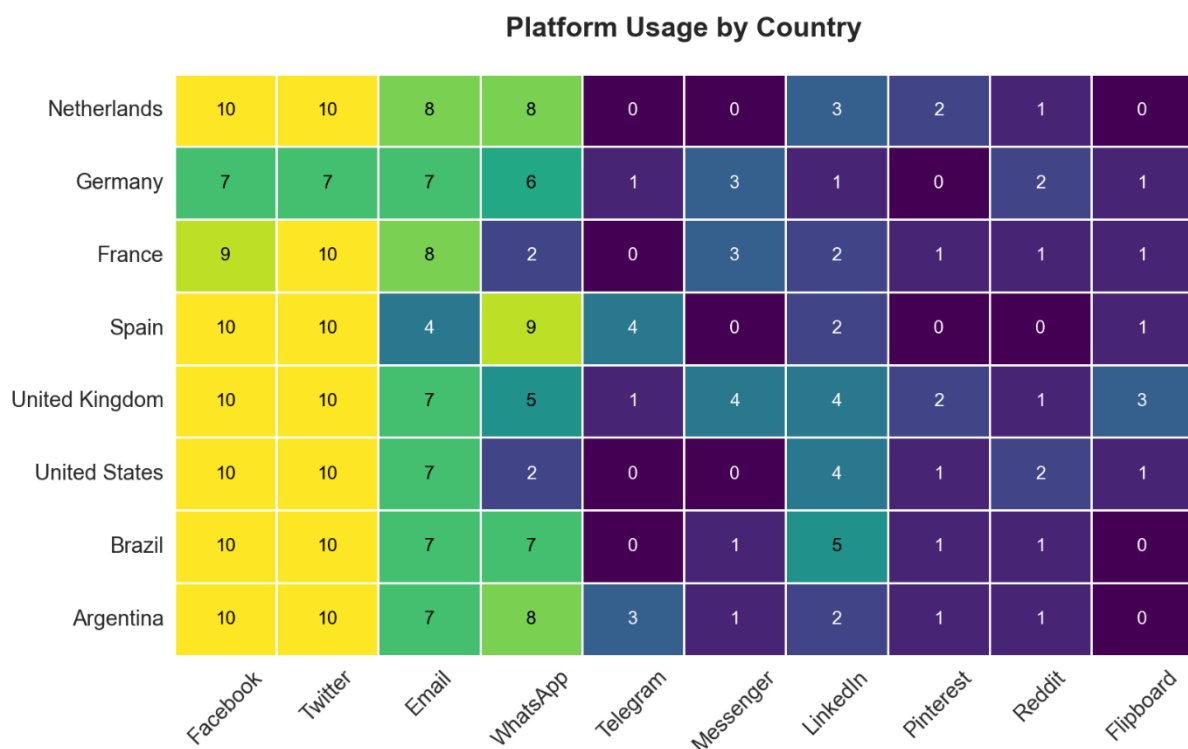


Figure 43 – Types of share buttons per country.

Another interesting form to share a news story in some news sites is the possibility to gift an article. On news sites with paywalls and exclusive content, if you are a subscriber, you can gift a news piece to a friend. This is a way to share the story and encourage others to subscribe. The New York Times, for example, gives 10 articles for a subscriber to gift for free per month, just as the Washington Post. Krauteporter from Germany, which does not adopt share buttons for news stories, adopts the possibility to share their content as a gift to someone else if you are a member. We also make an honorable mention to the button designed to print the article and the possibility to bookmark it if you have a login on the website, which is a form to personalize the user experience in the news site.

2.4.1 The German Outliers

As for Germany being the exception in the adoption of share buttons, it could be due to a variety of factors. One possible explanation is that some German news organizations may have

concerns about data privacy and protection, and therefore may be hesitant to implement features that allow for the sharing of user data on social media platforms. Additionally, cultural, and linguistic factors may also play a role in the adoption of share buttons, as German social media platforms may have different usage patterns and preferences compared to those in other countries.

Knowing the specific news outlets in Germany that did not adopt share buttons—Krautreporter, Correctiv, and Stern—does add nuance to our understanding of the situation. Krautreporter is an independent, crowd-funded online magazine. It prides itself on being ad-free and relies on its membership model. Given that its revenue isn't tied to traditional advertising models and page views in the same way that commercial publications might be, Krautreporter might prioritize a different user experience. It is possible they view share buttons as a potential distraction or not essential to their mission. Correctiv is a nonprofit investigative newsroom. Their aim is to delve deep into systemic issues and injustices, often producing long-form, intensive reports. As an investigative platform, their primary focus might be on the quality and impact of their journalism rather than virality or wide dissemination. Though one could argue that share buttons would aid in the latter, Correctiv might choose to limit external influences or distractions on their site.

Unlike the first two, Stern is a major, long-established German weekly news magazine. It is one of the country's largest in terms of circulation. Stern's decision to not incorporate share buttons is more puzzling given its commercial nature. However, it is possible they have other mechanisms for sharing or engagement, or they may have made design decisions based on their demographic and user behavior. It is also possible that they prioritize direct engagement on their platform rather than spreading content across social media.

The audience of outlets like Krautreporter and Correctiv might be more niche and dedicated. These readers might not need share buttons to disseminate content; they could share it in other ways if they find it valuable. While Stern is commercial, both Krautreporter and Correctiv operate on non-traditional models (crowdfunded and nonprofit, respectively). This could influence their approach to share buttons, prioritizing reader experience and content integrity over potential virality. Also, Germany's stringent data protection regulations and the general privacy-conscious nature of the population might mean that even major outlets prioritize user data protection over potential benefits of share buttons. In the end, the decision of these outlets to not adopt share buttons could be influenced by a mix of their operational models, the nature of their content, their target audience, and broader cultural and regulatory factors in Germany.

2.4.2 Widespread Integration

The widespread integration of social media share buttons on news websites, as seen in the 77 out of 80 news sites from our *corpus*, can be thought from various perspectives, especially when considering Western culture, globalization, and capitalist dynamics. These three pivotal forces intersect and shape the contours of our online interactions. Western societies, with their deep-rooted values of individualism and interconnectedness, have been significantly amplified in the digital age. The act of sharing news articles isn't merely dissemination; it is a profound gesture of self-expression and community dialogue. Yet, this cultural paradigm doesn't stand alone. It is intricately interwoven with the sweeping forces of globalization, which dissolves traditional barriers and standardizes digital experiences. In this global digital realm, news is both local and universal, with share buttons acting as conduits of worldwide engagement.

But beneath these layers of cultural and global dynamics lies the unyielding engine of capitalism. Every share, click, and interaction isn't just an expression or connection; it is a cog in the vast machinery of profit, brand promotion, and algorithmic dominance. In this ecosystem, the share button transforms from a mere tool to a powerful economic instrument, driving traffic, brand visibility, and algorithmic advantage. Together, these forces – cultural, global, and economic – shape our digital world, influencing behaviors, expectations, and the very fabric of online engagement. As we navigate this intricate tapestry, understanding these dynamics becomes crucial in deciphering the present and anticipating the future of our digital interactions.

In the digital age, the paradigms of information consumption and dissemination are continually evolving. Driven by cultural, global, and economic forces, this transformation impacts everything from user behavior to website design.

2.4.2.1 Western Ideals in a Digital Era

The Western *ethos*, characterized by individualism and a commitment to free expression, finds new avenues of manifestation in the digital realm. For centuries, Western societies have placed a premium on individual expression and democratization of information (Hofstede, 1980). Today, tools like share buttons epitomize this tradition, allowing users to project their identity and beliefs onto a broader stage. Sharing an article, in many ways, becomes an act of personal endorsement, weaving individual beliefs into the collective digital tapestry. Moreover, this cultural *ethos* embraces the interconnected nature of our digital world. The belief that content should be freely shared, discussed, and disseminated has led to the rise of platforms that foster such interactions. The meteoric rise of social media platforms, with their integrated ecosystems, stands testament to this prevailing idea (Boyd and Ellison, 2007).

2.4.2.2 Globalization: Redefining Boundaries and Experiences

Globalization has indelibly marked the modern era, championed interconnectedness and erasing traditional barriers (Friedman, 2005). The ripple effects of this transformation are evident in the media domain. Today's news consumption is liberated from geographical constraints. A local incident can reverberate globally within moments, underscoring the universal resonance of human narratives. Share buttons, in this context, are not just tools; they are gateways to global discourse. Furthermore, as digital platforms evolve in tandem with globalization, we witness a homogenization of user experiences. The ubiquity of certain features, like share buttons, establishes new digital norms, shaping user expectations across the globe.

2.4.2.3 The Capitalist Pulse in Media Evolution

The media landscape isn't isolated from the broader capitalist paradigm that underpins many contemporary societies (McChesney, 1999). The imperatives of profit and growth exert palpable influences on media decisions. Sharing doesn't merely enhance user engagement; it catalyzes a chain reaction of economic benefits. Increased traffic translates to ad revenue, fitting seamlessly within a capitalist framework that prioritizes profitability. Moreover, each shared piece amplifies brand visibility, serving as cost-effective advertising. But the capitalist dynamic extends beyond direct economic gains. In a world governed by algorithms, content visibility hinges on user engagement. Platforms prioritize content with higher interactivity, creating a virtuous cycle where shared articles gain prominence, inviting further clicks and shares (Bucher, 2012).

As we navigate the contours of the digital age, it is imperative to understand the intricate interplay of cultural values, global forces, and economic motivations. From the seemingly simple act of sharing an article to the global resonance of news, these forces converge, shaping our digital behaviors, expectations, and experiences. Recognizing and decoding these dynamics not only offers insights into the present digital landscape but also provides a compass for its future evolution.

In the tapestry of media history, citizen involvement has always been a rich thread. Traditionally, while citizen participation in the media, such as the creation of informative content, was valued, it often encountered barriers like resource requirements, expertise, and the presence of media gatekeepers. As a result, citizen voices were sometimes marginalized (Carpentier, 2011). However, the advent of the internet and social media heralded a significant transformation in this dynamic. New, more accessible forms of engagement emerged, allowing actions like sharing a news article, retweeting, or liking content to become potent means of dissemination. These practices, described as 'low-intensity participation', might seem less intensive individually, but their collective

power, as highlighted by Masip et al. (2015), holds the potential to immensely influence both the political and media agendas.

Many news outlets, in recognition of this shift, have integrated share buttons on their websites, a testament to their adaptation and acknowledgment of this decentralized form of participation. It empowers the audience, broadening the media's reach and allowing users to be active disseminators of content. Yet, the digital media landscape remains nuanced. Some outlets, particularly in countries with strict data protection standards like Germany, have opted against share buttons, possibly prioritizing direct user engagement, data privacy, or a curated user experience. As we traverse the digital age, one principle stands undiminished: the voice of the citizen. Whether through original content creation or the act of dissemination, this voice is pivotal in continually shaping, challenging, and redefining the media landscape.

3. Networking: presence of social media platforms.

We scanned the presence of the 80 news sites from our *corpus* in three popular social networks: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Their pages on these platforms are a way they reach the public and, often, call out to them to participate⁵⁰. All the news sites we studied, have profiles on Facebook and Twitter, and 79 have profiles on Instagram, being the NL Times from the Netherlands the only exception.

Social network sites – such as Facebook and Instagram which are owned by the platform Meta – are becoming central to the way people experience news, particularly conversational networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, which are an increasingly significant source for news (Mitchell and Page, 2015). Social media facilitate access to news, as well as provide opportunities to engage in the news process, through commenting, sharing, and posting online (Holton et al., 2015).

So, are news sites embracing social media or are they trying to bring back users to their news sites? In fact, they are doing both: embracing these networks as a means of content distribution and user engagement, while also trying to bring users back to their own websites. Social media platforms have become important sources of news for many people, but news organizations still see their own websites as the primary platform for delivering their content and engaging with their audience (Westlund and Lewis, 2014).

⁵⁰ Future studies would benefit from studying solely the presence of news organizations in platforms such as these, looking, for example, at the uses they make, the content they post, the uses they give to their profiles, and the choices they make to engage (or not) other users via these networks.

Samanta do Carmo⁵¹, former newsroom coordinator for the Intercept Brasil illustrates the perspective of news organization: “(we are) *a digital native investigative journalism outlet for the social media era*, taking this into consideration, *establishing a strong presence on social media was a natural path*. Our social media team was set up at the same time as our team of reporters and editors, for example. The video team, to mention, came later. Our social networks have grown consistently since 2019, with the Vaza Jato series of reports. The increase in our followers and other metrics was also recorded during the pandemic, but the most extraordinary increase occurred in 2019” (Samanta do Carmo, March 2021). Marianna Araujo⁵², former reporter of the news site complements that “The Intercept makes use of all networks because they are essential to our mission: telling the stories that need to be told. *We go where the audience is*. A considerable part of our audience comes from networks, but we also have a lot of native content on them, which demonstrates its importance for talking to our audience. There was growth during the pandemic, but just like there was in all other channels.” (Marianna Araujo, February 2021).

The Digital News Report of 2020 (Newman et al., 2020) found that, in Latin America, social platforms have stimulated the consumption of images to the detriment of text, even though most people prefer a mixed approach. The report also suggests that audiences prefer to consume news in video and audio formats, which opens up new possibilities for news organizations. Together, the growth in access and the number of users on Instagram in recent years can be connected to the popularization of visual formats in journalism. Moreover, 30% of the Brazilian public uses the platform to consume information. This is an important finding, especially as it relates to the case of The Intercept Brasil (TIB), a digital-native medium that used its Instagram account to publish exclusive content rather than direct traffic to their own portal during the pandemic. This contradicted common findings in the literature (Myllylahti, 2020; da Silva et al., 2020), which describe these social media as platforms as a way only to catch the attention of the user or distribute content.

In the context of the pandemic, The Intercept embraced social media platforms in its strategy to the extent that they changed the standard use of these tools by creating new ways to engage with their audiences (Gruszynski et al., 2021; Sanseverino & De-Lima-Santos, 2021). By using the platform’s streaming service and recording and making content available on IGTV (the

⁵¹ Samanta do Carmo is the former newsroom coordinator for The Intercept Brasil. An exchange was conducted with the journalist for this research in March 2021 via Google Docs. Statements from the exchange will be used throughout this thesis from this point forward, always between quotations mark, and, if necessary, information the journalist provided will be followed by the reference (Samanta do Carmo, March 2021).

⁵² Marianna Araujo is a former reporter for The Intercept Brasil. An exchange was conducted with the journalist for this research in February 2021 via Google Docs. Statements from the exchange will be used throughout this thesis from this point forward, always between quotations mark, and, if necessary, information the journalist provided will be followed by the reference (Marianna Araujo, February 2021).

resource for long videos on Instagram), TIB reinforced the public's stories. Using this exemplary integration experiment, TIB created a movement of innovation and experimentation in Latin America, which was also accompanied by changes in consumer behavior in the digital environment.

With the accelerated growth of social media platforms, traditional outlets are adapting to this rapidly evolving media ecosystem, optimizing their sites to allow the sharing of their news stories and offering the space for comments (Canavilhas, 2011). There is an obligatory need to be present in social media nowadays, as social networks constitute a vital structure within which the output of journalism is rendered meaningful by users (Heikkilä and Ahva, 2014). The use of social networks in the distribution of news increases the number of readers, as they facilitate the way users relate to the media, strengthening the relationship between the user and the news outlet (Canavilhas, 2011). In it, with the help of new devices and the internet, production processes gained agility and ease in their realization, configuring a context in which the loss of revenue and market share of large journalistic organizations occurred, which was also reflected in impacts on its relevance as a source.

News organizations all over the world have in recent years increased their use of analytics – systematic analysis of quantitative data on various aspects of audience behavior aimed at growing audiences, increasing engagement, and improving newsroom workflows. Visibility is a term that today involves, for example, strategies to optimize the presence of publications on search engines (Search Engine Optimization – SEO); manage the presence on social networks and access to free content so that there is a return of paid access to vehicles; adapt published content considering the affordances of different platforms, observing their communication and interaction possibilities.

The increasing availability, uptake and use of social media has also empowered news and information consumers, which created an alternative source of information for the public, while has presented several challenges and opportunities for the news media. Social media became a part of the journalistic process. In fact, social media platforms created a space that allowed news outlets to deliver information and promote their content, find sources and get ideas for stories, and connect with their audiences. At the same time, as these networks grew in popularity and added new features, an array of possibilities for storytelling emerged for the media, like being able to live stream events or publish news reports on Instagram Stories (Vazques-Herrero et al., 2019).

When professional journalists cannot generate content, because, for example, of decreased news budgets or difficulty in the access of particular locations or events, mainstream media turned to the content generated from tweeters, bloggers and other users of social media to produce their stories. They called their audience to send in information, from tips, to personal reports, videos

and images. In situations of crisis, such as the COVID-19 global pandemic, the audience becomes even more prominent sources of news: they collect, curate and disseminate their first-hand accounts. The journalistic use of social networks as a source brings new challenges and amplifies existing ones. Challenges of a strictly journalistic nature (newsworthiness, verification, etc.), but also ethical and legal that should fundamentally concern journalists, but also citizens. Citizens who instinctively and thoughtlessly capture and share fragments of their own daily life and that of others, ignoring the consequences that these captures have in aspects such as privacy, intimacy or copyright (Masip, 2015).

In recent years, the role of social networks in the consumption of information has gradually gained importance and created a mediated space for publishers; but also established an attention economy that is defined by “a scarce and fluid commodity which carries monetary value; is based on individual user interaction which can be harvested, measured, and exchanged for revenue on a platform, on a news site, or an online site” (Myllylahti, 2020, p. 568) according to international comparative data, more and more citizens have social networks as their primary or secondary source of access to news (Newman et al., 2018). Olmstead, Michael and Rosenstiel (2011) argued that, although the way citizens searched for information on the internet had been the most important transformation of the last decade, the new ways in which citizens shared, debated and redistributed information would be the great innovation of the next ten years.

Various authors have highlighted the relevance or transformative potential of user interactions on social networks with respect to the traditional information cycle, by exchanging or commenting on content related to news or matters of general interest (Nielsen and Schröder, 2014; Newman, Dutton and Blank, 2012). These new dynamics, originated by users who share, recommend or send informative material through public or private messages to their contacts on social networks, would be expanding the scope of the public sphere in which ordinary citizens would gain prominence (Singer et al., 2011; Papacharissi, 2015; Klinger and Svensson, 2015), challenging the traditional hegemony of journalists and the media as the only gatekeepers of issues of public interest (Suau, 2015).

The fragmentation and multiplication of the audience based on digital social networks are characteristic of post-industrial journalism (Anderson et al., 2013). The number of users of networks allows us to ponder fundamental questions in journalism, such as the relationship with sources; the enlargement, valuation, distribution, and circulation of content; loyalty of readers; and the speed of sharing information. Each social network has different characteristics and provides users with distinct tools for the interaction and dissemination of information.

What is modified is the way of accessing that information and the way of relating to it, which is no longer exclusively unidirectional. Although the media continue to play a central role, other actors such as search engines and social networks are becoming increasingly important. Information arrives, therefore, through multiple channels and the citizen gains power in determining which topics will be considered news and which will not (Masip et al., 2015). As a result, there is a need to rethink processes and structures. There is a rapid process of companies including Facebook, Snapchat, Google, and Twitter taking control of the traditional role of editor.

Nevertheless, we found that these 80 news organizations, as others out there, are, in its majority, employing digital platforms to privilege their own business models (Cornia et. al, 2018; Rashidian et al., 2019; Jenkins and Nielsen, 2020), by using these tools to distribute content and encourage users to become members/subscribers. Social media platforms are useful for attracting new users and expanding the reach of news content, but their limitations should not be overlooked, such as the algorithmic filtering of content and the potential for misinformation to spread quickly (Cherubini and Nielsen, 2016). A sentiment share by Livia Guarrigue⁵³, journalist from Mediapart: “By spreading throughout social networks, the amount of publications, it offers a lot of visibility” (Livia Guarrigue, February 2020).

Media organizations prioritize divulging content on social media than actually using their pages to engage with the users who are also on these platforms, and who often tend to leave comments and questions, beyond likes and shares, on their posts. But even though publishers still rely on social media to reach readers, these third-party digital platforms are rarely a place of meaningful interaction beyond simply distribution (Carpes da Silva and Sanseverino, 2020). Therefore, while news organizations are using social media to reach new audiences and engage with users, they are also investing in their own websites to provide a more tailored and controlled user experience. This includes developing mobile apps and personalized content delivery methods, as well as optimizing their websites for search engines and social media sharing (Kümpel, Karnowski, and Keyling, 2015).

4. Possible futures for interaction, engagement, and participation in online news

Interactive tools and features on news websites have evolved significantly since the early days of online news. The evolution of interactive tools and features on news websites has been

⁵³ Livia Garrigue is a French journalist for Mediapart, that works as manager of Le Club. An exchange was conducted with Ms. Guarrigue in February 2020 in the newsroom of Mediapart; and further emails were exchanged with questions for this research. Statements from the journalist will be used throughout this thesis from this point forward, always between quotations mark, and, if necessary, information provided by the journalist will followed by the reference (Livia Garrigue, February 2020).

driven by changes in technology and user behavior, with news organizations increasingly using social media, user-generated content, and personalized content to engage with their audiences and build a sense of community around their brand. Initially, news websites were primarily one-way channels for distributing information to readers, with limited opportunities for interactivity or user engagement. However, with the increasing popularity of social media and the rise of mobile devices, news organizations have embraced a variety of interactive tools and features to engage with their audiences.

For example, research by Hermida (2010) found that the use of social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, has become increasingly popular among news organizations. These platforms allow news organizations to engage with readers in real-time, share breaking news, and promote their content to a wider audience. Similarly, research by Domingo et al. (2008) found that many news organizations have adopted interactive features such as comment sections and user-generated content to engage with their audiences and foster a sense of community around their brand. These features allow readers to share their opinions and perspectives on news stories, as well as to contribute their own content, such as photos and videos.

More recently, there has been a growing trend towards more personalized and interactive forms of engagement with news audiences, with a focus on meeting the needs of mobile users and being present on social media platforms. News organizations have been focusing on the personalization and customization of news content, using algorithms and other technologies to deliver tailored content to individual users (Al-Rawi and Gray, 2018). This allows news organizations to better meet the needs and interests of their audiences, while also increasing engagement and loyalty among readers.

The customization of news content using algorithms and other technologies can be seen as a way for news organizations to court users and create a more personalized and engaging experience. While comment sections and other direct forms of interaction with users remain important, the customization of news content can also play an important role in building and maintaining user-media organization relationships in online news. By delivering content that is tailored to the individual needs and interests of each user, news organizations can increase engagement and loyalty among readers, while also providing a more relevant and valuable experience.

The customization of news content is a growing trend in online news for several reasons. First, it allows news organizations to provide a more personalized experience for readers, which can increase engagement and loyalty (Al-Rawi and Gray, 2018). By tailoring content to the specific interests and preferences of individual readers, news organizations can create a more relevant and

valuable experience for users. Second, customization of news content can help news organizations address the challenges of information overload and filter bubbles (Flaxman et al., 2016). By providing users with content that is tailored to their interests, news organizations can help users navigate the overwhelming amount of information available online and avoid being trapped in echo chambers.

A more tailored and controlled user experience on news sites can involve several elements, such as personalized content recommendations based on a user's reading history, preferences, and location; notifications for breaking news and other events of interest; user profiles and preferences management tools; and commenting systems that are moderated and provide a safe and engaging environment for discussions. Personalized content delivery methods of information can include various techniques, such as algorithmic recommendations based on user behavior, topic-based or location-based content aggregation, and content customization based on user preferences or demographics (Wang, Lin, and Lu, 2018). These methods can help news organizations deliver content that is more relevant and engaging to individual users, which can increase user satisfaction and retention.

However, there are also challenges and difficulties associated with the adoption of customization of news content in newsrooms. One of the main challenges is the need for sophisticated algorithms and data analysis tools to effectively personalize content for individual users (Al-Rawi and Gray, 2018). This requires significant investment in technology and data analytics capabilities, which may be a barrier for smaller news organizations. Another challenge is the potential for algorithmic bias and the need for transparency around the editorial decision-making process (Tandoc et al., 2018). News organizations must be careful to ensure that their algorithms are not reinforcing existing biases and viewpoints, and that users are aware of how their data is being used to personalize content. There are concerns around filter bubbles and the potential for personalized content to reinforce existing biases and viewpoints (Pariser, 2011).

So, is a tailored news experience the future? It is certainly one of the trends shaping journalism online. With the growing use of algorithms and other technologies, news organizations are able to personalize content delivery and create a more engaging experience for their users. Nonetheless, it is important to note that personalization will probably never be the only way to engage with audiences and build relationships with them. Other forms of engagement, such as comment sections, newsletters, and social media, are important because they provide different ways for users to interact with news content and with the news organization.

Comment sections, for example, allow users to share their thoughts and opinions on news stories, and to engage in conversations with other readers. This can create a sense of community

around the news organization and foster deeper engagement with the content. Newsletters, on the other hand, provide a more direct way for news organizations to communicate with their audience. By offering a personalized selection of news stories, and additional features such as exclusive content and promotions, newsletters can help build brand loyalty and keep readers coming back to the news site. Social media is also important for news organizations, as it allows them to reach new audiences and engage with users on platforms where they are already spending their time. By sharing news stories and engaging with users on social media, news organizations can build brand awareness and drive traffic back to their website or mobile app.

A combination of different forms of engagement still seems necessary to build a loyal readership and succeed in the future of journalism online. There is evidence to suggest that that is key to retaining users in online journalism. For example, a study by Domingo et al. (2018) found that news organizations that offered a variety of interactive features, including comment sections, social media integration, and newsletters, had higher levels of user engagement and loyalty. Similarly, a study by Lee and Ma (2012) found that the use of multiple engagement strategies, including multimedia content, social media, and interactive features, was associated with higher levels of user satisfaction and loyalty. These findings suggest that news organizations should not rely solely on a single form of engagement, such as personalized content delivery, but should instead adopt a more holistic approach that incorporates a range of interactive features and engagement strategies. This can help to build a more loyal and engaged readership, as well as to foster a sense of community and connection between readers and the news organization.

But if *a little bit of everything* seems to be the strategy for the successful engagement with users via interactive features, “the ultimate holy grail” for media companies is implementing an effective omnichannel strategy that generates customer engagement (Sona Patel⁵⁴, March 2021). Omnicanality refers to the ability of a media organization to deliver content to its audience through various channels, such as social media, websites, mobile applications, email, and print publications (Olmstead, Mitchell, and Holcomb, 2011). The concept involves the integration of different platforms to create a seamless and consistent user experience across all channels: “with omnicanality, it is no longer a question of creating bridges between channels but rather initiating real synergies between them to enable their simultaneous use” (Sona Patel, March 2021).

⁵⁴ Sona Patel in the Director of UGC and Community at The New York Times. An exchange was conducted with the journalist for this research in March 2021 via Google Docs. Statements from the journalist will be used throughout this thesis from this point forward, always between quotations mark, and, if necessary, followed by the reference (Sona Patel, March 2021).

For media organizations, omnicanality enables them to reach a wider audience by allowing users to consume content in different formats and on different platforms. For example, news organizations can deliver breaking news via social media or mobile applications, while also providing in-depth coverage and analysis on their websites or print publications. This approach increases engagement with the audience, as users can access content through their preferred channels (PWC, 2019).

Large legacy companies such as The New York Times, already have multiple channels to reach their audience, like the print newspapers, websites, mobile applications, and podcasts. Sona Patel, their Director of UGC and Community, explains that in this case the challenge becomes “the volume and omnicanality of reader engagement”, while at the same time she recognizes that “keeping those relationships alive (with their audience) informs our coverage and helps us understand the way in which our readers experience our journalism and fine-tune our work”. Representing the ultimate integration of different channels to provide a consistent user experience, omnicanality becomes the concept that will follow media companies into the future of journalism. An omnichannel strategy promises to help improve customer satisfaction and loyalty by providing a seamless experience across different platforms (KPMG, 2021), and allow to reach wider audiences and increase engagement.

“Omnicanality has quickly become a standard for most companies, which place their customers at the heart of their concerns” (Sona Patel, March 2021). However, this strategy is not easy to implement for any media organization, because you must know how to adapt to the characteristics of the channels composing it, and even more importantly, you have to identify the corresponding benefits they can mutually provide. Implementing an omnichannel strategy can be especially challenging for digital news natives and smaller media companies, that face several hardships to employ and maintain such a strategy.

The major issue is resource constraints. Smaller media companies often have limited resources, including budget, staff, and technology. These limitations can make it difficult for them to invest in the new technologies, staff training, and content creation needed for an omnichannel strategy. Technical challenges can also make implementing an omnichannel strategy difficult. Seamless integration between different platforms is essential for a successful strategy, but this can be technically difficult, particularly for smaller companies with limited expertise and specialized personnel.

There is now a trend, for example, to use mobile applications to deliver news content and engage with users. Since at least 2016, mobile devices have been used more than desktops for online news consumption (Newman et al., 2016), and social media, especially Facebook, has played

a significant role in this trend, which news organizations have followed. Developing mobile apps is increasingly important for news organizations to build a relationship with users, as more and more people consume news on their mobile devices.

The 80 news sites from our *corpus* can be accessed through mobile browsers, and 63 of them (78.5%) have dedicated applications for mobile devices, with the United States having 10 (16%), the United Kingdom having 9 (13%), Spain having 8 (13%), France having 10 (16%), the Netherlands having 6 (9%), Germany having 9 (14%), Brazil having 7 (11%), and Argentina having 5 (8%). As mobile usage continues to grow, news organizations are adapting their strategies to meet the needs of mobile users (Kümpel, Karnowski, and Keyling, 2015). This includes developing mobile apps that allow for personalized content delivery, push notifications, and user feedback.

News apps provide a more convenient and user-friendly way for users to access news content and engage with news organizations, however, developing mobile apps can be challenging for news organizations due to various factors such as the cost of development, maintenance, and updates, as well as the need to provide a unique user experience that stands out from other news apps (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, 2018). Additionally, news organizations face the challenge of competing with a vast number of other apps for users' attention and limited screen space on mobile devices (Wirth et al., 2021).

According to a report by Pew Research Center, in the United States, 54% of adults get news from news websites or apps on their smartphones, while 30% get news from websites on a desktop or laptop computer (Shearer and Matsa, 2021); and 93% of U.S. adults who access news on mobile devices use news apps (Pew Research Center, 2021). This suggests that more people are accessing news sites via their phones than computers, highlighting the importance of mobile optimization for news organizations. Studies have shown that younger generations tend to rely more on mobile devices and apps for news consumption than older generations (Newman et al., 2021). This trend is expected to continue as mobile devices become more prevalent and user-friendly and helps make the case of the importance of an effective omnichannel strategy for media organizations who want to continue to survive and succeed in the future.

It should be noted that an omnichannel approach allows media organizations to collect data on user behavior and preferences, which can be used to personalize content and advertising, helping them create the ultimate tailored experience for their users. By using data to personalize content and advertising, organizations can provide users with more relevant and engaging experiences, while also generating revenue from targeted advertising (Ni, et al., 2020). But how does this not cross the line into intrusive or unethical practices that violate user trust or privacy (Hoffman and Novak, 2017)? Omnichannel strategies by media companies to collect data on user

behavior and preferences raises yet again important questions about data privacy (Zhong, et al., 2021). As organizations collect data across different platforms, they may be able to build detailed profiles of users, potentially including sensitive information such as their location, age, interests, and online activity (KPMG, 2021).

In the end, the evolution of interactive tools and features on news websites has been driven by changes in technology and user behavior, with news organizations increasingly using social media, User-Generated Content, and personalized content to engage with their audiences and build sense of community around their brand – the omnichannel strategies being the ultimate testament to this. There has been a growing trend towards more personalized and interactive forms of engagement with news audiences, with a focus on meeting the needs of mobile users and being present on social media platforms.

Personalization of news content using algorithms and other technologies can be seen as a way for news organizations to court users and create a more personalized and engaging experience. By delivering content that is tailored to the individual needs and interests of each user, news organizations can increase engagement and loyalty among readers, while also providing a more relevant and valuable experience. However, the concerns associated with the adoption of customization of news content in newsrooms, including the need for sophisticated algorithms and data analysis tools to effectively personalize content for individual users, and the potential for algorithmic bias and the need for transparency around the editorial decision-making process are undeniable. And yet, while personalization will probably never be the only way to engage with audiences and build relationships with them, it is certainly one of the trends shaping future online journalism.

CHAPTER 9

USER-GENERATED CONTENT IN NEWS SITES

Engagement, while central, is but a part of the larger media-user interaction matrix. Next, we explore the realm of User-Generated Content, a testament to the possible democratization of the digital media space. User-generated Content in journalism can be considered a form of participation, as it allows members of the public to contribute their own perspectives and information to the news-making process. UGC can come from a variety of sources, such as social media, blogs, or other online platforms, and can provide a different perspective on a story, offer new angles and insights, and even break news. By using UGC, news organizations can provide a more diverse range of perspectives on a story and give voice to members of the community who may not have been otherwise heard.

As we propose to debate participation and engagement, seeing it in digital journalism as how the public gets involved and contributes to the journalistic process, we opted to look at the uses of User-Generated Content under this umbrella, and from the perspective of news organizations. We consider that integrating UGC into news production, as well as how newsrooms are managing their audience is related to how technology is demanding change, innovation, and adaptation in the journalistic profession and how it works on and with the web. User-Generated Content does not exist in a vacuum, depending on an established relationship with the public, while also responding to the ecosystem in which it is inserted.

For news companies, journalists are the ones responsible for the news stories we see, how the story will be constructed and published. The role of journalists is to provide accurate, reliable, and timely information to the public. They play a crucial role in informing the public about events, issues, and trends that affect their lives, and in helping to shape public opinion and policy. The relationship between journalists and User-generated Content can be complex and multifaceted. UGC can provide journalists with valuable insights and perspectives that can enhance their reporting and help to tell more complete stories, but it can also pose significant challenges in terms of accuracy, credibility, and legal liability.

In news stories, voices are usually given to outsiders that can add value and information to the story, through interviews conducted and curated by newsroom staff, either because they are specialists in the subject, witness to a situation or official sources, such as government leaders. But what spaces are given to the voices of the general public? As we explored the 80 news sites from our *corpus*, we attempted to investigate how User-Generated Content is perceptively used for the production of news, for storytelling, and what room it is given on official news portals.

However, it is important to note that not all User-Generated Content can be considered a form of participation, as some UGC may simply be a reaction or a comment to the news, rather than a contribution to the storytelling itself. Additionally, UGC can range from simple comments or reactions to more comprehensive and well-researched information and perspectives. Therefore, it is important to consider the level of participation and the type of content submitted when determining whether UGC can be considered a form of participation in journalism.

UGC can simply be seen as a form of engagement because it allows members of the public to interact with and respond to the content provided by news organizations. For example, UGC such as comments or reactions to a news story, can provide valuable feedback and insights for journalists, and can also foster a sense of community among readers. Both engagement and participation are important for journalism, as they can help to increase the reach and impact of journalism, foster a more engaged and active readership, and provide valuable feedback and insights for journalists.

Nonetheless, it can be easier for news organizations to engage users than to create spaces for them to participate in the news-making process. Engaging users typically involves providing interactive features such as commenting, voting, and social media sharing, which can be relatively simple to implement and can be used to encourage users to spend more time on the site, interact with the content, and come back for more. This type of engagement can be achieved by providing a platform for users to express their thoughts and opinions about the news, and it is a way for the news organizations to create a sense of community among their readers.

Creating spaces for participation, on the other hand, requires more effort and resources, as it involves empowering citizens to actively participate in the democratic process by giving them a voice in the news. This type of participation can include allowing users to submit their own perspectives and information, which can be more complex to implement and to manage. It also requires a different type of engagement from the audience, as it requires them to be active participants in the news-making process, rather than just consumers of the news. Even so, it is worth noting that while engagement can be easier to achieve, it is not necessarily mutually exclusive from participation. Both are important for online journalism and can help to increase the reach and impact of journalism, foster a more engaged and active readership, and provide valuable feedback and insights for journalists. By providing a space for engagement, news organizations can start to build a foundation for participation.

1. History of UGC in Journalism

User-Generated Content is not a black and white concept, nor is it exclusive to journalism, as it can be broadly considered as any form of content, such as blog posts, wikis, comments and videos, created by users of a system or service that is made available to the public. The term started to be used more broadly in the mid-2000s, with the gaining popularity of new media and the internet, so much so that in 2006 Forbes elects “YOU” as person of the year. Obviously, before the digital age, people also could participate, but that process became more evident with the web, and the expectations for what that participation may mean increased, with ideals of interaction, participation and collaboration. What defines what the User-Generated Content is its *enunciator*, as whoever creates the enunciation is a user, a person who is part of the audience who stopped just receiving and started also producing content on the web (Scolari, 2012).

We must note that the applications of User-Generated Content in journalism and in news sites is far different for the how the user is centred in other online environments. If we look at platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Youtube, for example, these are platforms are intermediaries and hosts for the content created by their users. From personal to professional profiles created in these networks, the users share texts, photos and videos, that make these platforms what they are; that is, they are utterly dependent on User-Generated Content and the active participation of public on their platforms to exist – it is why they exist. But in journalism, as an established institution, with designated professionals to produce a specific type of content – the news, in which the role of mediator and gatekeeper is well established, UGC and, consequently the public, finds its space according to what which journalistic organization decides to allow.

Nonetheless, as the user practices his newfound agency in the web, his actions gain different contours: cultural theorists perceive it as participatory engagement, in contrast to the passive recipients of earlier stages of media culture; economists and business managers phrase see through the rhetoric of production rather than consumption; and in terms of labor relations, users are appraised from their roles as amateurs and volunteers opposed to those in the professional leagues (van Dijck, 2009) – and all of these perspectives can be relevant to think the user in relation to journalism. For the purpose of this work, we look at the user from a perspective of participatory engagement, as we primarily explore the spaces hosted and created for them to engage with the media organization online.

When the internet first became a part of the newsroom, which stretched roughly from the advent of the commercial internet in 1994 to the widespread availability of broadband in 2004, the primary concern for news organizations was how to turn print products into online content. At the beginning of the digital newspaper boom, there was only the transposition of printed

newspapers to the network (Pavlik, 1997; Quadros, 1999; Machado, 2003). Instead of seeing the web as a new medium, with its own characteristics, traditional companies saw it as a new tool for distributing content, originally produced in other formats. At best, the presence on the internet was seen as an extension or complement to the traditional product. Thus, this first decade of digital journalism was characterized by the transfer of content from a traditional medium to a new one, with little or no adaptation.

Soon began a timid exploration of hypermedia in parts of journalistic sites that started to show some differentiated products, such as news updates and static three-dimensional infographics and, later, in motion. In this sense, it was a way to meet the expectations of a user thirsty for finding transformations in a medium from the digital revolution. However, digital journalism remained timid when it came to creativity and innovation. The fear of cannibalizing the traditional environment and the concern to obtain immediate profits greatly limited the innovative momentum, even when the initial problems of access (speed of connections, for example) were being eliminated.

In the following years, the wider availability of broadband internet and new technologies made it possible for multimedia material to be published anywhere and interactivity, comments on articles, podcasting, and crowdsourcing became the new sources of both anxiety and opportunity for journalism everywhere. This phase classified as transition is marked by an expanded technological base, extended access through broadband connections; proliferation of mobile platforms; more specialized teams; expanded use of databases; algorithms; programming languages; development of more complex content management systems; greater incorporation of blogs; adoption of systems that enable effective user participation in the production of information; differentiated products created and maintained in an automated way; dynamic websites; multimedia narratives; use of resources such as RSS (Really Simple Syndication or Rich Site Summary) to collect, disseminate and share content; use of the podcasting technique to distribute audio and video content; experimentation with new conceptual elements for the organization of information; greater integration of archival material in the information offer; use of metadata and data mining to extract knowledge; and application of new methods to generate different views for journalistic content.

Until 2001, collaborative journalism experiences were restricted to specific niches and communities. Following the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York (2001), the Tsunami off the coast of the Indian Ocean (2004), the London bombings and Hurricane Katrina in the United States (2005), the idea of the citizen-journalism and UGC became in many ways necessary for mass media, mainly in a perspective of news supplementation, taking advantage of the content

published by readers to fill the gaps where professional journalists could not be. The images and testimonies of witnesses were the main resources available to journalists to narrate what was happening, especially in the moments immediately after the dramatic events. Only through citizen collaboration can images of places and events be offered to which professional journalists do not have access or to which they are simply not present (Masip, 2015). Images that provide immediacy, spontaneity, authenticity, and proximity.

These practices started to develop in traditional media outlets with the use of witness reports, news commentaries and audiovisual content of citizens about unusual and unexpected events and tragedies. In 2005, BBC adopted a User-Generated Content platform for their websites. In 2006, TIME Magazine named "You" as their Person of the Year, recognizing the rise of UGC on the internet, and paying tribute to users who started to dedicate their creative energy to a booming web culture (van Dijck, 2009). On that same year, CNN launched iReport, that was designed to integrate user generated news reports to the organizations. Fox News followed their example and created uReport, with the same purpose. Precursor projects that marked a significant change for journalist organizations, who realized the public's take on the news was no longer ignored and now went beyond opinion – they could participate, collaborate and generate their own news products.

Entire sites became a space for the audience to have it say and several traditional media outlets have decided to create these places themselves: The Telegraph, the Sun and the Express, for example, attempted to become hosts of their own social networks designed specifically so their readers could publish photos and blog posts and talk on forums. The Guardian's Comments Free website went as far as providing a platform in which several non-journalists deemed as experts could blog about the issues of the day. Both Sky and the BBC have created online galleries for their users to upload hundreds of photos and videos. A tendency that an increasing number of traditional media outlets had been following and that went far beyond than the traditional letter to the editor to give the reader the feeling that he is being heard.

The Los Angeles Times also carried out such an experiment, opening the possibility for the public to rewrite the opinion section and the editorial. "The response was massive, allowing to observe the political guidelines of the newspaper's public (...), but, in addition to the radical divergences between conservatives and liberals, the site was also invaded by nonsense, obscenity and even pornographic images" (Costa, 2005). Because of this, the editors of the newspaper decided to close this possibility of greater public participation two days after its implementation. So, as we look at these initiatives over fifteen years after they were launched, we see that they

ended up failing and being shut down. They were optimistic initiatives to create spaces for users that found their downfalls in the correspondent demand for newsrooms to moderate the content.

As digital and online journalism became a reality for the profession and the employment of interactive features promoted citizen participation and engagement, several research papers began to explore the theme. Studies debated topics such as the features being incorporated to online journalism (Schultz, 1999; Nip, 2006; Zamith, 2008), reasons for the resistance to their incorporation (Hermida and Thurman, 2007), and the implications of online, interactive features on the changing role of media in democracy (Tumber, 2001).

Beyond interactivity and the possibility to contribute to journalism, began new ethical and practical concerns related to the use of UGC, which respond to the demands of the profession of presenting accurate, truthful, and credible information to the public (Tuchman, 1978). The changes journalism went through with digitalization and the internet do not diminish the stakes when journalists come into possession of users' content. The ability to reach enormous audiences does not guarantee accuracy, credibility, context, or fairness. They still should have to ask themselves several questions regarding the audiences' content that they may publish. For once, is the content newsworthy? Is there a legitimate editorial purpose to use the UGC?

Also, other questions arise: what is the motive for the submission? Sources do often have personal interests. Will the organization pay for User-Generated Content? Many newsrooms have a policy about paying sources for information, but there is not a consensus if you should or not pay for information, because it also brings ethical implications. Some outlets have policies in place regarding paying for video and journalists are bound by the rules of the news outlet they work for.

Then, there are questions regarding the reliability of the UGC: is the video or audio staged, enhanced, or altered in any significant way? Could someone have altered it to have it aired or published? What steps can be taken to determine the authenticity of submitted content? Accurate and truthful information is the basis of journalistic credibility, and the verification of information is an essential part of the profession.

Not surprisingly, then, that studies have shown that it is unusual for media companies to allow citizens to be a part of the news production process (Domingo et al. 2008) and UGC is not made a priority, as it is used in a limited way (Naab and Sehl, 2017). This results in a reality where the audience is commonly classified as a nuisance as well as a marketing tool, while companies struggle between making a true effort to include the public in the journalistic process or just opening spaces for participation because it has become a must in online journalism.

2. UGC: Benefits, Challenges, and Ethical Considerations

User-generated content refers to any content created by individuals who are not professional journalists, but rather by ordinary people using various digital platforms to share information. The point of User-Generated Content in journalism is to increase audience engagement and participation, as well as to provide a more diverse and nuanced perspective on news events. In traditional journalism, the news is typically reported by professional journalists, who gather information through interviews, research, and observations. However, with the rise of social media and other digital platforms, anyone with a smartphone and an internet connection can now become a source of news and information. User-generated content can include everything from eyewitness accounts and photos of breaking news events to opinion pieces and personal stories.

Each news organization decides privately how they will engage their public and encourage participation. The “how”, “when” and “why” come down to each newsroom answering, “what do we want?” when it comes to their relationship with the audience. But what the often end-of-the-world scale events of the 2020s have taught us is that you cannot disregard the public and the content they generate. This is not to say that journalism isn’t reporting on these events, or that there aren’t practical and ethical discussions that come from content generated by users, such as matters of accuracy, credibility, and truth. The thing is: this content is out there. People have access to it. And journalism faces a choice: do we include it into our news reporting? Do we call the public to send this content to our newsrooms? Do we open spaces to listen to the people in our sites?

2.1 Benefits of UGC Integration: Diversity, Immediacy, and Audience Engagement

UGC offers numerous benefits to journalism, enhancing its democratic nature, diversity, and immediacy. (Hermida, 2010) asserts that UGC amplifies citizen participation, enabling a broader range of voices to be heard. This inclusivity counters the hegemony of traditional media gatekeepers, diversifying perspectives and democratizing the flow of information. Additionally, UGC fosters real-time reporting, allowing journalists to rapidly disseminate breaking news. This immediacy not only engages audiences more effectively but also challenges established news outlets to maintain their relevance in a fast-paced digital era. (Allan, 2013).

UGC encourages active participation from the audience, transforming them from passive consumers to active contributors (Bruns and Burgess, 2015). This engagement fosters a sense of community and belonging, as individuals interact with each other and with the content. The participatory nature of UGC promotes audience loyalty and strengthens the relationship between

media outlets and their viewers. User-Generated Content integration in media also enables the amplification of diverse voices and perspectives that may otherwise be marginalized in traditional media outlets. This diversity can contribute to a more inclusive representation of society (Jenkins, 2006). UGC platforms allow individuals from various backgrounds to share their experiences and opinions, enriching the overall media landscape.

The most outline and visible benefit of UGC in news sites is, however, that it offers the advantage of real-time reporting and coverage. Social media platforms allow users to share updates, images, and videos instantly, leading to quicker dissemination of news and events (Hermida, 2010). This immediacy enhances the timeliness and relevance of media content, catering to the contemporary audience's demand for up-to-the-minute information. There are instances where UGC has been successful in engaging audiences and providing unique perspectives on news events. The **Arab Spring uprisings**, for example, in 2011, in which UGC played a significant role in providing real-time updates and alternative perspectives on the events unfolding in various countries. Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook were used to share videos, photos, and first-hand accounts of the protests and government crackdowns. This allowed for a more nuanced and diverse understanding of the events, which traditional media outlets may not have been able to provide (Hermida, 2012).

The **Boston Marathon bombing** is another example, as after the bombing in 2013, UGC had a role even in helping authorities track down the suspects. Amateur photos and videos taken by bystanders were used to identify and locate the suspects, providing critical evidence to law enforcement officials (CNN, 2013). The **Ferguson protests** in 2014, gave UGC crucial role in the coverage of the protests that followed the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri (USA). Twitter and other social media platforms were used to share photos and videos of the protests and police response, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the events than traditional media outlets could offer (Hermida and Thurman, 2017).

When a **massive earthquake struck Nepal** in 2015, UGC provided a unique perspective on the disaster. Social media platforms were used to share photos and videos of the damage, as well as to coordinate rescue and relief efforts. This allowed for a more immediate and comprehensive understanding of the disaster than traditional media outlets could provide (Chen and Lu, 2016). As we can see in these examples, UGC played a significant role in providing real-time updates and alternative perspectives on the events unfolding in various countries (Hermida, 2012). In these cases, of a major breaking news event, media organizations had to make the decision to use or not UGC to enhance their coverage. They had to assess the credibility of the

sources, verify the content, and weigh the potential benefits of providing real-time, on-the-ground perspectives against the risks of sharing unverified information.

2.2 Challenges Posed by UGC: Verification, Credibility, and Information Overload

From firsthand accounts of breaking news events to personal perspectives on global issues, UGC has become a pivotal component of modern news reporting. However, amidst the myriad benefits lies a landscape fraught with challenges and complexities that news organizations must navigate with precision and care (Quandt et al., 2016). Credibility and verification are significant hurdles. Ensuring the accuracy and reliability of UGC demands meticulous fact-checking and source verification, which can strain newsroom resources. The anonymity often associated with UGC also poses challenges, as it can be exploited for misinformation and malicious intent. Moreover, (Lewis, 2012) underscores the challenge of maintaining professional standards when incorporating amateur-generated content, raising concerns about consistency and editorial control.

- **Verification:** UGC often lacks the rigorous fact-checking procedures that traditional media adheres to, raising concerns about accuracy and authenticity (Hermida, 2012). The challenge lies in distinguishing genuine content from misinformation or deliberate hoaxes, highlighting the need for reliable verification mechanisms.
- **Credibility:** The credibility of UGC sources can be questionable, as users may not have the same level of journalistic integrity as professional reporters (Lewis and Westlund, 2015). Audiences must critically assess the credibility of UGC and be aware of potential biases or misinformation inherent to such content.
- **Information Overload:** The sheer volume of UGC available can overwhelm audiences, making it difficult to sift through and process the vast amount of content (Bruns and Burgess, 2012). This information overload can lead to cognitive fatigue and impact the audience's ability to discern relevant and accurate information.

In the pursuit of an informed, engaged, and empowered audience, journalism grapples with these challenges, striving to strike the delicate balance between harnessing the potential of UGC and safeguarding the core principles of accuracy, credibility, and responsible reporting.

2.3 Ethical Considerations in UGC: Accuracy, Privacy, and Sensationalism

Incorporating User-Generated content into journalism undoubtedly adds a dynamic and engaging dimension to news reporting. However, as we navigate this evolving landscape, it is paramount that we remain vigilant about ethical considerations. First and foremost, the principle

of informed consent cannot be overstated. As (Singer et al., 2011) emphasize, when dealing with UGC, especially content of a sensitive or personal nature, obtaining clear and informed consent from content creators is not just a legal necessity but a moral imperative. It upholds the integrity of journalism, respects the rights and intentions of contributors, and helps avoid potential legal complications.

Attribution, as highlighted by (Bruns and Highfield, 2012), is another ethical pillar in UGC utilization. News organizations must give proper credit to UGC sources, acknowledging the invaluable role of citizen journalists in contributing to the news landscape. This not only ensures transparency but also fosters a sense of trust and respect in the journalism community, bridging the gap between professional and amateur content creators.

In the quest to harness the power of UGC, three ethical considerations loom large:

- **Accuracy:** Media outlets must uphold ethical standards by verifying UGC before dissemination to prevent the spread of false information (Hermida et al., 2014). Failure to do so can damage the outlet's reputation and contribute to the propagation of misinformation.
- **Privacy:** UGC often involves personal information shared by individuals, raising concerns about privacy violations (Domingo et al., 2008). Media organizations must obtain consent and handle user data responsibly to protect individuals' privacy rights.
- **Sensationalism:** Media outlets might prioritize sensational UGC for higher engagement, potentially sacrificing accuracy and sensitivity (Lewis, 2019). Ethical considerations involve balancing the pursuit of audience attention with responsible and accurate reporting.

As journalism evolves in the digital age, ethical considerations must remain at the forefront of our practices. Utilizing UGC offers tremendous opportunities for engagement and inclusivity, but it also demands a profound commitment to ethical standards. Striking this balance is not just a professional obligation but a testament to our dedication to delivering reliable, respectful, and responsible journalism to an ever-discerning audience.

2.4 UGC Between Democratization and Journalistic Dilemmas

The burgeoning presence of User-Generated Content in the contemporary media landscape illustrates the transformation brought about by the digital age. While UGC brings a pulse of public sentiment, the professional journalistic landscape navigates its integration amidst socio-

economic and political complexities. An undeniable part of this complex mosaic is the multifaceted realm of participatory online production.

Within the vast digital ecosystem, amateur-driven comments, critiques, and opinions have evolved into crucial pillars of information dissemination. Both professional media outfits and alternative citizen-centric sources embrace these amateur expressions. The influence of this user-generated content not only reshapes the spectrum of available information but also underscores the socio-political ramifications of these emerging socio-economic models. These models interweave media strategies, the dynamics of participation management companies, and the online behavior of everyday users, creating a profound impact on public space functionality (Smyrnaioi and Marty, 2017).

Historically, the allure of the internet's participatory culture was defined by its inclusivity, a vision predominantly championed by Anglo-Saxon scholars bridging academic, journalistic, and entrepreneurial spheres (Rebillard, 2007). This optimistic view propelled a shift in journalistic practices, leaning towards fostering greater public engagement. A manifestation of this shift was the proliferation of comment sections on media platforms, aiming to harness and amplify reader voices (Domingo et al., 2008).

Yet, this utopian vision gradually receded, giving way to growing disillusionment. As economic challenges intensified, coupled with escalating geopolitical tensions, online spaces, once envisioned as platforms for constructive discourse, increasingly hosted hate speech and became hotbeds for public opinion manipulation (Erjavec and Kovačič, 2012; Karatzogianni, 2015). The economic strain further exacerbated challenges, as newsrooms grappled with the resources required to manage and moderate these participatory spaces (Degand, 2012).

Editorial rooms found themselves at a crossroads: under managerial directives, they integrated UGC into their narratives, simultaneously wary of associated legal and editorial pitfalls. This shift not only disrupted traditional journalistic gatekeeping but also triggered profound ethical and philosophical introspection within media entities (Lewis et al., 2010).

It is noteworthy that journalistic institutions with strong public affiliations follow a unique trajectory. Their operational methodology is fundamentally anchored in a mutualistic relationship with their audience, who assume various roles ranging from experts and sources to commentators and readers. In response to this continuously evolving landscape, numerous digital newsrooms have pioneered initiatives such as live-blogging, enabling direct interaction between journalists and their audience, thereby achieving substantial engagement. Nevertheless, these platforms aren't devoid of editorial oversight. Often concealed from public view, this oversight aligns primarily with the outlet's objectives.

For mainstream media, comment sections, while fostering reader loyalty and engagement, must also mitigate legal ramifications. Hence, the audience participation, underpinned by a marketing-driven perspective, morphs into a logistical challenge, often outsourced and systematized beyond editorial purview. In this intricate tapestry, UGC's emergence as a dominant force is both a reflection of the digital age's democratizing potential and a testament to the enduring challenges that accompany such seismic shifts.

2.5 UGC in Practice

Overall, the decision to use UGC in news reporting is a complex one that requires careful consideration of both the potential benefits and risks. While UGC can provide unique insights and foster greater audience engagement, news organizations must also be mindful of the quality and credibility of User-Generated Content, as well as the legal and ethical implications of using it in their reporting. The Le Monde live blogs, as Gilles vanKote (February, 2021)⁵⁵ explains, threads this exact line between the benefits and downfalls of participation. Included in the live, user participation can sometimes come into tension with the primary function of the feature, which is providing verified and up-to-date information on the event being covered. The temporality of information production, coupled with that of real-time conversation with the user, can lead to a loss of precision, to verification defects (Philips, 2010) or even to the impoverishment of the link with the user (Pignard-Cheynel and Sebbah, 2022). As vanKote (February, 2021) explains, even in the rush of conducting live blogs, the journalists have to take the time to verify the information, because this format does not escape the rules applied to journalists.

News organizations may opt to use UGC to increase audience engagement and participation. By incorporating user-submitted content into their reporting, news sites can build a sense of community and collaboration with their audiences. This can also help to amplify diverse voices and perspectives that may not have been covered by traditional media outlets. Another potential benefit of using UGC is that it can provide a more comprehensive and nuanced view of news events. Eyewitness accounts, personal stories, and social media posts can all contribute to a more complete picture of breaking news stories. This can be especially valuable in fast-moving news cycles where traditional journalists may not have the bandwidth to cover every angle.

⁵⁵ Gilles vanKote is Director of Reader Relations for Le Monde. Exchanges were conducted with the journalist in November 2020 via email; and an exchange via videocall was conducted in February 2021. Statements from the journalist will be used throughout this thesis from this point forward, always between quotations mark, and, if necessary, information he provided will followed by the reference (Gilles vanKote, February 2021).

However, there are also several reasons why news organizations may opt not to use UGC in their reporting. One major concern is the quality and credibility of User-Generated Content. With the rise of deepfake technology and other forms of online manipulation, it can be difficult to verify the accuracy and authenticity of user-submitted content. For this reason, news organizations may be hesitant to rely too heavily on UGC as a primary source of information. Another potential drawback of using UGC is legal liability. News organizations may face legal risks if they publish User-Generated Content that contains copyrighted material, defamation, or other legal issues. Without proper safeguards and vetting processes in place, news organizations may choose to avoid using UGC altogether to avoid legal complications.

Journalistic ethics and the obligatory trust in the relationship between news outlets and the public are factors that come into the decision of using or not content created by users. Ultimately, content produced by the public is handled on a case-to-case basis, though newsrooms and media companies establish best-practices to manage it. UGC must be appropriate, accurate and newsworthy – this demands verification and a debate of why this content deserves to be published. Efforts to ensure it meets the ultimate value of journalism: truth.

Adopting User-Generated Content into storytelling doesn't mean journalistic values are abandoned or that journalists' jobs are made less important. UGC will always prompt a form of mediation by newsroom staff, be it implied or active, as journalists filter the content and decide what can be used, how it can be incorporated into news stories and what level of importance it will have on the storytelling. This process of journalistic mediation legitimizes information – if the internet made it possible for ordinary people to become content distributors and the media no longer has publication exclusivity, journalists claim the space of credible information.

The integration of User-Generated Content in journalism introduces a dynamic dimension to media production and consumption. The benefits of democratization, diversity, and immediacy must be weighed against the challenges of credibility, verification, and ethical concerns. Embracing UGC requires journalistic institutions to adapt their practices, reassess their editorial standards, and engage in a nuanced dialogue with their audiences. As UGC continues to shape the media landscape, an ongoing exploration of its implications remains essential to uphold the principles of responsible and impactful journalism.

3. UGC in Practice on News Sites

User-Generated Content is a popular way for media organizations to engage their audience and enrich their news stories. There are multiple profiles for user contributions, as they come, for example, as images (photos and videos) and as text. They also have different origins, reaching

journalists via social networks, being sent into the newsrooms, or having been asked by news organizations (call for contributions). By exploring the 80 news sites of our *corpus*, we observed that, though most do not make a constant effort to include the user into the storytelling process in an *active* way, they have a continuous use of User-Generated Content in news stories specific settings, such as:

- **Breaking News:** When a major event or breaking news story happens, media organizations often turn to UGC to get first-hand accounts and perspectives from eyewitnesses on the ground. This could include photos and videos from social media platforms, comments from witnesses, or live streams from the scene.
- **Opinion and Analysis:** UGC can also be used to provide a diverse range of opinions and perspectives on a particular issue or topic. This could include quotes from social media posts or comments, as well as user-submitted opinion pieces or blog posts.
- **Crowdsourcing:** Media organizations can also use UGC to crowdsource information and data from their audience. For example, they may ask their audience to submit photos or videos of a particular event or situation, or to contribute their own stories and experiences.
- **Social Media Integration:** Media organizations may also integrate UGC from social media platforms into their news stories. This could include embedding tweets or Instagram posts or using social media to source information or interview subjects.
- **Community Engagement:** UGC can also be used to foster a sense of community and engagement among a media organization's audience. This could include user-submitted photos and videos for contests, polls or surveys, or even user-generated news stories.

News sites continue to use UGC in their news stories due to several benefits it provides, including real-time updates, diverse perspectives, valuable information, interactive experiences, and community engagement. Firstly, UGC allows for real-time updates and coverage of breaking news stories (Gonzalez and Somerville, 2016). Media organizations can quickly get first-hand accounts and perspectives from eyewitnesses on the ground, including photos and videos from social media platforms and live streams from the scene. This helps news sites to provide up-to-the-minute coverage to their audience, keeping them informed of the latest developments.

Secondly, UGC offers diverse perspectives and opinions on a particular issue or topic (Westlund and Fagerjord, 2017). By incorporating quotes from social media posts or comments,

as well as user-submitted opinion pieces or blog posts, news sites can provide their readers with a more comprehensive view of a story. This helps to promote a more inclusive and diverse news environment, which is essential for building trust with audiences. Thirdly, UGC allows media organizations to crowdsource information and data from their audience (Hermida, 2010). By asking their audience to submit photos, videos, or their own stories and experiences, news sites can gather information that they may not have access to otherwise. This not only helps to enrich their news coverage but also promotes audience participation and engagement.

Fourthly, social media integration of UGC can provide more interactive experiences for news audiences (Waldman, 2011). By embedding tweets or Instagram posts or using social media as a way to source information or interview subjects, news sites can create a more engaging and immersive experience for their audience. Finally, UGC can be used to foster a sense of community and engagement among a media organization's audience (Friedland and De Rosa, 2015). By encouraging user-submitted photos and videos for contests, polls or surveys, or even user-generated news stories, news sites can build a relationship with their users and create a more inclusive news environment.

While we've explored the diverse profiles and potential of User-Generated Content (UGC) in shaping news narratives, it is imperative to critically assess its real-world applications. Our comprehensive *corpus* of 80 news websites from eight countries reveals a spectrum of UGC utilization. The theoretical benefits of UGC, such as offering real-time updates and fostering community engagement, have been well-chronicled. However, it is crucial to remember that its practical incorporation doesn't always enrich the news discourse. By examining specific instances from these websites, we aim to provide a balanced view, shedding light on both the transformative potential and the pitfalls of UGC in contemporary journalism. As we navigate through these concrete examples, we'll scrutinize how UGC, for better or worse, is altering the landscape of modern news stories.

3.1 Examples of UGC in storytelling

The Olympics (Summer in Tokyo and Winter in Beijing); pop culture moments around celebrities (Megan Markle and Prince Harry's interview and the #FreeBritney Movement, for example: these events were present on the majority of websites of *corpus* during the time of our study and they were selected as examples because, on their coverage, they integrated User-Generated Content and could show how this resource is used for storytelling in news sites around the world. The events may appear to be of different nature, but there is a thread that interconnects them. In addition, it was interesting to show the format that led them to gain prominence, in

which something unusual or strange caught the attention of many network users and the event went viral.

There are two manners in which User-Generated Content tends to be used in storytelling: 1) personal testimonials become the news and 2) User-Generated Content makes/changes/illustrates the storytelling. In the first instance, news sites use personal testimonials of users to construct their stories, be it the account from an experience of a situation or event that the user has lived or was living through, made part of the news production, with different measures of intervention from newsroom staff. Second, we noticed that there are cases when UGC is used in news stories to complement or illustrate what was written by journalists, such as pictures, videos, and texts.

3.1.1 Viral Content

There are cases where the spread of the images through the social networks for its funny or unusual content become part of the news, as UGC can also be what makes a story happen in the first place. Images that go viral on social networks are often picked up by news sites to illustrate events or even become the story itself. When content goes viral (when a text, image, video, or link – often defined as memes – spreads rapidly on the internet), it is often picked up by news sites and an article is made about it.

Viral content on social media is becoming increasingly important as a form of User-Generated content that appears in news sites, because social media platforms, like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, are a rich source of information and perspectives on a wide range of topics, and viral content can quickly spread and capture the attention of large audiences. Media organizations are increasingly using viral content to engage their audience and add value to their reporting. For example, a viral video or meme may be used to illustrate a news story or provide commentary on a particular issue. Media organizations may also use viral content to source information or interview subjects, particularly in breaking news situations.

However, it is important to note that viral content on social media is not always reliable or accurate. Some viral content may be manipulated or taken out of context, and media organizations need to be diligent in verifying and fact-checking any viral content they use in their reporting. In addition, media organizations need to be sensitive to the potential impact that using viral content may have on the original creators and users. While media organizations may have the legal right to use viral content under fair use or other copyright exceptions, they should also consider ethical considerations and best practices for crediting and compensating the original creators.

The fact that content has gone viral on social media can make it a story in and of itself. When content goes viral, it often captures the attention of a large audience and can have a

significant impact on public opinion and discourse. This can make it newsworthy and relevant to a wide range of topics, including politics, culture, and social issues. Media organizations may choose to report on viral content to provide analysis and commentary on why the content went viral and what it says about broader societal trends or issues. For example, a viral video or meme may be used to explore issues related to social justice, political activism, or humor in popular culture.

An example of this is **Mike Pence's fly** (Figure 44), as the unexpected appearance of the bug in the debate of the US vice-presidential candidates generated a wave of memes, especially on Twitter. Nearly 58 million viewers watched Kamala Harris and Mike Pence defend their ideas on USA Today on October 7, 2020. But then, while talking about the Trump administration's support for US law enforcement, a fly landed on Pence's white hair and stayed there. for two incredible minutes. The internet could not ignore the insect and jokes began to emerge. Among the comments, there were those who said that the fly was Pence's only "black friend" and that flies are attracted to feces.

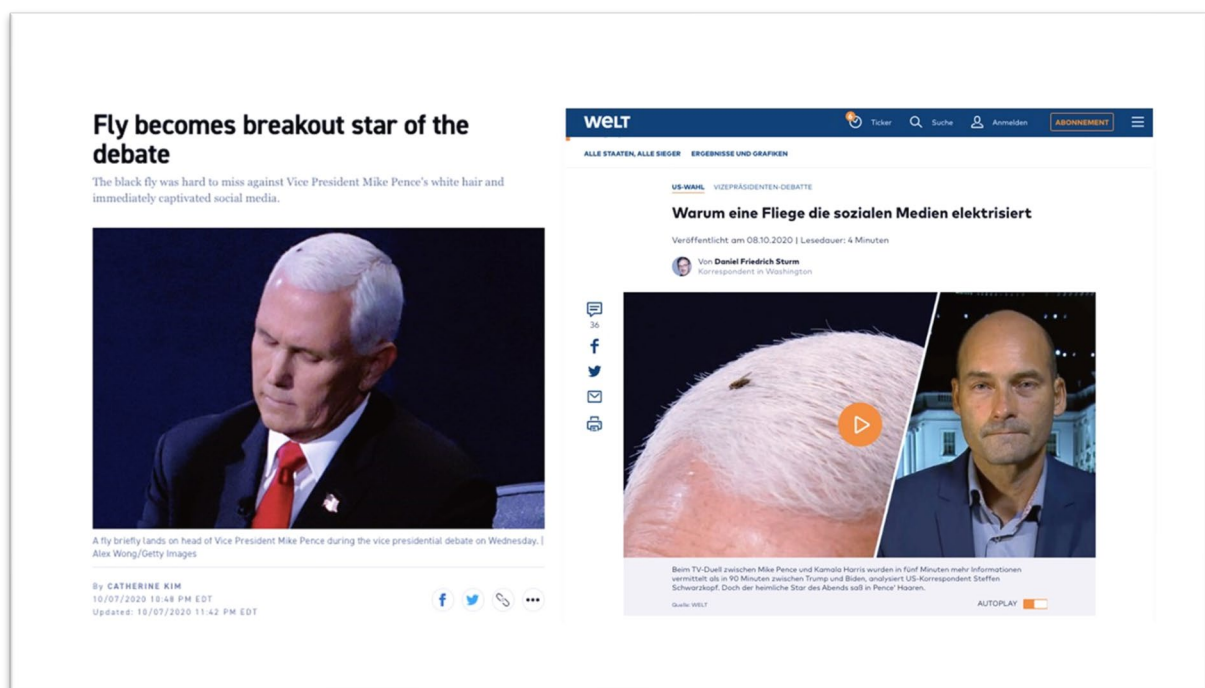


Figure 44 – Print Screens from Politico and Welt about Mike Pence's fly.

In general, all the news sources mentioned the event of the fly landing on Mike Pence's head during the debate with Kamala Harris, and how it became a topic of discussion on social media. Even though they differ in their approach and emphasis on the event, how the audience

paid attention to fly was most important. Politico (US)⁵⁶ and Uol Notícias (Brazil)⁵⁷ present the event in a humorous way, with emphasis on the fly's visibility due to Pence's white hair and the creation of a Twitter account for the insect. They also highlight the event's repercussion on social media, including the creation of memes. 20 minutes (France)⁵⁸ emphasizes the fly's impact on the debate, landing on Pence's head during a discussion on systemic racism among police officers. They also mention how Joe Biden's campaign capitalized on the event on social media. Welt (Germany)⁵⁹ approaches the event briefly, presenting it as part of a list of topics discussed during the debate, without emphasizing its impact or repercussion on social media. Although the title of the article refers to the fact that the insect left social media "electrified", the landing of the fly and its repercussions are approached in a very synthetic way. De Telegraaf (Netherlands)⁶⁰ characterizes the fly as an unwelcome guest that sparked hilarious comments on social media. They also highlight the moment when the fly landed on Pence's head during a discussion on systemic racism among police officers, followed by a brief comment on the positions taken by Biden and Trump regarding the debate on social media.

Bernie Sanders and his mittens (Figure 45) were a similar phenomenon. A pair of gloves stole the show at the inauguration of US President Joe Biden in January 2021. Senator and 2016 Democratic presidential candidate, Bernie Sanders, was photographed in a folding chair with legs and arms crossed wearing patterned gloves, big and cute. The image went viral. Twitter transported Sanders and his gloves to historic photographs, famous paintings, and even the moon. Sanders said the gloves were a gift from a teacher in Vermont. His campaign website sold T-shirts, stickers and hoodies with the meme and donated the money raised to a charitable organization.

⁵⁶ Source: <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/10/07/fly-mike-pence-vp-debate-427704>

⁵⁷ Source: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/internacional/ultimas-noticias/2020/10/08/mosca-que-pousou-em-mike-pence-vira-meme-e-ganha-ate-conta-no-twitter.htm>

⁵⁸ Source: <https://www.20minutes.fr/high-tech/2880227-20201008-debat-entre-mike-pence-kamala-harris-mouche-vole-vedette-candidats>

⁵⁹ Source: <https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/us-wahl/article217388586/Mike-Pence-die-Fliege-Insekt-stiehlt-Trumps-Vize-bei-TV-Duell-die-Show.html>

⁶⁰ Source: <https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/175065924/vlieg-trekt-aandacht-tijdens-debat-pence-en-harris>



Figure 45 – Print Screens from La Nación about Bernie Sander's mittens.

The news from different countries, including Brazil, Argentina, Germany, France, and the UK, all focus on Bernie Sanders and his mittens during Joe Biden's inauguration. While some articles emphasize the humor and memes that circulated on social media, others highlight Sanders' fashion choices and his reaction to the attention he received. The G1⁶¹ article from Brazil describes Sanders as appearing bored and irritated during the inauguration, while also highlighting a funny meme of him sitting with his arms crossed. La Nación⁶² from Argentina focuses on Sanders' casual outfit, specifically his jacket and woolen gloves. Stern⁶³ from Germany presents Sanders' own reaction to the attention, stating that he was just trying to stay warm and pay attention to the proceedings. Additionally, Sanders spoke positively about the interest in the creator of his gloves, Jen Ellis. 20 Minutes⁶⁴ from France highlights the phenomenon of Sanders' mittens on social media and credits the photographer who captured the moment. The Mirror⁶⁵ from the UK declares Sanders as the real star of the inauguration and includes a response from the senator, where he explains that people in Vermont prioritize staying warm over fashion. Overall, while the articles

⁶¹ Source: <https://g1.globo.com/mundo/noticia/2021/01/21/foto-de-bernie-sanders-sentado-na-posse-de-biden-viraliza-veja-memes.ghtml>

⁶² Source: <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/el-mundo/la-asuncion-joe-biden-bernie-sanders-se-nid2577994/>

⁶³ Source: <https://www.stern.de/politik/ausland/bernie-sanders-bei-seth-meyers-ueber-sein-meme--so-reagiert-er-auf-das-strickhandschuh-meme-30012324.html>

⁶⁴ Source: <https://www.20minutes.fr/insolite/2958255-20210121-investiture-joe-biden-democrate-bernie-sanders-moufles-detournes-reseaux-sociaux>

⁶⁵ Source: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/bernie-sanders-mittens-were-real-23356134>

vary in their focus, they all acknowledge the impact Sanders' appearance had on social media and the attention it generated.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that the mere fact that content has gone viral does not necessarily make it newsworthy. Media organizations should still exercise editorial judgment in deciding whether to cover viral content, and should consider factors such as accuracy, relevance, and impact on their audience; even if reporting on viral content simply because it is popular on social media can be a strategy to attract an audience and engage the public. Viral content often captures the attention of a wide range of people, and reporting on it can be a way for media organizations to tap into that interest and drive traffic to their websites or social media pages. In the end, the decision to share viral content on social media is up to each news organization, and will depend on a variety of factors, including their goals, audience, and journalistic values. While viral content can be a valuable source of engagement and conversation, it should be approached with care and consideration, and should not be the sole focus of a news organization's coverage.

3.1.2 The 'Celebrity Factor'

News sites also often pick up content posted by celebrities, like actors and singers, posted on their social networks, and create articles depicting it. They also use the reactions of the public and the fans from those notably in the public eye to generate stories. In the age of social media, celebrities have more direct access to their fans than ever before. They can share their thoughts, opinions, and personal moments with millions of followers with just a few clicks. This has given rise to a phenomenon known as "celebrity journalism", in which news sites and media outlets use social media content posted by celebrities to generate news stories and articles. This trend has been fueled by the fact that celebrities are always in the public eye, and people are naturally curious about their lives. With social media, fans have been given a sanctioned view into the personal lives of their favorite celebrities, and this has created a new level of intimacy between celebrities and their fans.

As a result, news sites and media outlets have begun to pick up on this trend and use social media content posted by celebrities to create news stories and articles. These articles often focus on celebrity opinions on current events, personal moments, or even their fashion choices. In some cases, celebrities use their social media accounts to announce big news or share exclusive content, making their accounts a valuable source of information for journalists and fans alike. However, the use of social media content by news sites and media outlets has also sparked debates about privacy and the role of the media in the lives of celebrities. Some argue that the use of social media content for news stories and articles is a violation of privacy, while others see it as a natural extension of the celebrity lifestyle.

The **#FreeBritney movement** (Figure 46) is an interesting example of celebrity focused journalism that used UGC from social media to tell Britney Spears story. 2008 was not a good year for the singer. After the American popstar went through bad times and was hospitalized twice, her father asked that justice pass to him control of the fortune and other aspects of his daughter's life. More than 10 years have passed without Britney having the right to decide how to spend her money or have another child, for example. This is how the #FreeBritney movement emerged in 2019, created by fans of the singer. As the pop princess fought in the courts to regain control of her life, fans and celebrities took to the hashtag on social media to support her. The case gave rise to a documentary and several press reports. Free Britney finally took place in November 2021, when Spears' father agreed to step down from the role. The singer thanked the movement on social media.



Figure 46 – Print Screen from La Voz about #FreeBritney.

The news on Pop Culture Legend #FreeBritney was reported by several news outlets from different countries. Le Monde (France)⁶⁶ provides an in-depth report of the court decision that ended Britney Spears' conservatorship and highlights the singer's reaction to the news. The article also touches upon the tense relationship between Spears and her father and the support of her

⁶⁶ Source: https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/11/13/la-tutelle-de-la-chanteuse-britney-spears-enfin-levee-par-la-justice-americaine_6101911_3210.html

fans throughout the legal process. Bild (Germany)⁶⁷ focuses on the artist's declarations of gratitude towards her fans and quotes celebrities who have also expressed their support for the court decision. La Voz (Argentina)⁶⁸ emphasizes the importance of the #FreeBritney movement, which was created and driven by fans and friends of the singer and presents a series of memes that circulated on social media following the court decision. Metro.uk (UK)⁶⁹ highlights the collaboration of celebrities and friends of Spears in the #FreeBritney movement and provides a list of notable personalities who have commemorated the judicial decision. Nu.nl (Netherlands)⁷⁰ reports on the artist's reaction to the court victory and provides a brief overview of the trial, along with a table that briefly characterizes the main parties involved. Overall, the news outlets present similar information about Britney Spears' release from conservatorship, with slight differences in focus and additional details. All of them highlight the support of her fans and the role of the #FreeBritney movement in the legal process, as well as the reactions of celebrities and the singer herself.

The British Royal Family Debacle (Figure 47) also caught up the attention of the media, not only for the notoriety of those involved, but also by the repercussion it had on social media, with hashtags and memes arising around it. These are difficult times for the royal family. In January 2020, Prince Harry and wife Meghan Markle surprised everyone with the announcement that they would step away from their duties in the royal family. In a move that became known in the British press as “Megxit”, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex gave up the money they received from the royal family, their titles and moved to the United States. In March 2021, the couple gave an interview to American presenter Oprah Winfrey, exposing episodes of racism and lack of support for Meghan's mental health at Buckingham Palace. Less than a month after the interview aired on April 9, Prince Philip and the Duke of Edinburgh, the Queen's husband, died aged 99 at Windsor Castle. Finally, in August of the same year, Prince Andrew, son of Elisabeth and Philip, was officially prosecuted for sexual abuse in the United States.

⁶⁷ Source: <https://www.bild.de/unterhaltung/leute/leute/britney-spears-ueber-ihre-wiedergewonnene-freiheit-ich-werde-wohl-den-rest-des-t-78232120.bild.html>

⁶⁸ Source: <https://www.lavoz.com.ar/vos/musica/britney-spears-las-reacciones-tras-su-liberacion-de-la-tutela-de-su-padre/>

⁶⁹ Source: <https://metro.co.uk/2021/11/13/britney-spears-paris-hilton-leads-stars-celebrating-as-conservatorship-ends-15595271/>

⁷⁰ Source: <https://www.nu.nl/achterklap/6167551/britney-spears-reageert-op-einde-curatele-beste-dag-ooit.html>



Figure 47 – Print Screen from The Canary (UK) about the controversy surrounding Meghan Markle's Oprah interview.

The news articles presented showcase different aspects of the British Royal Family Debacle, which refers to the controversies and tensions surrounding the members of the British Royal Family. CNN (US)⁷¹ reports on the decision of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle to leave their senior roles in the Royal Family and become financially independent. The article highlights the reaction of the UK press, which made this issue front-page news. CNN also notes the relevance of this news in a week when international tensions between the United States and Iran were making headlines. The Canary (UK)⁷² focuses on the controversy surrounding Meghan Markle's upcoming interview with Oprah. The article highlights the racist and misogynistic attacks that the English press had inflicted on Meghan since her relationship with Prince Harry was announced. The article also notes how social media reacted to the announcement of the conversation between Oprah and the Dukes of Sussex. La Voz de la Galicia (Spain)⁷³ reports on Meghan Markle's job at Disney as the narrator of the movie *Elephant*. The article notes that the recommendation came from her husband, Prince Harry. The news also briefly alludes to the couple's decision to resign from their royal positions. Diario Popular (Argentina)⁷⁴ reports on Prince Harry's announcement on

⁷¹ Source: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/01/09/media/harry-meghan-front-pages-intl-gbr-scli/index.html>

⁷² Source: <https://www.thecanary.co/trending/2021/03/04/meghan-markles-interview-with-oprah-sparks-controversy-and-it-hasnt-even-ai-red-yet/>

⁷³ Source: <https://www.lavozdeg Galicia.es/noticia/sociedad/2020/03/26/meghan-markle-consigue-trabajo-disney-recomendacion-harry/00031585251786813272144.htm>

⁷⁴ Source: <https://www.diariopopular.com.ar/internacionales/el-principe-harry-y-la-duquesa-meghan-markle-renuncian-la-realeza-britanica-ser-economicamente-independientes-n451029>

Instagram that he will give up the benefits of being part of the British Crown and dedicate himself to work in charitable institutions. The article notes that the British press's attacks were one of the reasons for the prince's decision.

Sky News (UK)⁷⁵ reports on the scandal surrounding Prince Andrew and his connections with Jeffrey Epstein, which led him to step back from public duties. The article reproduces a statement by Prince Andrew, which was posted on Instagram, and notes that some companies and universities had distanced themselves from him since the interview he granted. NOS.nl (Netherlands)⁷⁶ reports on the condolences offered by the British to the Royal Family after Prince Philip's death. The article reproduces messages of grief issued by European aristocrats, former American president Barack Obama, and the current president, Joe Biden. The article notes uncertainty regarding Prince Harry's attendance at the funeral due to the suspension of his royal privileges. In summary, these news articles show different facets of the British Royal Family Debacle, including the controversies surrounding Prince Harry and Meghan Markle's decision to leave their senior roles, the scandal surrounding Prince Andrew and his connections with Jeffrey Epstein, the grief and condolences offered after Prince Philip's death, and the attacks by the British press on Meghan Markle.

Elon Musk's choice of a baby name (Figure 48) was not left behind in social media, and consequently new sites' attention. In May 2020, Tesla CEO and SpaceX founder Elon Musk announced the birth of their seventh child — the first with Canadian singer Grimes. But what caught attention was the name the couple chose for the baby. In response to a follower on Twitter, Musk said the son's name is X Æ A-12. Grimes soon confirmed the information and told the meaning of the strange name: a combination of the variable "X", the elven symbol "Æ" which means artificial intelligence or love and the name of the couple's favorite aircraft "A-12". The internet speculated about how the name would be pronounced and found that Musk calls the child "Baby X". In December 2021, the couple secretly had a baby girl, named Exa Dark Sideræl Musk or "baby Y".

⁷⁵ Source: <https://news.sky.com/story/prince-andrew-steps-back-from-public-duties-1186585>

⁷⁶ Source: <https://nos.nl/artikel/2376088-bloemen-en-vlaggen-halfstok-voor-prins-philip-man-met-een-levendige-persoonlijkheid>



Figure 48 – Print Screen from Vice about Elon Musk's choice of a baby name.

The public response to Elon Musk and Grimes' baby name was widely covered by news outlets around the world. The Los Angeles Times (US)⁷⁷ reported on Grimes' initial explanation of the name, which included a mistake corrected by Elon Musk. Vice (US)⁷⁸, on the other hand, focused on the difficulty of pronouncing the name and the various attempts by people to do so. The Spanish news outlet Okdiario⁷⁹ reported that Elon Musk used his Twitter account to share a photo of his newborn son and his unique name, which sparked much discussion on social media. Le Figaro⁸⁰, a French newspaper, reported on the legal issues surrounding the name, as California law prohibits the use of numbers in first names. The couple later changed the name to X Æ A-Xii, using Roman numerals instead of the number 12. The Dutch newspaper Metro NL⁸¹ took a humorous approach, initially asking its readers to guess what X Æ A-12 meant before revealing that it was the name of the couple's newborn son. The Brazilian news outlet Gaucha ZH⁸² reported

⁷⁷ Source: <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-05-06/elon-musk-grimes-baby-name-tweet>

⁷⁸ Source: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/bv8gja/how-pronounce-elon-musk-grimes-baby-name>

⁷⁹ Source: <https://okdiario.com/happyfm/elon-musk-grimes-dan-bienvenida-hijo-x-ae-12-musk-5563899>

⁸⁰ Source: <https://madame.lefigaro.fr/celebrities/elon-musk-et-grimes-sont-parents-dun-petit-garcon-050520-180915>

⁸¹ Source: <https://www.metronieuws.nl/entertainment/2020/05/ra-ra-wat-is-x-ae-a-12/>

⁸² Source: <https://gauchazh.clicrbs.com.br/donna/gente/noticia/2020/05/nasce-filho-de-elon-musk-com-a-cantora-grimes-ck9twbypr003o015nhrspie64.html>

on the public's fascination with the name, which quickly became a trending topic on social media. Overall, the newspapers covered a range of topics related to the public response to Elon Musk and Grimes' baby name, including attempts to decipher the name's meaning, discussions around its legal implications, and public opinions on the name's creativity and originality.

The Oscar Slap (Figure 49) also made it into the celebrity related news realm, with the reactions to a particular moment that overshadowed the most important award in world cinema. A controversial and unusual reaction marked the 94th edition of the Oscars. On stage to announce the best documentary, comedian Chris Rock made a joke about the alopecia of actress Jada Pinkett Smith, wife of Will Smith. Annoyed by the mockery, Will took the stage and slapped Rock. Spectators and guests came to believe that it was a staged slap, but it soon became clear that none of this had been arranged. Less than an hour later, Will Smith receive the Oscar for best actor for King Richard and used his speech to apologize. As the internet debated whether the actor's attitude was correct, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences didn't seem at all happy about what happened. Days after the ceremony, Will Smith was banned from the Oscars gala for 10 years.

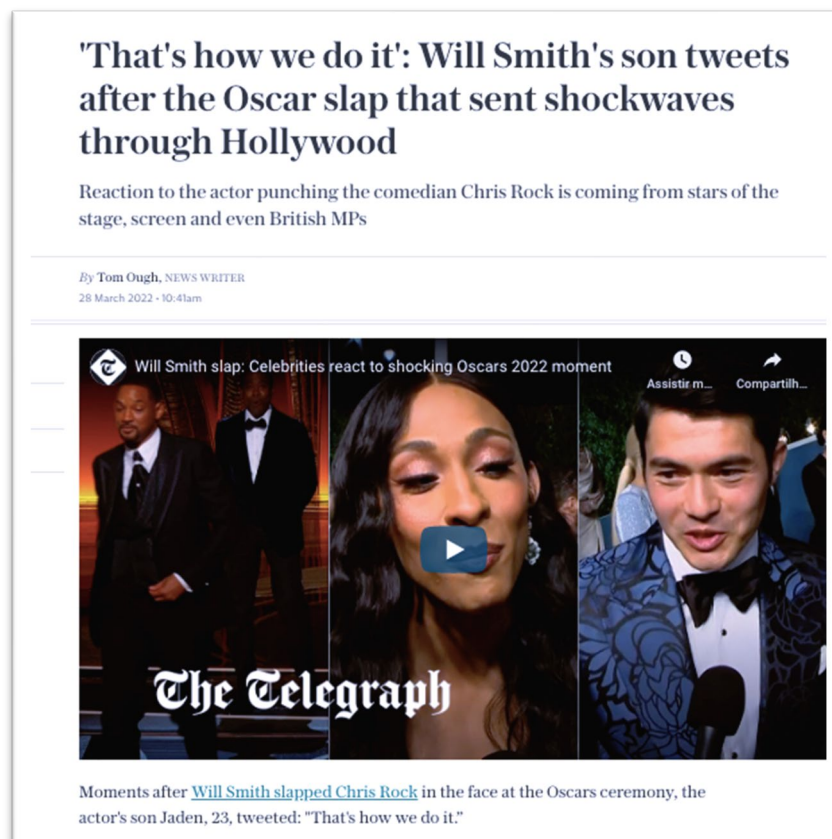


Figure 49 – Print Screen from The Telegraph about Oscar Slap.

The coverage of the Will Smith and Chris Rock Oscar slap had a noticeable difference in the way the international news outlets incorporated reader responses and social media reactions. While Fox News (US)⁸³ and Welt (Germany)⁸⁴ focused mainly on the statements from the involved parties, including Will Smith's apology, The Telegraph (UK)⁸⁵ and La Prensa⁸⁶ (Argentina) highlighted the impact of social media on the incident, such as Jaden Smith's tweet and the memes that circulated. Liberation (France)⁸⁷ took a unique approach to the news, emphasizing the dichotomy of reactions on social media, with some people finding the incident amusing, while others were outraged. RTL Nieuws (Netherlands)⁸⁸ added another layer to the discussion, questioning whether the slap was real or staged, indicating a possible skepticism towards the authenticity of the event. Overall, the various news outlets provided different perspectives on the incident, showcasing the cultural and contextual nuances of their respective regions. Still, it was clear that the impact of the incident on social media was not something to be ignored, with reader responses and memes becoming part of the narrative. This demonstrates the increasing importance of social media in shaping news coverage and public opinion.

3.1.3 World Events

UGC can reshape narratives and public perceptions and major world events, such as the Olympic Games, have been no exception to this trend. The Tokyo Olympics offered a vivid tapestry of stories, from postponed events amidst a pandemic to the dramatic personal decisions of athletes like Simone Biles. Yet, what made these narratives even more compelling was the chorus of voices on social media – from athletes connecting directly with fans to viral moments creating cultural phenomena overnight. This direct channel provided by platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok humanized athletes, magnified controversies, and shed light on otherwise overlooked moments, ensuring they reached global audiences instantaneously.

The **Tokyo Olympics** (Figure 50) was surrounded by articles that demonstrated the significant impact of social media on the event and how it has shaped public perception of the competitions and athletes. Social media provided a platform for athletes to connect with their fans,

⁸³ Source: <https://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/chris-rocks-brother-will-smith-oscar-slap-foul>

⁸⁴ Source: <https://www.welt.de/kultur/article237851219/Will-Smith-entschuldigt-sich-bei-Chris-Rock-Oscars-Academy-leitet-Untersuchung-ein.html?icid=search.product.onsitesearch>

⁸⁵ Source: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/03/28/do-will-smiths-son-tweets-oscar-slap-sent-shockwaves-hollywood/>

⁸⁶ Source: <https://www.laprensa.com.ar/513938-El-mensaje-de-Jaden-el-hijo-de-Will-Smith-tras-el-bofeton-de-su-padre-a-Chris-Rock-en-los-Oscar-.note.aspx>

⁸⁷ Source: https://www.liberation.fr/culture/gifle-de-will-smith-aux-oscars-memes-pas-mal-20220328_JKPAPS47CZGVJAZ4SEGVDHUT7M

⁸⁸ Source: <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/editienl/artikel/5298102/was-klap-will-smith-chris-rock-echt-stunt-oscars>

amplified controversy and misinformation, and created new cultural references and phenomena. Postponed for a year due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the 32nd edition of the Olympic Games took place in Tokyo, Japan, between July 23 and August 8, 2021. The event was marked by practically empty stands, after so many foreigners how much local spectators were banned from watching the competitions. The Olympic village has turned into a “bubble”, where athletes, technical committees and officials must follow strict rules to prevent the spread of the virus. Highlight for the debut of new sports in the competition, including baseball, skateboarding and surfing. And also, for Simone Biles, an American gymnast who arrived in Japan as the main star of the games and ended up abandoning the competition to take care of her mental health.



Figure 50 – Print Screen from the New York Times about the Tokyo Olympics.

The news articles about the Tokyo Olympics cover a wide range of topics and events that occurred during the games. These articles highlight the role of social media in amplifying and

shaping public perception of these events. The DailyMail (UK) article⁸⁹ on Simone Biles emphasizes the controversy surrounding her decision to withdraw from the Olympics to prioritize her mental health. The article notes the support Biles received from fans on social media, highlighting the role of social media in shaping public opinion and support for the athlete. Le Parisien's (France) article⁹⁰ on Nicolas Batum's magnificent counterattack highlights the impact of social media on public perception of the athlete's performance. The article notes how users compared Batum's move to a work of art, indicating the power of social media to shape public discourse and create cultural references. The article from AD.nl (Netherlands)⁹¹ summarizes various events at the Olympics that garnered attention on social media, such as the gold medal shared by two high jump competitors and British swimmer Tom Daley knitting in the stands between races. This article highlights how social media can amplify and popularize unusual or quirky events that might not receive as much attention from traditional media outlets. The New York Times (US) article⁹² on the "anti-sex beds" rumor shows how social media can generate controversy and misinformation. The article notes that athletes speculated that the beds were made of cardboard to prevent intimacy, which the Olympic committee later denied through Twitter. This article underscores the impact of social media on public perception and how misinformation can spread quickly through these platforms. Finally, Estadão's (Brazil) article⁹³ on athletes using TikTok to connect with fans shows the power of social media to humanize and promote athletes. The article notes how TikTok provides athletes with a platform to showcase their daily routines and promote lesser-known sports. This article highlights the role of social media in creating new opportunities for athletes to connect with their fans and promote their sports.

Fast forward to the **Beijing Winter Olympics**, and the influence of social media became even more entrenched. News outlets, recognizing the allure and authenticity of UGC, seamlessly integrated tweets, videos, and posts into their stories, offering readers a multi-dimensional perspective. These firsthand accounts, be it about technological innovations or the personal challenges athletes faced, enriched the storytelling, bridging the gap between professional journalism and raw, unfiltered experiences. Moreover, in an age marked by the challenges of a

⁸⁹ Source: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9837707/Simone-Biles-thanks-fans-love-support-shock-withdrawal-Tokyo-Olympics.html>

⁹⁰ Source: <https://www.leparisien.fr/sports/jo-de-tokyo-de-la-joconde-a-la-creation-de-michel-ange-le-magistral-contre-de-batum-deja-a-la-posterite-05-08-2021-XZIIYG3ULRE5NEO74WACN5R3DE.php>

⁹¹ Source: <https://www.ad.nl/olympische-spelen/opmerkelijke-spelen-breien-op-de-tribune-toiletteren-goud-delen-en-zilver-haten~a82b5a83/>

⁹² Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/19/world/asia/tokyo-olympics-anti-sex-beds-cardboard.html>

⁹³ Source: <https://esportes.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,atletas-invadem-tik-tok-e-se-aproximam-dos-fas-ao-mostrar-rotina-diaria,70004043089>

pandemic and geopolitical tensions, these narratives offered a reminder of the shared human experiences underlying the competitive spirit.

While the world was breaking records of Covid-19 cases driven by the Ômicron variant, China was organizing a health bubble with 25,000 people to hold the 24th edition of the Winter Olympics. The 15 ice and snow modalities were held in Beijing between February 4 and 20, 2022 and once again established Norway as the power of the games, with 37 medals. Beijing was the first Olympic venue to use 100% artificial snow, made by a machine using millions of liters of water. The games were also marked by the diplomatic boycott of several countries initiated by the United States, which alleged concern about human rights violations in China.



Figure 51 – Print Screen from ABC about the Beijin Winter Olympics.

Overall, the coverage reflects a diversity of approaches, ranging from technological innovations to personal struggles and social media impact. However, the incorporation of social media content in several articles demarcates the importance of this platform in athletes' lives and the potential for media outlets to engage readers by providing more intimate and authentic

perspectives. ABC (Spain)⁹⁴ reports on the poor conditions faced by athletes who have tested positive for Covid-19 (Figure 51). This coverage sheds light on the challenges of holding large-scale sporting events during a pandemic and the impact on athletes' health and well-being.

The BBC (UK)⁹⁵ stands out for its focus on technological innovations, featuring articles and videos showcasing robots that serve food and clean the facilities. This choice of coverage reflects the increasing role of technology in sports events and aligns with the BBC's reputation as a technology-focused media outlet. DW (Germany)⁹⁶ focuses on the performance of one athlete, Natalie Geisenberger, who became one of the most successful German athletes at the Winter Olympics. The article also raises the possibility that Geisenberger may surpass the medal record of another German athlete, Claudia Pechstein. This approach emphasizes national pride and the history of German success in the Winter Olympics. Huffpost (US)⁹⁷ highlights the social media message of gymnast Simone Biles defending skier Mikaela Shiffrin against online attacks. The article demonstrates the impact of social media on athletes' lives and the potential for fellow athletes to use their platform to support each other. Linternaute (France)⁹⁸ traces the biography of skier Tess Ledeux, highlighting her family background and personal struggles. The article provides a more humanizing perspective on the athlete and appeals to readers' emotions.

This coverage of the Beijing Winter Olympics by different international news outlets had the same common aspect: articles that featured social media content, either by reproducing posts from athletes or by embedding videos and tweets. An approach that is intended to increase user engagement and provide a more intimate view of the athletes' experiences.

3.1.4 Unprecedented times

Beyond the viral and the 'celebrity factor', there are instances when User-Generated Content is used in news stories to complement or illustrate what was written by journalists, such as pictures, videos, and texts. In this context, we can question if the use of UGC alters the impact of the story or changes how it is told. We noticed through our observation that this content comes heavily from social networks (such as the case of the coverage of the Tokyo and Beijing Olympics). In unprecedented times, there seems to be an increase in the need for User-Generated Content. It

⁹⁴ Source: https://www.abc.es/deportes/juegos-olimpicos-invierno/abci-pesadilla-olimpica-para-atletas-contagiados-pekín-202202061740_noticia.html

⁹⁵ Source: <https://www.bbc.com/sport/winter-olympics/60271190>
<https://www.bbc.com/sport/winter-olympics/60257247>

⁹⁶ Source: <https://www.dw.com/de/sechsmal-gold-geisenberger-erfolgreichste-deutsche-winter-olympionikin/a-60731655>

⁹⁷ Source: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/simone-biles-message-mikaela-shiffrin_n_620f4b5ce4b06fa062afc04a

⁹⁸ Source: <https://www.linternaute.com/sport/biographie/2596723-tess-ledeux-apres-l-argent-en-big-air-une-nouvelle-medaille-en-slopestyle/>

is what we have seen with natural disasters and terror attacks, but as social networks and digital media have advanced, it is easier and more common to find content generated by the public. 2020 was a year that changed the world, or at least, how we experienced it, with the coronavirus pandemic. Some major events dominated headlines in this period throughout all sites, related to the global coronavirus pandemic (the continued waves; development and distribution of the vaccines for COVID-19; placement and lifting of measures alongside the spread of news strains). Alongside the pandemic, other world events dominated the media: the U.S. elections (Kalam Harris as first female vice-president; Biden victory highly contested by Trump and his supporters; riots in the Capitol); the Black Lives Matter protests; and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which led to war.

3.1.4.1 A Global Pandemic

In late December 2019, in Wuhan, China, the first cases of a new acute respiratory disease, similar to pneumonia, were identified. The outbreak of the disease spread rapidly to other countries, reaching millions of people, and leading the World Health Organization (WHO) to decree the world situation as a pandemic on March 11, 2020¹. In this context, social detachment was recommended as strategy for controlling population mobility, reducing non-essential commercial activities, restricting the movement of people at events and public transport, closing schools and universities. At the same time, government authorities have established the use of masks and hand hygiene with gel alcohol, as preventive measures, always following the recommendations of global health institutions.

The seriousness of this crisis has reinforced the need for reliable, accurate journalism that can inform and educate, but it has also reminded us how open we have become to conspiracies and misinformation. Journalists no longer control access to information, while greater reliance on social media and other platforms give people access to a wider range of sources and alternative facts, some of which are at odds with official advice, misleading, or simply false (Newman et al., 2020). But if journalism faced drastic changes in the 21st century, with new demands, reorganization of newsrooms and the breakdown of paradigms by the new technologies, digital media, and social networks; the profession remained linked to its fundamental principle: to champion the public interest – an urgent necessity in times where the coronavirus pandemic comes on the tailcoats of the refugee crisis, climate change and world conflicts.

Relationships with the audience go beyond the transactional, as news outlets call on the public not only to support them via subscriptions, contributions, or membership, but also invite them to engage by sharing or responding to stories, sending information, or participating in reporting projects. Several newspapers in different places in the world deactivated their paywalls

to allow access to contents related to the pandemic (Gruszynski et al., 2021), which represents an important action in relation to the ethical commitment of journalism to public interest (McBride and Edmonds, 2020).

Though it is too early to predict the full impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the news industry, it does seem to be a catalyst for more cost-cutting, consolidation, and even faster changes in business models (Newman et al., 2020). Commercial media have reported a significant increase in online traffic and have produced many examples of innovations in data journalism and other visual formats online to help explain the crisis, such as practical guides for managing isolation and staying safe (Newman et al., 2020). However, while some publications report growth in digital subscriptions, publishers also saw advertising revenues falling by up to 50% and many newspapers have cut back or stopped printing physical copies and laid off staff (Newman et al., 2020). The lockdowns have also accelerated the use of new digital tools, with many people joining online groups or taking part in video conferencing for the first time. Together with the impact on print production and distribution, this will likely speed up the journalistic industry shift to digital (Newman et al., 2020).

The events resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic effectively created a moment of great mobilization by the media and journalism, which redoubled efforts for the selection, treatment and dissemination of data and news relevant to the clarification of citizens, while triggered a rapprochement with its audiences (Gruszynski et al., 2021; Sanseverino & De-Lima-Santos, 2021). Access to the portals of the main media - in some cases with temporarily suspended paywalls - registered a very significant increase. However, if it was in favor of a greater use of conventional social media as a source of information, the health crisis also exacerbated the serious difficulties affecting the media. Like other sectors of the country's economic and social life, the media and journalists have not escaped the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic enshrined Covid-19 as the almost absolute theme of the media agenda; on the other, it confined journalists to a scenario in which the home was practically replaced by newsrooms. Teleworking dominated and had implications for journalistic routines: journalists did less reporting and had to adopt complementary technological means for the exercise of the profession and for contact with information sources.

The 2020 Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2020) has already indicated that the coronavirus crisis was changing the public behavior towards news consumption in the digital environment, which have been exacerbated at the early days of the pandemic. Consequently, it may have long-term effects for journalism. Indeed, young people consumed more news through services like Instagram, Snapchat, and Tik'Tok, for instance. Videoconferencing emerged as a new

platform for personal communication and changed the profile of government press conferences. Still, the media adopted these new technologies for remote work, but also content production and distribution. The fight against Covid-19 involves a central role that production, circulation, and access to information have assumed in raising awareness about the individual care necessary for common well-being, as well as in the establishment of public policies and their implementation based on the measures concerning the number of cases of contagion and deaths.

The world scenario of social isolation, with variants of confinement, took the production of news from the physical space of newsrooms to the home office (Lubianco, 2020; Jones, 2020). In the meantime, although the journalistic activity is recognized as essential, the displacement of reporters to coverage is not always possible, which has opened more space for content produced by the public. So, can we say the pandemic was a momentary breakthrough for User-Generated Content in journalism? Gaining more common uses in storytelling beyond the viral content for the click?

The pandemic brought on special coverage in most news outlets. Life in the time of a global pandemic has certainly changed, as people reorganize and rethink their routines when news practices arise and governments call for social isolation, for people to stay home and wear a mask. These made many news organizations reach out to the public – to those experiencing the pandemic on their daily lives in different contexts and situations beyond the newsroom – to tell their stories (Gruszynski et al., 2021; Sanseverino & De-Lima-Santos, 2021). Stories start to come from users, whose voices gained space in media outlets, and bring to life with different resources the human side of the pandemic. As we consider how much the sanitary and economic crisis has been debated, by world leaders and the press, it seems important that we are consistently reminded of the social consequences of the spread of the coronavirus, seeing the faces of those who are living them.

The crisis called for creativity from many news outlets, called for more out of journalism, and this brought many of the initiatives we have seen for interesting uses of User-Generated Content; though there are outlets who did use UGC for storytelling before and continue to use in other contexts, as part of their perspective regarding the profession and the relationship they seek from the audience.



Figure 52 – Print Screen from Folha de S. Paulo about the Covid Pandemic⁹⁹.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on social media, with people turning to these platforms to get the latest news, share their experiences, and connect with others during the lockdown. As a result, social media has become a crucial source of information and a platform for discussion, debate, and sharing of experiences related to the pandemic.

Several of the news articles mentioned in the previous response also incorporate reader responses, which is indicative of the crucial role of social media in shaping public opinion about the pandemic. For example, The Guardian's article (UK)¹⁰⁰ on coronavirus memes and tweets invites readers to share their own memes and jokes about the pandemic in the comments section. Similarly, Folha de São Paulo's article (Brazil)¹⁰¹ on COVID-19 victims' reactions to news of

⁹⁹ Source: <https://hashtag.blogfolha.uol.com.br/2021/06/30/apos-suspeita-de-propina-usuarios-das-redes-relembra-amigos-e-familiares-mortos-pela-covid/>

¹⁰⁰ Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/mar/18/coronaviral-the-best-memes-tweets-and-cartoons-to-get-you-through-open-thread>

¹⁰¹ Source: <https://hashtag.blogfolha.uol.com.br/2021/06/30/apos-suspeita-de-propina-usuarios-das-redes-relembra-amigos-e-familiares-mortos-pela-covid/>

corruption in vaccine procurement includes social media posts from readers paying tribute to those who have lost their lives due to the pandemic (Figure 52).

Moreover, the impact of the pandemic on social media has been far-reaching and enduring. For instance, Clarín's article (Argentina)¹⁰² on Bill Gates' views on current vaccines and the need for annual vaccination highlights the ongoing challenges posed by the pandemic and the need for continued vigilance and adaptation. Similarly, Focus's article (Germany)¹⁰³ on vaccine safety and immunologist Carsten Watzl's tweets demonstrates how social media can be used to educate and inform the public about the pandemic and the importance of vaccination.

On the other hand, The Intercept Brazil's article¹⁰⁴ on Twitter's negligence in removing posts spreading misinformation about the pandemic highlights the negative impact of social media on public opinion during the pandemic. The article argues that social media platforms have a responsibility to monitor and remove posts that spread false information and contribute to the spread of the virus.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on social media, with people turning to these platforms to get information, share their experiences, and connect with others. The news articles illustrate the varied ways in which social media was incorporated into journalism and has been used during the pandemic, from humor and tributes to criticism and expert opinions. The incorporation of reader responses in these articles highlights the crucial role of social media in shaping public opinion and underscores the need for responsible use and monitoring of these platforms during the pandemic.

3.1.4.2 Black Lives Matter and The Death of George Floyd

In 2020 a significant and transformative event marked global consciousness: the tragic killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer. Floyd's death sparked worldwide demonstrations under the Black Lives Matter movement's banner (Hernández and Mueller, 2020). Social media platforms, notably Twitter, played a pivotal role in magnifying this activism (Wirtschafter, 2021), showcasing those issues of systemic racism and racial inequality in the US—and globally—weren't mere remnants of history but ongoing challenges for Black individuals and people of color at large. The unfolding of these events amidst a global pandemic didn't hinder the movement's momentum. Some contend that societal interconnectedness during this time made these occurrences deeply interlinked (J. L. Davis and Love, 2022).

¹⁰² Source: https://www.clarin.com/internacional/bill-gates-vacunas-problemas-clave-impiden-terminar-pandemia_0_ga7Fo1KQ3.html

¹⁰³ Source: https://www.focus.de/gesundheit/coronavirus/gute-datenlage-trotz-kurzer-zulassung-wir-kennen-die-langzeitfolgen-in-12-tweets-erklaert-immunologe-den-kimmich-irrtum_id_24361528.html

¹⁰⁴ Source: <https://theintercept.com/2021/01/17/manuel-o-twitter-tambem-tem-culpa>

The first images of an event that paint a developing story often come from those who were there when it all happened. As such, UGC is used to illustrate a developing story and to add information for the coverage of the event, but the types of situations when this happens vary widely. An episode of racism started one of the biggest waves of anti-racist protests in the United States and the world. On May 25, 2020, a 46-year-old black man named George Floyd was killed during a police stop in the city of Minneapolis after one of the officers pressed his knee against his neck for more than nine minutes. The moment was filmed by witnesses and the video went viral on social media. Less than 24 hours later, people were already marching demanding punishment for those involved.

Protests spread across the United States and demonstrations of support were recorded in more than 60 countries. Driven by the Black Lives Matter movement — founded in 2013 after the acquittal of a security guard accused of murdering a black teenager — protesters called for an end to violence against black people and held up signs with the phrase “I can’t breathe”, repeated by Floyd minutes later before his death. Social media was flooded by users’ views, with videos, photos and texts that tell a story of the events they are living through and witnessing in their part of the world. We saw the protests through the eyes of those who have taken to the streets to call for racial equality.

The video of his death was unequivocal proof of what had happened. Racism has always existed. Black men and women have been killed by the police before and after what happened with Mr. Floyd; but by getting the event on camera, the words that would be spoken by thousands of protesters across the world, captured on camera by a 17-year-old with a smartphone Mrs. Frazier changed the story. Changed how it was told and its impact. The video was uploaded in full to news sites everywhere, such as The New York Times (Figure 53), always with warnings that the graphic images should be views with discretion.

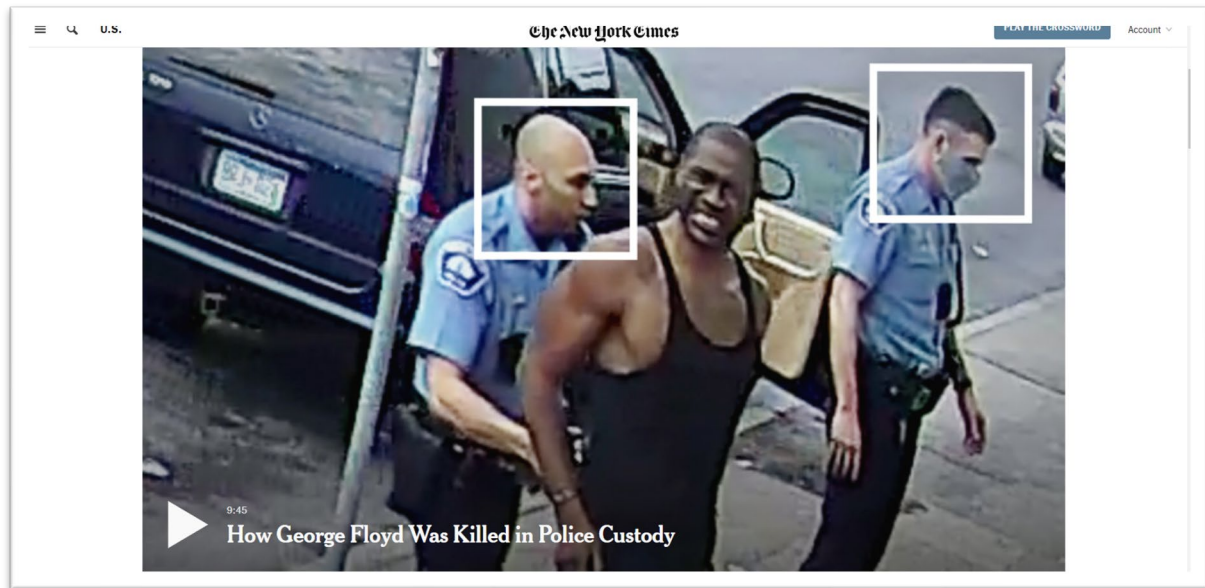


Figure 53 – Print Screen from The New York Times Website about the death of George Floyd published on May 31st 2020¹⁰⁵.

Darnella Frazier, a high school student, took out her phone and filmed the police restraining a black man on the street. He was already on the ground and gasping for air when her footage started. For 10 minutes and nine seconds she kept the video going, capturing the moment that would spark a revolution throughout the United States. What would have happened if there had been no video? If the footage had not been spread online? If the images hadn't been picked up and divulged by news organizations? There are many "what ifs" that could be asked, but fact of the matter is, the video, captured by a regular person, on her daily life, that made the choice to stop and record what she was seeing, brought a shift in our reality.

¹⁰⁵ Source: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html>> Accessed on: 22 Dec. 2022.

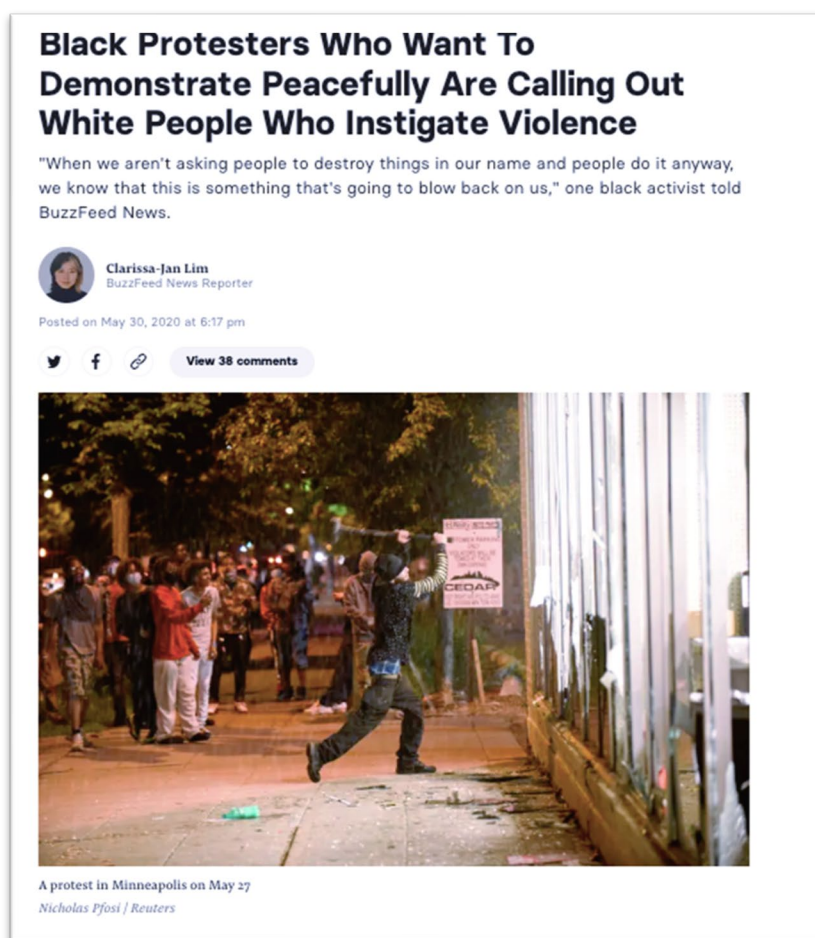


Figure 54 – Print Screen from BuzzFeed News about Black Lives Matters Protests on May 30th 2020¹⁰⁶.

In addition to the diverse range of perspectives and information provided by the news sources on the Black Lives Matter movement and protests, it is worth noting the role of reader responses and social media in shaping the coverage and impact of the movement. Several of the articles incorporated social media content, such as the video posted on Twitter in the BuzzFeed News (US) article (Figure 54), and the posts by artists on Blackout Tuesday in La Vanguardia (Spain)¹⁰⁷. This reflects the widespread use of social media in the organization and dissemination of information during the protests, with many people sharing videos, photos, and personal accounts of their experiences on various platforms.

Moreover, reader responses were also incorporated into some of the articles, such as the statements from authorities and contextualization provided in the BBC (UK) article¹⁰⁸, and the

¹⁰⁶ Source: <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/clarissajanlim/protesters-violence-george-floyd?bftwnewsandutm_term=4ldqpgc#4ldqpgc> Accessed on: 22 Dec. 2022.

¹⁰⁷ Source: <<https://www.lavanguardia.com/cultura/20200602/481574286908/george-floyd-blackouttuesday-pantallas-negro-instagram-twitter-musica.html>> Accessed on: 22 Dec. 2022.

¹⁰⁸ Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52932611>

comments from organizers of the Amsterdam protest in Dutch News (Netherlands)¹⁰⁹. This suggests the importance of feedback and engagement from the audience in shaping media coverage and public discourse on issues related to the Black Lives Matter movement. Overall, the incorporation of reader responses and social media content highlights the role of collective action and public participation in the Black Lives Matter movement, both in terms of driving media coverage and amplifying the voices of marginalized communities.

3.1.4.3 US Elections, Capitol Riots and Trump Impeachment

The 2020 American election broke attendance records, with more than 150 million votes, and consecrated Democrat Joe Biden as the 46th president of the United States. The victory, however, was not recognized by the opponent at the polls, Donald Trump. While the press announced Biden's triumph, the then president alleged fraud in the vote - although no evidence of electoral crime was found. On January 6, 2021, the day Congress would make Biden's victory official, Trump addressed thousands of supporters in front of the White House and asked them to march to Capitol Hill (where the US Congress is located) and fight "like the hell". Hours later, the extremists stormed the building in Washington, forcing a hasty evacuation. The invasion ended with 5 dead, 50 security agents injured and more than 700 people arrested and indicted. Trump was impeached for inciting the violence but was acquitted after a two-thirds majority was not reached in the Senate.

The storming of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, by individuals contesting the results of the 2020 US Presidential election and advocating for Donald Trump's victory, stands as a landmark event in contemporary US chronicles. It wasn't a novel instance for social media platforms to enact special protocols for content regulation in relation to elections. As unveiled by leaked documents, Facebook had proactively strategized to counter misinformation specifically tied to the election outcome (Mac and Frenkel, 2021). Yet, they not only struggled to curb the influx of misleading content but as noted by Facebook's own research, their platform inadvertently directed users towards extremist factions (Guardian Staff, 2021).

¹⁰⁹ Source: <https://www.dutchnews.nl/news/2020/06/some-3000-demonstrate-against-police-violence-in-amsterdam/>



Figure 55 – Print Screen from The Sun about Trump¹¹⁰.

Four news articles touch upon different aspects of the aftermath of the US elections, Capitol riots, and Trump impeachment, as covered by international media outlets. The Sun article from the UK¹¹¹ talks about 'Twitter permanently suspending Donald Trump's personal and campaign accounts (Figure 55). It includes a response from Trump alleging that the move was driven by social media employees who were associated with Democrats and the radical left to silence him. The article also mentions that Trump may create his platform as an alternative to Twitter. This news demonstrates the power of social media platforms and their role in shaping public opinion and political discourse.

The Estadão article from Brazil¹¹² takes a different approach, discussing the humorous side of the election results and Trump's reluctance to accept the outcome. It highlights the impact of social media on political humor, with Twitter users creating memes and jokes about the election results and the slow polling of some states. This demonstrates the role of social media in shaping the public discourse around political events and highlighting the importance of humor as a coping mechanism.

¹¹⁰ Source: <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/13696115/trump-potus-twitter-banned-risk-violence-radical-left-2/>

¹¹¹ Source: <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/13696115/trump-potus-twitter-banned-risk-violence-radical-left-2/>

¹¹² Source: <https://internacional.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,veja-os-melhores-memes-da-eleicao-presidencial-americana,70003506410>

The Infobae article from Argentina¹¹³ discusses the consequences of the Capitol riots for the rioters who were recognized and lost their jobs. Companies were able to identify employees who participated in the riots through images released on social media and television, and many employers no longer wanted to hire supporters of Donald Trump who had violated the security of one of the most emblematic buildings of democracy in the United States. This demonstrates the impact of social media on the personal and professional lives of individuals and highlights the potential consequences of actions taken in the public sphere.

Finally, the Le Figaro¹¹⁴ article from France focuses on the testimony of police officers who witnessed the Capitol riots and were themselves attacked by the invaders. The article highlights the racial dimension of the attacks, with black police officers being subjected to racist abuse. This news reflects the ongoing racial tensions in the US and the impact of political events on marginalized communities, as well as the importance of bearing witness to the experiences of those who were directly affected by the events.

3.1.4.4 The Ukraine War

On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, starting an armed conflict in Eastern Europe. Several Ukrainian cities, including the capital Kiev, were attacked with missiles and bombs by Russian troops. One of the reasons for the invasion is Ukraine's possible entry into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a US-led military alliance. The war has claimed thousands of civilian casualties and more than 5 million people have fled Ukraine since the bombing began. Russia's attitude was condemned by 141 of the 193 member countries of the United Nations (UN). In response to the invasion, several nations announced economic sanctions in an attempt to weaken the Russian economy. So far, negotiations on a peace agreement have not been successful.

¹¹³ Source: <https://www.infobae.com/america/eeuu/2021/01/08/los-activistas-que-asaltaron-el-capitolio-ya-son-reconocidos-y-comienzan-a-perder-sus-empleos/>

¹¹⁴ Source: <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/etats-unis-une-commission-qui-divise-rouvre-l-enquete-sur-l-attaque-du-capitole-20210728>



Figure 56 – Print Screen from *The Independent* about the Ukraine War¹¹⁵.

The news articles presented offer a diverse range of perspectives on the ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia, covering topics such as social media, propaganda, humanitarian aid, and personal stories of those affected by the war. The Vice (USA) article¹¹⁶ highlights the negative impact of social media and the spread of misinformation, with some users making suggestions on how to fight Russian soldiers that are impractical and potentially harmful. The Independent (UK)¹¹⁷, on the other hand, presents practical ways to help Ukraine, such as donating to charities, contacting representatives, and spreading information (Figure 56).

El País (Spain)¹¹⁸ addresses the use of war memes, which although not as dangerous as tanks and missiles, can also be used for propaganda and to influence public opinion. Brut (France) discusses the role of influencers and social media in the Ukrainian War, stating that they are showing everyday life in the country at war. DER Spiegel (Germany) warns readers to be cautious when sharing videos about the War in Ukraine on social media, as many are fake, leading to misinformation.

¹¹⁵ Source: <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/how-to-help-ukraine-charities-donate-b2023089.html>

¹¹⁶ Source: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/4awp9p/its-a-golden-age-for-armchair-generals/>

¹¹⁷ Source: <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/how-to-help-ukraine-charities-donate-b2023089.html>

¹¹⁸ Source: https://elpais.com/opinion/2022-02-25/memes-de-guerra.html?rel=buscador_noticias

Pagina 12 (Argentina)¹¹⁹ reports on a diplomatic operation to evacuate Argentine families with newborn babies from Ukraine safely. Nexo (Brazil)¹²⁰ discusses Ukraine's use of Twitter to campaign for Russia's banning from social media, as well as encouraging users to use specific hashtags related to the conflict.

Overall, it is evident that the conflict between Ukraine and Russia is not only being fought on the ground but also on social media. The impact of social media is undeniable, with both positive and negative aspects being highlighted in the articles. It is essential to be cautious and verify information before sharing it on social media, as fake news can have far-reaching consequences. Moreover, personal stories and accounts of those affected by the conflict provide a human touch to the news, making it more relatable and highlighting the need for humanitarian aid.

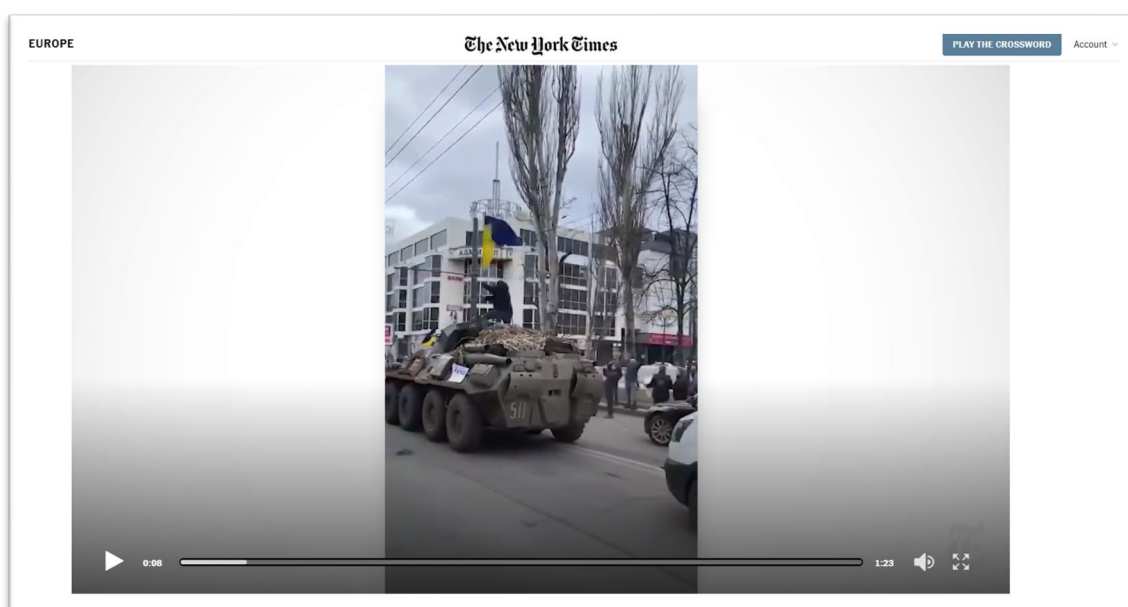


Figure 57 – Print Screen from The New York Times about the Ukraine War¹²¹.

Adding to the previous news, The New York Times¹²² published a video showing a man waving a Ukrainian flag on top of a Russian armored personnel carrier (Figure 57), which generated

¹¹⁹ Source: <https://www.brut.media/fr/news/pourquoi-les-influenceurs-jouent-un-role-dans-la-guerre-en-ukraine-18d8c84c-a632-447c-83d0-45cf0f3b08cc>

¹²⁰ Source: <https://www.nexojournal.com.br/extra/2022/02/24/Governo-da-Ucr%C3%A2nia-faz-%E2%80%98guerrilha%E2%80%99-no-Twitter-contra-a-R%C3%BAssia>

¹²¹ Source: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/05/world/europe/kherson-protests-ukraine.html?fbclid=IwAR1aSWOCB_JSLOsJ1mTEf-5bF12USyzLd_0xr4BIHHtogOEIcb6BMpEFvrI

¹²² Source: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/05/world/europe/kherson-protests-ukraine.html?fbclid=IwAR1aSWOCB_JSLOsJ1mTEf-5bF12USyzLd_0xr4BIHHtogOEIcb6BMpEFvrI

cheers from onlookers in Kherson. The footage is evidence of the continued resistance of Ukrainian citizens against Russian aggression. The use of social media has helped to disseminate information about the conflict and has also been used by the Ukrainian government to launch a campaign against Russia on Twitter, as reported by Nexo (Brazil). The conflict has also caused concern among citizens of other countries, as reported by Pagina 12 (Argentina), where five Argentine families stranded in Ukraine were successfully brought to safety in Poland. While social media has played a vital role in spreading information and raising awareness about the conflict, it is important to be cautious about the misinformation that circulates on these platforms, as reported by DER Spiegel (Germany).

In the modern media landscape, news articles are not just standalone pieces of information but are part of a larger tapestry of narratives, interconnected threads shaped by a myriad of forces. One of the most influential forces in recent times is undeniably social media. While each article has its specific focus, a recurring theme emerges from their collective examination – the profound influence of social media platforms on public discourse, opinion formation, and even the intricate facets of both personal and professional lives.

Social media has transcended its original purpose of connecting individuals. It has evolved into a dynamic public square, influencing, and mirroring the sentiments of its vast user base. This, in turn, has a cascading effect on journalism. News articles now often echo sentiments from these digital platforms, sometimes even using them as primary sources. This reciprocal relationship means that the opinions and discussions birthed on social media platforms can often shape the trajectory of news narratives.

Furthermore, events that unfold in the United States, given its global prominence, have ramifications that reverberate internationally. While this has historically been the case due to the nation's geopolitical importance, in the era of real-time communication and social media, this influence has been amplified. As events in the US gain traction on platforms like Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook, they simultaneously capture the attention of international media outlets. This leads to a global dissemination of news, framing public perception of the US not just domestically, but across borders.

It is fascinating to note that the perception of the US internationally is not just shaped by its diplomatic or economic decisions, but also by the tumultuous events and discussions that find their way onto social media platforms. Hence, when significant events occur, be they political, cultural, or social, their echo is not limited to American shores. International media, leveraging the

viral nature of social media content, often provide coverage, analysis, and commentary, painting a picture of the US that contributes to global public opinion.

The interplay between social media, news articles, and international perspectives offers a rich tapestry of narratives. It showcases the intertwined nature of local events with global perceptions, emphasizing the interconnected world we inhabit. Overall, while each news article had its focus, they all illustrate the role of social media in shaping public opinion, discourse, and the professional and personal lives of individuals. Additionally, they all demonstrate the global impact of the events in the US on international media coverage and public perception of the country in other Western nations in a globalized world.

3.2 Designated spaces and continuous efforts for UGC

The launch of participation spaces marked the great trend in the evolution of digital journalism. It is a phenomenon associated with technological innovations and social uses of the internet (Bruns, 2005), but also with the tradition of a more engaged journalism (Paulussen et al., 2007). There are numerous studies that have analyzed the participation mechanisms promoted by the media (Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Singer et al., 2011; Suau, 2015), have monitored their use of social networks (García de Torres, 2011a; 2011b), or have inquired about the relationship of journalists with readers and their opinion about the participatory audience (Heise et al., 2013).

Participation has always been considered as something positive and desirable (Borger et al., 2013; Curran, Fenton and Freedman, 2016; Klinger and Svensson, 2015). And yet, empirical research suggests that journalistic newsrooms have developed participation spaces mainly driven by economic interests (loyalty to the audience, increase traffic) and trying to minimize their incidence in the information production processes (Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Vujnovic et al., 2010). Peters and Witschge (2015) point out that even outlets that employ a discourse of participation, in fact, usually offer limited space for it. According to the authors, news organizations, in general, understand participatory journalism only as an opportunity to derive economic benefits while journalists still maintain a far higher hierarchical level on the relationship, keeping most of the control over the editorial processes. Therefore, participation generally tends to be minimal despite discourses of democratization and inclusivity.

We find the models defined by Masip and Suau (2014) for participation useful to think of the *engagement/participation puzzle* that we observed through the study of these 80 news sites. The models – the catch-all, user community and collaboration networks – are drawn not only by the type of tools adopted, but also by the type of participation foreseen for the users and the forms of relationship that are promoted between the medium and the user.

The catch-all model maintains the essence of participation understood as a sum of interaction mechanisms. Mechanisms that require a low level of commitment from users, but also from the environment. The media that are included in this model generally lack a strategy in terms of participation, being carried away by the inertia of the sector that leads to a proliferation of options. The lack of strategy means that the interaction with the audience does not translate into a better journalistic practice, nor does it translate into an income route to consider, since the ties that are established from participation are weak. In fact, loyalty can be attributed especially to ideological motives, since most of the media that fall into this category hold very strong political positions.

The other two models identified represent an obvious evolution with respect to the catch-all model. The two are built around two different participation strategies. The collaborative network model seeks the complicity of readers, making them protagonists of the production process. Citizens are sources, but also producers, they are given a voice and space. Active audiences are also part of the medium, making up a whole, although final control over what is published remains in the hands of the medium. The user community model, for its part, is also built by creating close links and complicities between the medium and the users, but unlike the previous model, the center on which the relationship pivots no longer falls on production, but in the debate. The protagonist moves and is shared by the media and users. This model takes the elements that define social networks and tries to build a community based on a horizontal relationship between users-users and users-media. The community becomes the conducive environment for discussion “among friends” around the issues on which they share interests: the information provided by the medium.

From our observation of news sites, selective and participatory interactivity options are dominant. These are forms of low or medium-level participation, which allow the medium to continue to keep control of the User-Generated Content, retaining the gatekeeper role. At the same time, it allows a minimum of participation that is sufficient to gain readers’ loyalty, making them part of the published content and generating traffic.

If we look at the models of participation proposed by Masip and Suau (2014) and consider the 80 news sites studied, we can see a lot of them combine these models, but participation and engagement look very differently for each medium, despite the same tools and resources being frequently used, according to the uses they are given by each media organization. And using them may mean success to some, while struggle to others, showing that participation and engagement are merely one factor of the many that dictate the survival of a media company.

Eldiario.es (Spain), which has an open access, but inspires memberships through benefits for its members, encourages an active interaction and participation in the media. They encompass a perfect example of combining and providing the three categories of interactivity proposed by Masip and Suau (2014). On the one hand, they have a selective interactivity manifested through tools such as newsletters and RSS, among others. On the other, there are also options for participatory interactivity, as any reader— with prior free registration— can comment on and, thus, discuss the news (though only subscribed users can participate and vote in surveys to help the media to make decisions, such as to restrict comments to just the members). Finally, the third type of interactivity promoted by Eldiario.es is the productive one, since any user can send tips or information to help the newsroom investigate what could be an important topic or hidden issue, and furthermore, members can send their own opinion articles.

Eldiario.es manages to encourage engagement to different degrees, according to the user's involvement (member/non-member); collaboration, as members' money allows media independence and anonymous readers can send/leak relevant information or data; and even a twofold engagement: (1) media engagement toward autonomy, counterpower, quality, and deep analysis (2) and users' engagement as members of a community where their voices will be heard through user generated content and even, sometimes, also listened to through voting.

As we explored the 80 news sites from our *corpus*, we found that some organizations have sections on their websites designated for contributions from users. This content created by users is separate from that done by members of the newsroom. This demarcates a hierarchy between what is written by the audience and what is written by journalists, as what comes from the newsroom is featured on the front page, it deemed the *official* news, while what comes from the public is contained to a determined and demarcated space. This is up to par with the challenge that news media has had in consolidating audience participation, as journalists struggle to integrate participation into long standing routines without having the professional authority as a journalist questioned (Masip et al., 2015).

This is an initiative, though, that has continually existed through the history of journalism and causes effects in its practice, as the profession opens space for the user to send in their contributions and has them become a part of the news site. It goes beyond the *basics*, the responsive, the feedback, and invites do reader to create a story from start to finish. Having these sections means this is not a punctual effort but signifies a continuous initiative to include the public in the news site with a constant call out for contributions from users.

The French medium Mediapart is an interesting example of this initiatives. It consists of two main sections: Le Journal, run by professional journalists, and Le Club, a collaborative forum

for its subscriber community. The organization was launched in 2008 by editors and journalists (led by Edwy Plenel), who left the most legitimate print dailies in France (such as *Le Monde*), to innovate journalism and create an online outlet based on a subscription business model. “Mediapart founders had the intuition that the media crisis, at the digital were tied up with a change in media users’ habits and expectations. Professional journalists had to cope with an active and responsive readership” (Livia Garrigue, February 2020). All-and-all, what started as an experiment in digital native media, became a success. By 2016 *Mediapart* had 130,000 subscriptions, €11m turnover with €1.9m margins (16 percent of the turnover) and was competing hand in hand in the market with the so-called traditional news outlets, such as *Le Monde* and *Liberation*.

Mediapart describes itself as an independent, most relevant to this research, a *participatory* newspaper: “the <part> from Media-part is for <participative>.” (Livia Guarrigue, February 2020). Since 2019, its primary means of funding are memberships, which guarantees it freedom and editorial independence: they are only accountable to their members. Mediapart gives members responsibility and power, turning them into an active part of the news organization. As members, users can comment on news articles, but most importantly, they can have their own blogs in “Le Club” to publish opinion articles, a section which, in fact, is open access even for non-subscribers. Through “Le Club”, Mediapart encourages the sense of belonging to a community: a collective of active members who read the newspaper but also contribute with their own opinions beyond leaving comments on the news. “Le Club” is a sort of social network where users can follow other blogs from members, or even journalists, create their own personal network, and communicate privately with other subscribers and even journalists. This is, in fact, a mechanism of productive interactivity since users generate their own content for which they are responsible.

In return for their contribution, members receive a two-fold responsibility: firstly, as guarantors of the medium’s editorial independence, and secondly, as responsible for their UGC on “Le Club”. However, they also receive the gratification of being heard—or, better said, of being read—by others and of being considered by the medium, since Mediapart provides them with a specific, personal space to share their own opinions and thoughts. Together with these gratifications, members also obtain distinction, as they can publish on Le Club, and exclusivity, because they are not mere readers but members of a community of users who pay for reading quality and verified information and, if the case, for generating their own content too.

On the other side of the French panorama, *Le Monde* developed the practice of conducting *lives* and today it is the most used means of participation on the website. This form of participation has multiple angles: (1) pedagogical, as journalists and specialists answer questions, (2) social, as links and connections are formed between readers and journalists, and (3) marketing,

as links are placed to other articles produced by the editorial staff, as well it becomes a form to attract the audience to the website. This is not a space per se dedicated to the user, but it is a continuous effort with which Le Monde has been experimenting it and improving over the years that has led to participation from their subscribers.

We talked with Gilles vanKote (2020), Director of Reader Relations from Le Monde, in the height of the pandemic in France, where the live blogs conducted by the news site gained new relevance – “the users had many questions and they wanted reliable sources to answer them, and they looked to us”. vanKote recalled that these *lives* appeared for the first time in a time of crisis, in January 2010, with the aim of following the consequences of the earthquake in Haiti. Since then, Le Monde has opted to continue using this format whenever developments in a given event may interest the general public, including citizens who, as a rule, do not consume informational articles.

Live-blogging can be defined as a digital journalistic production carried out live and published in the form of a flow of messages, gathered in a distribution space on the media site (Pignard-Cheynel and Sebbah, 2022). Whether predictable (elections, political, sporting, or cultural events) or unpredictable (attacks, natural disasters, news items), *lemonde.fr* *opens* a live stream as soon as the news requires it, with an average of one to two per week. Now, at the heart of the live blogs of Le Monde, is the participation of their subscribers, even though that is not why it was initially envisioned. The fact that the live was prized by readers for its interactivity was a surprise - the tool allowed it, but it arose from a journalistic concern of producing information in real time (Pignard-Cheynel and Sebbah, 2022). “Before the lives they commented before or after the fact, now we have a live interaction with our readers, with have a connection, participation”, said vanKote.

Throughout their one year online, The Correspondent had one of the most interesting proposals for engaging their readers, making them a central part of their journalism. A failed experiment as far as business model is concerned, unable to support the venture in the middle of a global crisis caused by the spread of the coronavirus, The Correspondent’s proposal of public relationship is still forward-thinking, and worth of notice. Their experience, in relation to their proposed relationship with their members, was quite impressive. They were not relegated to a target audience, to passive consumers of information, but as potential sources of expertise, who can enrich journalism by actively sharing their knowledge and experiences. The founders believed the experience and expertise of readers was the great untapped power of journalism (Pfauth, 2018).

Journalist Nabeelah Shabbir joined The Correspondent from the start as a Conversation Editor being responsible for making that connection happen. Having drunk the proverbial *kool-aid* the founders of the website Ernst-Jan Pfauth and Robert Wijnberg sold as a new way of doing

journalism – “not just for the public, but with the public”, she described The Correspondent experiment as an extension of the Dutch project De Correspondent, that Pfauth and Wijnberg had already made it work in a national level with a Netherlands membership (Nabeelah Shabbir, October, 2020). For Ms. Shabbir, putting their members front and center in their journalism, came from the idea that Jay Rosen, one of the champions of The Correspondent International in the U.S. during the crowdfunding campaign, said already back in 2006. In her words, “the audience is not just an audience anymore, it is all about participation and bottom-up journalism” (Nabeelah Shabbir, October 2020).

Ms. Shabbir said she had an “unique role” if you consider journalism enterprises as a Conversations Editor, but an essential one for what their project proposed: “a lot of what we do at the Correspondent is having conversations with our members, we are entirely funded by members” Nabeelah Shabbir, October 2020). Her job was to make those conversations happen through every new story they published, thinking who could contribute, how to turn the comment sections into a conversation and dig into their members’ different expertise for each topic. The Correspondent stories granted that every journalist has a bias, and these conversations with members, through their different expertise, could shed new light and bring new angles to their stories – the comments became an extension of the journalists work, who heard, responded, and discussed alongside members. Nonetheless, she recognized the challenges of working with their members and making these conversations happen – for one, Ms. Shabbir was the only whose responsibility was to bridge the gap between the journalists, their stories, and their members.

From the point of view of the The Intercept, they have “Vozes” (Voices, in English), a unique editorial section that serves a distinct purpose within our platform. Unlike the investigative reporting, which delves deep into complex issues, Vozes is primarily dedicated to presenting narratives in alternative formats. Within Vozes, they provide a platform for our columnists and opinion writers to engage with the hot button debates and issues that are currently making waves in society. But specifically, the section showcases the life stories of individuals who serve as exemplary figures within the intricate socio-cultural and political landscape of Brazil. These narratives are often shared in the first person, lending a personal touch to the storytelling.

Samanta do Carmo (March 2021), explains that “we are open to input from our audience in shaping our editorial agenda. This input can come via email or through traditional methods such as proactive outreach to our reporters and editors. Depending on the nature of the narrative that can be crafted, these audience suggestions sometimes evolve into full-fledged articles or reports featured in Vozes”. The concept behind the creation of the Vozes editorial section dates back to

2016. Its primary objective was to inject more humanity, awareness, and sensitivity into our journalistic content.

Notably, in the tumultuous early months of the 2020 pandemic, we observed a significant shift in what our audience sought from us. Reports from domestic workers and healthcare professionals became highly sought-after content. This transition was intriguing, as it signaled a departure from the established format that had traditionally resonated with our readers. a newsletter, Silvia Lisboa (2020), a section editor, stated the following:

During the coverage of the pandemic, we are working even harder to publish the testimonies of people who are not usually heard in times of crisis. Share our texts on your networks and make these voices heard even further. Do you know a story that we need to tell? (Lisboa, 2020, paragraph 5, our translation).

“Vozes, as an editorial platform, has always been about sharing first-person stories that have a profound impact on and relevance to society. During the pandemic, this mission took on even greater significance. It became one of the most vital aspects of our coverage. Through Vozes, we narrated the stories of individuals profoundly affected by the health crisis, individuals who found themselves on the front lines of the battle against the disease” (Marianna Araujo, February 2021). Reflecting on their efforts throughout the pandemic, Ms. Araujo concludes that Vozes emerged as an essential channel for shedding light on the human stories that defined this extraordinary period in our history – the pandemic. It provided a platform for those directly impacted by the pandemic to share their experiences and for readers to gain insight into the harrowing challenges faced by individuals on the front lines of this battle.

Through the examples of these media organizations – Eldiario.es, Mediapart, Le Monde, The Correspondent, and The Intercept – we can see unique approaches to user participation and audience engagement. These examples showcase the diverse strategies employed, from membership-driven models to live-blogging initiatives and even platforms that empower users to contribute their expertise. The introduction of participation spaces has marked a significant trend. This phenomenon is driven by technological advancements, the changing dynamics of internet use, and a desire for more engaged journalism. However, the way news organizations approach UGC, and audience engagement varies widely. The common theme across these news organizations is the continuous effort to involve the public in the news production process. By creating designated spaces for user contributions and facilitating ongoing interactions, these outlets aim to bridge the gap between traditional journalism and a more participatory approach.

3.3 The Spectrum of Journalistic Mediation: Integrating UGC into News Storytelling

When a news story is being written, we rarely see User-Generated Content as a stand-alone item, being published without accompanying content produced by journalists or any form of

edition – that is, the active mediation of newsroom staff for material that originates from the public. Journalists will always have some form of intervention in the content. What tends to differ is the relevance the UGC has to the story being told. Through our observation of how User-Generated Content was integrated into the news production and became part of the storytelling in the news sites we explored, we established three levels of journalistic mediation for this type of content: minimal, medium, and maximal (Table 46). These levels apply singularly to the incorporation of user content into news stories.

Table 46 – Levels of Journalist Mediation on UGC as part of storytelling.

Minimal	Medium	Maximal
Journalists have minimal interference in the content created by the user. They may provide a context for the material or make slight adjustments/corrections, but the final story (published content) is majorly produced by the user.	User-Generated Content and content produced by journalists complement one another, both being important to the construction of the story. It can be a collaboration between users and newsroom staff.	User-Generated Content is used to illustrate or complement stories. Though they may aggregate the perception of the audience to the story, they are not essential to the narrative. The journalist's content is what composes most of the story.
Example: testimonials of users and their personal experiences that are minimally edited for clarity and gain a brief context written by journalists.	Example: testimonials of users that are used intermittently with a journalist's narrative regarding an event/situation, in a collaboration between public and newsroom staff to construct the story.	Example: journalist narrates an event and to show the perspective of the public incorporates content of users posted in social media.

The level of mediation has relation to how the news organizations see their type of journalism, their perception and adoption of traditional professional values, and the priorities established as a company, though the same outlets may have stories with different levels of mediation. We can consider that the less journalists interfere with or edit/complement the content, the more central User-Generated Content is for the storytelling; but we grant that stating there was a process of revising and editing, making clear there was an active process of mediation of content by the newsroom, often strengthens the journalistic value of the content in the eyes of the audience and imbues it with credibility, as the authority and trustworthiness earned by journalists as professionals is passed to news they research, produce, write and divulge.

As we explored the 80 news sites from our *corpus*, we searched for examples of User-Generated Content in news production and from our observation of the multiple examples, we perceived that, when they are integrated into the news narrative, they tend to be used in three different ways, that often represent the type and level of mediation they receive from journalists: 1) Used as complementary information or to illustrate a story; 2) Used to create a collaborative story in partnership with journalists; 3) Used as the primary story, only being put into context by journalists. We outlined multiple examples of how User-Generated Content was being used in the news sites we studied, but we found that as a resource, the case number one was the most common, with UGC massively used by news sites as manner to complement information or to illustrate a story.

Following our in-depth analysis of the integration of User-Generated Content in news stories, it is noteworthy that its utilization often serves a supplementary role rather than a primary narrative. This dominant practice has its roots deeply embedded in the historical context of journalism and its relationship with the masses. Historically, journalism has always been seen as a mediator of reality. The fourth state, as journalism is sometimes referred to, took upon itself the onus of translating the happenings of the world for the general populace (Schudson, 1995). This ingrained notion that journalists are the ‘owners of information’ has its grounding in centuries of practice where news organizations, armed with their resources and networks, brought distant events to our doorstep. Journalists have long been the gatekeepers of information, determining what should be considered ‘news’ and what should be omitted. In this context, journalists possess a sense of authority, and even in our digital age, a hierarchical relationship between them and the general public persists.

Enter the era of the internet, social media, and digital technologies, and one might assume that the tables have turned. Theoretically, these tools should democratize information dissemination. However, the relationship between journalists and the public remains predominantly unchanged. Why? Trust plays a pivotal role. As Kovach and Rosenstiel (2010) elucidate in their work, the elements of journalism hinge on the principles of truth and verification. While anyone can post content online, the process of verifying that information, especially in a breaking news scenario, requires resources - both human expertise and financial backing. Hence, even in our digitized world, the audience tends to look toward established news sources when seeking verified and reliable information.

However, the landscape isn’t entirely untouched by the digital revolution. The commercial value of UGC is undeniable. A viral tweet, an amusing video, or even a poignant Instagram post has the potential to attract a broad audience. The allure of these ‘viral’ UGC pieces, often fun and

engaging, cannot be ignored by news organizations aiming to bolster their reach and relevance, especially among younger audiences. Yet, the inclusion of such content still undergoes the process of journalistic mediation. Even when a viral piece of UGC becomes a news story, it is often enveloped by a professional narrative, ensuring it aligns with the news outlet's standards and *ethos*.

In the realm of journalistic mediation, while UGC is increasingly finding its way into the news narrative, it is predominantly in roles that adhere to or benefit the established norms of the industry. Be it for trust, verification, or commercial value, the dance between UGC and traditional journalism continues to be a complex choreography of the old and the new. As Singer et al. (2011) aptly put in their examination of UGC's integration into news production, the intersection is more of a complement than a replacement, reinforcing the gatekeeping role, albeit in contemporary settings.

While traditional journalistic paradigms have retained a significant influence in the face of technological advancements, it is undeniable that the digital age has imprinted its mark on modern news-making. The realm of User-Generated Content (UGC) especially has emerged as a formidable entity, both in terms of its sheer commercial potential and its implications within broader socio-economic frameworks.

In today's digitized world, a viral tweet, a captivating video, or a thought-provoking Instagram post can have a vast and instantaneous impact. Such content, arising organically from the masses, possesses an innate ability to resonate with vast and diverse audiences. But beyond the surface appeal, these instances of UGC carry deeper implications in the domain of what's known as cognitive capitalism. Notions like participatory production (crowdsourcing) and UGC, while celebrated in dominant discourses for their democratizing potentials, have been critically analyzed as mechanisms for extracting more value within this framework (Scholz, 2013).

For many, the influx of UGC into mainstream media is not just a benign development but can be seen as an extension of capitalistic practices where uncoerced online activities morph into free labor. The crux of the debate revolves around whether such labor, while freely given, can be construed as a source of exploitation and alienation. Arguments advanced by Fisher (2012) emphasize how secular work on the web, including UGC, serves as a conduit for value extraction benefiting capitalist entities, often at the expense of the public.

News organizations, in their bid to stay relevant and competitive, might tap into this vast reservoir of UGC. Still, they are simultaneously navigating the intricate web of political socioeconomics of online information (Smyrnaio, 2015). When a piece of UGC gains traction, its rigorous journalistic mediation serves not just to maintain editorial standards, but also as an implicit

acknowledgment of the broader debates surrounding the value and implications of such content in the digital era.

In summary, while UGC offers a pulse of the public sentiment and a glimpse into ground realities, its integration into the professional journalistic landscape is fraught with complexities. These span not just the realm of journalistic integrity but also touch upon deeper socio-economic and political dimensions of our digital age.

4. The Future of UGC in Online Journalism

Over the past three decades, the digitalization of the media environment has transformed the profile of journalists, news organizations and media content. It has also disrupted media business models, journalistic practices, the public's relationship with information and the very notion of news (Salaverría and de-Lima-Santos, 2020, p. 3), leading to an immediate need to innovate as a matter to guarantee the future of journalism. Media organizations are leveraging UGC in new and innovative ways by using advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence and machine learning to analyze and verify user-generated content. These technologies can help to identify fake news and misinformation, as well as ensure the authenticity and credibility of UGC (Bradshaw and Howard, 2018).

- **The BBC's UGC Hub:** The BBC has a team of journalists dedicated to verifying UGC, who use a combination of advanced technologies and traditional journalistic methods to assess the authenticity and credibility of user-generated content. They use a tool called the UGC Hub, which uses machine learning algorithms to analyze social media posts and identify potential sources of fake news or misinformation.
- **Storyful:** Storyful is a social media intelligence agency that uses advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence and natural language processing to analyze UGC and verify its authenticity. They have a team of journalists and data scientists who work together to identify and track online trends and social media conversations, and to verify the accuracy of user-generated content.
- **Google's Project Shield:** Google's Project Shield is a free service that uses machine learning algorithms to protect news websites from cyber-attacks and other threats. It also includes a tool called Fact Check Explorer, which allows journalists to search for fact-checks of specific claims and statements made online.
- **The New York Times' Visual Investigations team:** The New York Times' Visual Investigations team uses advanced technologies such as satellite imagery, 3D

modeling, and machine learning to investigate and verify UGC. They have used these tools to verify the authenticity of UGC related to major news events such as the Syrian chemical attack in 2017 and the Hong Kong protests in 2019.

These are just a few examples of how media organizations are using advanced technologies to analyze and verify UGC. By leveraging these tools, they can ensure the authenticity and credibility of user-generated content and provide their audiences with accurate and trustworthy news and information. Additionally, media organizations are increasingly using UGC to create personalized and tailored news experiences for their audiences. By analyzing data on user behavior and preferences, news sites can curate content based on what their readers are interested in, leading to a more engaging and relevant news experience (Newman et al., 2021).

Another innovative use of UGC is the creation of community-driven news platforms. These platforms allow audiences to submit news stories and articles, which are then vetted and edited by professional journalists before being published (Neuberger, 2020). This approach not only promotes community engagement but also helps to democratize the news by giving a voice to underrepresented communities and topics. One example of a community-driven news platform is The Bristol Cable, a UK-based publication that focuses on local news and investigative journalism. The Bristol Cable is a cooperatively owned media outlet that operates on a model of participatory journalism, which allows members of the community to contribute their own news stories and opinions. The content is then vetted and edited by professional journalists before being published on the website or in print. Another example is Global Voices, an international network of bloggers, journalists, and translators who work together to provide independent news and analysis from around the world. Global Voices features a variety of stories and articles contributed by its community members, providing a platform for voices that might not be heard in mainstream media.

These community-driven news platforms not only provide a space for underrepresented communities to share their stories and perspectives but also promote greater transparency and accountability in the news industry. By allowing members of the community to contribute to the news-making process, these platforms help to democratize the news and promote greater trust and engagement between journalists and their audiences. Community-driven news platforms challenge the traditional hierarchy and gatekeeping role of journalists in the news media. In traditional news organizations, journalists are the primary gatekeepers who decide what news stories are covered and how they are presented to the public. However, community-driven news platforms allow community members to contribute their own stories and perspectives, thus expanding the range of voices and experiences represented in the news.

By creating a space for community members to participate in the news-making process, community-driven news platforms also promote greater transparency and accountability in the news industry. The vetting and editing process that takes place before publication ensures that the content meets professional standards and is factually accurate, while also preserving the unique voice and perspective of the contributor. Additionally, community-driven news platforms can complement traditional news organizations by providing coverage of stories and issues that may not be covered by mainstream media. By giving a voice to underrepresented communities and perspectives, these platforms can help to fill gaps in the news and provide a more diverse range of perspectives on important issues.

While community-driven news platforms are gaining popularity and represent an innovative approach to news-making, it is unlikely that they will replace traditional media organizations entirely. Instead, it is more likely that these platforms will exist alongside traditional media organizations, serving as a complementary source of news and information. Traditional media organizations have established resources and infrastructure that allow them to cover news stories in a more comprehensive and professional manner than community-driven news platforms. They also have a larger audience base and greater reach, which allows them to influence public discourse in a more significant way.

However, community-driven news platforms offer a unique perspective and a more diverse range of voices that are not often represented in traditional media outlets. They also provide a platform for underrepresented communities to share their stories and experiences, which can lead to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of issues. Overall, it is likely that community-driven news platforms will continue to grow and play an important role in the news industry, but they will coexist alongside traditional media organizations rather than replace them entirely.

Financial and legal concerns can have a significant impact on innovative projects involving public participation and User-generated Content in media companies. A few specific ways in which these concerns can stifle innovation:

- **Financial Constraints:** Projects involving public participation and User-Generated Content can be costly to manage and maintain. These projects require significant resources for content moderation, community management, and technical infrastructure. Media companies may be hesitant to invest in these projects due to the uncertainty of their return on investment.
- **Legal Risks:** User-generated content can pose a variety of legal risks, including copyright infringement, defamation, and invasion of privacy. Media companies may

be reluctant to host User-Generated Content due to the potential legal liability, and they may be hesitant to invest in projects that could expose them to these risks.

- **Regulatory Barriers:** organizations may face regulatory barriers in hosting User-Generated Content. For example, they may be subject to laws that require them to moderate content in certain ways or take down content that is deemed illegal or offensive. These regulations can limit the scope of what companies can do with User-Generated Content and limit their ability to innovate in this area.
- **Resistance to Change:** companies may be resistant to changing their approach to User-Generated Content. They may be reluctant to experiment with new forms of public participation or adopt new tools for content moderation. This resistance can limit the potential for innovation in this area.

All these factors can combine to hinder innovation in media companies, particularly when it comes to public participation and User-Generated Content. Media companies that can navigate these challenges may be able to differentiate themselves and build a stronger relationship with their audience by fostering a sense of community and engagement through User-Generated Content, but the panorama does not look promising.

5. *Mea Culpa*: Does the Public Want to Generate Content?

The public may find it easier to participate in a plurality of channels and platforms, being able to demand to be heard or claim their own spaces; while news organizations rethink and renew their practices, though still being able to choose how, when, and where to engage their audience. But as we often question why the potential of User-Generated Content for news production is not explored by media outlets, we do have to ask: *does the general public actually want to routinely contribute?*

There is evidence to suggest that the general public may not be particularly interested in routinely contributing to news production. While some individuals may be motivated to share their experiences or perspectives on particular issues, the overall level of participation in user-generated content (UGC) remains relatively low. Studies have shown that a minority of users actually participate and contribute with their own content (Karlson et. al 2015).

One factor may be the perception that news production is solely the responsibility of journalists (Chisholm, 2004; Hujanen and Pietikäinen, 2004; Roscoe, 1999). This perception may be reinforced by traditional media outlets, which have historically been the gatekeepers of news content and have positioned themselves as the authoritative sources of information. Another potential factor is the reluctance of audiences to give up their role as consumers and to take on a

more active role in news production (Chung, 2008). This reluctance may be related to a lack of confidence in one's own abilities or a belief that one's contributions would not be valued or taken seriously by journalists or news organizations. Furthermore, the process of contributing to news production can be time-consuming and may require a certain level of technical expertise, such as the ability to shoot and edit video or photos (Karlson et al., 2015). This may be a barrier for some individuals who are interested in contributing but lack the necessary skills or equipment.

Audiences on news sites are hesitant to produce material in a journalistic context (Bergström 2008; Chung 2008). There has been speculation to why that is, from the reluctance of the audience to give up on this role of consumer to the matter that news has been a traditionally and exclusively attributed as journalists' job (Chisholm, 2004; Hujanen and Pietikäinen, 2004; Roscoe, 1999). Masip and Suau (2014) proposed a typology of user participation in online news media that included four different modes of participation. These four modes of participation reflect a shift towards a more participatory and collaborative model of journalism, in which users play an active role in the production, distribution, and consumption of news content. They also noted that the different modes of participation have different implications for the role of journalists and the relationship between journalists and users. These modes are:

- **Commenting:** This mode involves users commenting on news articles or other content published by news media organizations. Commenting allows for immediate feedback and encourages interaction between journalists and users.
- **Sharing:** This mode involves users sharing news articles or other content on social media platforms or other online forums. Sharing can help to increase the reach and visibility of news media content and allows users to express their interests and opinions.
- **Producing:** This mode involves users actively producing and sharing news content, either independently or in collaboration with news media organizations. User-generated content can provide a valuable source of information and perspectives that complement traditional journalism.
- **Funding:** This mode involves users providing financial support to news media organizations through subscriptions, donations, or other means. Funding can help to sustain quality journalism and ensure its independence from commercial interests.

These modes reflect the range of willingness of the user to get involved, the effort he is comfortable with putting into his relationship with the media organization. The desire of the

general public to generate content for news production can vary widely depending on individual preferences, motivations, and circumstances. Here are some factors that may affect their willingness – or not – to contribute:

- **Interest and Expertise:** Some individuals are highly interested in specific topics and have expertise or personal experiences to share. They may be motivated to generate content to contribute to the discussion, inform others, or express their viewpoints.
- **Community and Social Engagement:** People who feel a strong sense of community or social responsibility may be more inclined to contribute content, especially if they see it as a way to positively impact their communities or advocate for social change.
- **Technology and Accessibility:** The ease of access to technology and platforms can influence whether the public is willing and able to contribute. If the tools and platforms are user-friendly and accessible, more people may participate.
- **Incentives:** Incentives such as recognition, financial compensation, or the opportunity to influence public discourse can motivate individuals to generate content.
- **Privacy and Security:** Concerns about privacy and security can affect people's willingness to contribute. They may hesitate to share personal information or opinions if they fear negative consequences.
- **Time and Effort:** Generating content can be time-consuming and require effort. Some individuals may be willing to contribute occasionally, while others may not have the time or energy to do so regularly.
- **Trust in Media:** Public trust in media organizations can impact the willingness to contribute. If people believe that their contributions will be taken seriously and used responsibly, they may be more likely to participate.
- **Cultural and Demographic Factors:** Cultural and demographic factors can play a role. For example, younger generations may be more accustomed to sharing content online, while older generations may have different preferences.

UGC has the potential to transform journalism by giving a voice to the public and fostering greater engagement and participation in the news process. However, it is important to note that incorporating UGC into news production is not without its challenges, and it is up to news

organizations to create an environment that encourages and supports citizen participation in journalism. Not everyone will want to routinely contribute to news production, and the level of engagement can vary widely. Offering a variety of ways for the public to engage, such as through comments, user-generated content submissions, or citizen journalism initiatives, can help media organizations tap into the potential of user-generated content while respecting the preferences of their audience.

The responsibility of journalism to create spaces UGC stems from the principles of transparency, accountability, and inclusivity that are central to the practice of journalism. Firstly, journalism has a responsibility to be transparent about the news gathering and reporting process. By incorporating UGC, news organizations can provide greater visibility into the perspectives and experiences of the public and demonstrate their commitment to representing a diverse range of viewpoints. Secondly, journalism has a responsibility to be accountable to its audiences. By incorporating UGC, news organizations can engage in a more collaborative and participatory approach to news production that encourages greater accountability and feedback from their audiences. Finally, journalism has a responsibility to be inclusive and representative of the communities it serves. By incorporating UGC, news organizations can provide a platform for underrepresented voices and perspectives and promote greater diversity and inclusion in their reporting. This responsibility of journalism to create spaces for UGC reflects its broader commitment to serving the public interest and upholding democratic values. By providing opportunities for citizens to contribute to the news process, news organizations can promote greater engagement, participation, and accountability in journalism. As an institution, the burden falls on it.

CHAPTER 10

USER PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT IN AN ONLINE NEWS ECOSYSTEM

Having explored the strategies for engagement and the spaces for participation in the news sites of our *corpus*, as well as understood UGC's historical and modern significance, we critically appraise the assumptions of engagement and participation that have shaped the digital journalism landscape. As we explored 80 news sites from eight different countries, looking at the features they offered, what they said about themselves and their users, we tried answering "*what is the role of user for this news organization?*". Mainstream journalism's approach to engagement, participation and User-Generated Content is largely framed by its shared norms and values, which reinforces the role of journalists as gatekeepers, who seek to keep the information published, even if it originates from the audience, in accordance with journalistic principles. In this chapter, we discuss through a critical lens engagement and participation in online journalism practices, considering the data we collected from desk research and platforms analysis (Yin and Davis, 2007), using examples of the news sites that compose our *corpus*, in order to outline why these channels, build to interact with the user are not sufficient to explain what affects the relationship between audience/public and media companies.

1. The Road so far: Journalism, Engagement, Participation and User-Generated

Who, what, where, when and why are the five questions that are at the heart of journalism as the profession arose through its duty to inform the public. If a journalist answers those questions in relation to any news story, they are doing their job. These are the questions that underpin everything journalism does, from what is written in a newspaper or online, what is said on TV or on the radio, for every country out there – at the very least the Western ones in which we have conducted our study. Journalism in a globalized world means that the practice of reporting news and information can now be done on a global scale, using technology to reach audiences beyond national borders. With the rise of the internet and social media, journalism has become more accessible and immediate than ever before, and news is shared across the globe in real-time.

While the basic functions of journalism – inform, educate, and entertain - remain the same, the ways in which these functions are carried out have changed. Journalists must now navigate a complex landscape of global news sources, social media platforms, and audience expectations to remain relevant and trustworthy. One of the key challenges in this context is forming a relationship with the public. As traditional news sources are increasingly supplemented by online content, journalists must work harder to establish credibility and maintain the trust of their audience. This

requires a commitment to transparency and accountability, as well as a willingness to engage with audiences on social media and other digital platforms.

We spoke with members of 15 new organizations, from eight different countries, and throughout all of our conversations, when journalism was discussed, specifically in relation to the idea of the *abstract* public of their news site, the sense of duty and the moral imperative to provide information always came through: “We have a right to know about the important things that shape our society and to use this information. In fact, it is more important than ever now in our interdependent world. And that is what journalism does” (Shabbir, 2022).

This ideological perspective of journalism gives purpose to news organizations: their duty to the public and to the truth, to accurate and precise information in a democratic society become core values of throughout all their mission statements. How they produce this journalism, how they newsrooms are organized and managed, how they present their news stories and, consequently, how they end up creating a relationship with the public, that is what changes.

Over the last few years, the media have multiplied the mechanisms for citizen participation. Various investigations (Peters and Witschge, 2015) have shown, however, that greater opportunities for interaction do not necessarily translate into greater commitment and identification of the audience with the medium. Under the aforementioned technological inevitability, the media have turned the availability of participation tools into an end in itself. The introduction of participation mechanisms with lawful commercial objectives occurred uncritically, assuming that in society 2.0 everyone would want to participate. The reality has proven much more complex. Introducing a culture of participation is difficult because it implies a new form of relationship between the parties. In the case of journalists, the change implies a modification of the balance of power between the participating actors, of their authority and in the decision-making process. A relationship that they do not seem to be willing to alter significantly (Singer et al., 2011).

The role of public participation in journalism varies depending on the specific goals and circumstances of the news organization. Some news organizations may prioritize public participation as a way to ensure that a diverse range of perspectives and voices are represented in the news, while others may prioritize traditional news-gathering methods and rely less on public participation. Public participation can be an important aspect of journalism; however, it is not essential for journalism to exist. Journalism can be done by professionals who gather and report news through traditional means such as interviews, research, and observations. Public participation can supplement and enrich the journalism, but it is not necessary for it to exist.

News organizations can have similar goals in terms of their journalistic mission, such as a commitment to serving the public interest. However, the way they present their content on their

websites can be quite different. For example, one news organization may prioritize audience engagement by providing a platform for comments and User-Generated Content, while another may take a more traditional approach and limit the space for audience participation. A news organization that prioritizes audience engagement by providing a platform for comments and User-Generated Content may create a more dynamic and interactive experience for the viewer. This can foster a sense of community and encourage active participation among viewers, which can in turn lead to a greater sense of trust and loyalty towards the news organization. On the other hand, a news organization that takes a more traditional approach and limits the space for audience participation may create a more formal and authoritative tone. This approach can be seen as more objective and professional and can help to establish the news organization as a credible and trustworthy source of information.

Similarly, one news organization may have a more hands-on approach to moderating and managing User-Generated Content, while another may take a more *laissez-faire* approach. The different approach to audience engagement and management can have a significant impact on the overall tone and feel of the website and can reflect the news organization's values and priorities. A news organization that has a more hands-on approach to moderating and managing User-Generated Content may create a more controlled and sanitized environment. This approach can be seen as more responsible and can help to ensure that the information provided is accurate and reliable. Whereas a more *laissez-faire* approach to moderating and managing User-Generated Content may create a more open and freer environment. This approach can be seen as more inclusive and democratic and can allow for a greater diversity of perspectives and opinions to be heard.

In the end, the approach that a news organization takes to audience engagement and management can reflect its values and priorities, but the strategies and tools used, and the spaces created and hosted to engage and encourage participation from the audience/public are all in the same realm, with different styles of management that represent diverse expectations they have for their relationship with the audience. Our research outlined three primary tools for engagement that are continually used: share buttons, present on 77 news sites from our *corpus*, newsletters, present on 73, and comment sections present on 49. It also noted the importance of presence on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, as it allows outlets to interact with their audience, share breaking news updates, and receive feedback on their content. Also, we highlight the integration of User-generated Content to news stories in its different levels, becomes a form to connect with the audience. All these spaces and strategies allow news organizations to

receive feedback, gain insights on their audience's perspectives, and ultimately build the type of relationship with the user they strive for.

In terms of technological innovation, it is true that we have the technology available to make creative advancements in journalism and go beyond these tools and strategies that have become the standard for media companies; but the challenge is in finding ways to implement these innovations in a sustainable and cost-effective way. This can be difficult as the media industry is facing a lot of financial pressure, and some organizations may not have the resources to invest in new technologies or in building audience engagement. Despite these challenges, there are news organizations which still see the value in investing in engagement, participation and UGC. They recognize that it is important to serve the public by including them in the news process, and that UGC can provide valuable insights and perspectives that may not be available otherwise. News organizations are trying to find a balance between the practicality and creativity, by implementing new technologies, tools, and methods to verify and validate the UGC, and to make it more efficient for their use. Ultimately, it is a matter of priorities and resources, but many news organizations see the value in engaging with the audience, and in using UGC as a means of diversifying and enriching their content.

Previous research argued against traditional media's reluctance to adopt participatory journalism (Domingo et al. 2008; Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Jönsson and Örnebring, 2011). Our research partially confirms this trend. At different levels, all the media analyzed offer some form of interactivity. However, there are significant differences between them, especially with regard to the types of interactivity which have been adopted. Tools that allow higher intensities of participation tend to be the least adopted, while the ones that allow lower intensities tend to be more present in media's websites. As a consequence, selective and participatory options for interactivity predominate. These are forms that imply a low or medium level of citizens' participation, allowing the medium to continue to keep control of the UGC and retaining the gatekeeper role. At the same time, these forms of participation, at a minimal intensity, are sufficient to gain the readers' loyalty, making them part of the published content. Tenenboim and Cohen (2015) are careful in emphasizing that commenting and clicking draw on different expressions of interest, and these expressions do not refer to two distinct audience groups but rather to two modes of relating to online news media.

The most popular tools – share buttons and comment sections – are a clear interactive feature to try and engage users, but they still provide a minimal form of engagement with the reader and a limited participation in the news process. In our observation, we also noted outlets make available manners to contact the newsroom that range from email to Google forms to secure

channels to document drops to numbers for messaging apps, mainly WhatsApp. These are rarely clear callouts for readers but limited to the “contact us” section of their websites that you have to actively search for. There are some that call out more openly to users, with sections and representatives dedicated to the audience, which allow them, for example, to give their opinion, request the discussion of certain topics, point out mistakes in news stories and send tips for possible news, though they do it via these same channels of communication.

When it comes to User-Generated Content, can these resources be considered innovative? The audience has been involved with news production for a long time, from letters to the editor, to readers’ photos, radio and television phone-ins. We can consider that UGC is amplified by the internet and digital media, continuing a tradition started with letters sent into the editors. A phenomenon that, not being new, has gained novel contours with the ease of access to the tools of production, publication, cooperation and information sharing. The web practically prevents the passive role of the public, since it incites the audience to debate, refute or contradict certain information, news or statement, as digital technologies have served as a motivator for greater popular interference in the news production.

Yet, we have to admit that there is a value to small acts of engagement, that happen around these simpler tools, rooted in the sphere of everyday media consumption (Picone et al., 2019), as they have an important value for audience practices in relation to journalism. Likes, shares and comments are a significant and central part of online interaction. Admittedly, while not everyone started blogging, many media users now engage in more casual practices of content production. With the tremendous uptake of social media over the past decade, liking, sharing, and commenting have become audiences’ dominant modes of productive engagement. According to the Reuters Digital News Report 2017 (Newman et al., 2017, p. 44), sharing news stories, albeit varying greatly by country, is done weekly by more than 60% of internet users in Chile, Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico, 40% in the United States, and 22% in the United Kingdom. But here too, the authors saw the use of social media for news falter in key markets in 2018 after years of continuous growth, and attribute it for the most part “to a specific decline in the discovery, posting, and sharing of news in Facebook” (Newman et al., 2018, p. 9).

The internet and digital media public invite the public to contribute through comments, blogs, forums, social networks, chats, sending photos, videos, or texts, but do the news organizations? Even if there are the material conditions for individuals to be able to participate in the information round-trip process, the tools alone are not sufficient to make it so. If the beginning of the digital revolution that changed journalism made the optimists believe that the audience would become a great part of the news production process; we now find that journalism continues

to hold tight to its job as gatekeeper – though perhaps not in the same capacity of a few decades ago. User participation, at the same time that it has become a must for news sites, is met with moderation and generally limited to certain spaces and activities.

Comment boxes and buttons that ask the user to share the content via email or social media are now nearly rudimentary tools for news sites, the standard practice for when you want to open some space for public participation and could be found in the majority of the websites we explored. Though comment sections are often closed to those who are not members of subscribers, and as such closed to the broader public. These forms of participation limit audience engagement to feedback, to the after the story has been produced (Peters and Witschge 2015), and do not truly encourage a continuous engagement of the public with the news process.

This is not to say that news organizations are not producing quality journalism, with thorough investigations, impressive collaborations and creative multimedia resources and presentations of data. Nevertheless, it does reflect how the resources and tools that arose with new technologies, just like the possibility for interactivity via multiple channels, don't automatically correspond to an expansion of the uses of User-Generated Content in journalism and the willingness from news organizations to make room for unfettered participation by the public. Moderation and mediation may always be an implied and necessary part of professional journalism, but the possibilities of user engagement are still largely unexplored by the majority of news media.

There are no common patterns between media from the same countries and the types of interactivities are not always determined by the media and political systems. Although aspects of political and media systems can determine the adoption of participatory features, the final decision on whether to offer tools for participatory journalism in the countries with democratic systems is usually linked to economic factors and business models. Although there exists a widespread enthusiasm in academia about the democratic potential of participatory journalism (Borger et al. 2013), this optimism is not shared by most of the media in democratic countries studied in this research.

News organizations are continually called to inform their audience about what is happening and help to understand and give context to facts and situations. Each outlet makes the choice of how to fulfill this function, giving different spaces and relevance to User-Generated Content, determining what roles the public can have in their news process. Innovative uses of UGC, that go further than the comment box and the share button, are still punctual in news sites, but they do prove that there are many forms to include the public in the journalistic process, even in the creation of narratives, using their content to help tell the story and incorporate their point of view into the news.

Though one might hypothesize that digital native outlets make more use of interactive features, considering they were thought out for the web from the beginning; our observation has shown that that is not the case. In the end, the use of the most common features to connect with the audience, such as comment sections, newsletters and share buttons, tend to have a higher correlation with the news organization business model and proposed idea of journalism. But we did note that digital news native, which were fewer in as *corpus* than legacy news media, had more creative, inventive, and meaningful ways to continually integrate the public into their journalism using as a basis the same tools.

Digital news natives find differentiation, reached by the development of more meaningful and inclusive relationships, based on news consumers online habits, increasingly focused on deeper connections and greater exchange of information through person-to-person (journalist-to-reader) interaction (Ingram, 2014). Even though Ingram's (2014) argument is based on anecdotal evidence, it does demonstrate that digital native news outlets have been more successful in implementing and seeing through participatory initiatives, whilst legacy news media struggle to sustain manners of public participation, as shows (Porlezza, 2019).

Member routines, which were common among the digital natives we studied, can have several formats: simple tools enabling members to vote on subjects of their interest, moderated comments sections, callouts where publishers ask for their expertise or interest on specific themes, structured surveys, real work with data shared that can be paid, participation on editorial and training events, etc. Interaction can work through different channels, such as the publishers' owned platforms, social media (Facebook Messenger and Groups are popular tools for that), emails—where different versions of newsletters can be tailored according to the interests and expertise of members subscribed—and even offline events and editorial meetings (Quamby et al., 2019). Participation is possible in the four steps of newsrooms' workflow: 1) planning; 2) research and reporting; 3) editing and fact-checking; and 4) post-publication.

These routines, in truth, can be employed basically by any publisher looking for reader revenue, either through memberships (when the publisher keeps the content free but asks for a donation from readers that can support their initiative), subscriptions (when content can only be accessed by paying subscribers), or other innovative models. But even successful cases when it comes to engaging the public show significant differences, constantly reassessing their choices, and making changes that take into consideration their philosophies, professional views, available resources, and particularities related to the market in which they are positioned.

We should note that, though a company business model can alter the spaces organizations provide for user participation, it is not defining for the use they make of content originated from

the public. Many news outlets, legacy, and digital native, employ paywalls in their websites, demanding the user to subscribe to have access to content. There are also those which were born on the web and rely on crowdsourcing to ensure their survival or have business models based on membership. Depending on the public for financial viability and survival does not imply an automatic model of journalism that allows for participation in their news production. The interesting cases we saw came both from legacy news outlets and digital natives, where newsrooms made the choice to use the audience in the journalistic product beyond feedback and bring in users as storytellers.

1.1 Emblematic Cases

In the vast tapestry of the digital media landscape, numerous threads weave together the story of contemporary journalism. The age of the internet has brought with it both profound opportunities and challenges for the world of news, reshaping our understanding of what it means to inform and be informed. This section delves deep into emblematic cases that highlight the dynamism and fluidity of digital journalism. From the intriguing transformation of BuzzFeed News and the unique approach of Brut, each narrative underscores the multifaceted nature of the digital news environment. As we navigate through these stories, we will uncover the internal and external forces that shape their trajectories, contextualized by the ever-evolving online news ecosystem marked by global influences. Through this exploration, we aim to paint a comprehensive picture of where digital journalism stands today and the possible directions it might take in the coming years. By understanding these emblematic cases, we can better appreciate the broader shifts and trends in the world of news, reflecting on their implications for both journalists and the audience they serve.

1.3.1 BuzzFeed News: from meme factory to Pulitzer Prize new site, to going offline.

In the complex, multifaceted online news ecosystem, the relationship between media outlets and digital platforms has consistently remained both collaborative and contentious. Within this dynamic, BuzzFeed News emerged as an avatar of the digital age, charting a course from its beginnings as a quirky meme factory to becoming a Pulitzer Prize-winning institution. In 2006, when Jonah Peretti founded BuzzFeed, few could have anticipated its meteoric rise from a hub for internet memes to a Pulitzer Prize-nominated news organization. Initially laser-focused on tracking viral online content, BuzzFeed had an uncanny knack for curating the whimsical, the trending, and the meme-worthy. However, by 2011, the landscape began to shift. With an eye towards the vast potential of the digital sphere, BuzzFeed made its foray into original content creation.

This transition was underscored in 2012 with the hiring of Ben Smith as editor-in-chief. More than a mere personnel change, this was a statement of intent: BuzzFeed was no longer content with just highlighting virality; it sought to create it through serious journalism. This ambition culminated in the establishment of BuzzFeed News, which would in time earn significant journalistic accolades, including a Pulitzer Prize nomination.

Yet, BuzzFeed's journey was emblematic of a broader trend in digital media: the "BuzzFeedization of journalism. This was a mix where news and entertainment seamlessly intertwined, producing content that was not only informative but also irresistibly shareable. The formula was potent: catchy headlines, investigative pieces, pop culture quizzes, and shareable lists, all tailor-made for maximum engagement on platforms like Facebook. Traditional media, initially wary of BuzzFeed's unorthodox approach, soon found themselves borrowing from its playbook. This blending of styles, however, was not without controversy. There were concerns about eroding the line between factual reporting and entertainment, potentially compromising journalistic integrity.

BuzzFeed News, with its acute awareness of the digital milieu, seemed to intuitively understand and harness the power of tech platforms, especially the likes of Facebook. Their content was meticulously crafted to resonate with vast swathes of the digital audience, capturing attention and "stopping thumbs mid-scroll". This strategy made them a notable force, so much so that legacy media giants, such as The New York Times, found themselves reflecting upon their own digital strategies, looking enviously at BuzzFeed's staggering reach.

However, under the pressures of the ever-evolving online news ecosystem shaped by global forces, BuzzFeed's reliance on platform algorithms became both its strength and its Achilles' heel. As Rafat Ali, the CEO of Skift, succinctly put it, "When you build your business on a trend — in this case, social sharing — and that trend comes to an end, so does your business" (2023). The shifting sands of platform policies and the migration of digital advertising revenue to platforms like TikTok and Instagram began to strain BuzzFeed News' model.

BuzzFeed News, once a paragon of digital media innovation, found itself at the mercy of the very platforms it had harnessed so masterfully. Their meteoric rise was undeniably tethered to their exceptional proficiency at deciphering and exploiting the algorithms of major platforms, especially Facebook. At its peak, BuzzFeed executives boasted about the company's uncanny ability to understand the often-opaque machinations of social media algorithms, ensuring their content consistently reached vast audiences. This strategy, while initially rewarding, exposed BuzzFeed News to the capricious nature of these very platforms.

When Facebook made changes to their algorithms, downgrading certain types of content, BuzzFeed News' once-formidable grip on audience engagement began to wane. This change meant that content which was once assured virality and high engagement became much less visible, leading to dwindling traffic. The reduced visibility meant a direct hit to their primary source of revenue: digital advertising. Moreover, the digital advertising landscape itself was undergoing rapid changes. Large segments of the advertising pie, which digital media companies like BuzzFeed News relied upon, were being devoured by tech behemoths such as Meta, Alphabet, and ByteDance. As young consumers gravitated towards newer platforms like Instagram and TikTok, the advertising dollars followed suit.

The financial strain became evident as BuzzFeed News' profitability plummeted. Despite its acquisition of HuffPost, BuzzFeed News reportedly lost around US\$10 million annually. The platform-dependent model that BuzzFeed News relied on had become its undoing. It was a stark reminder of the risks media entities faced when built on transient trends. Facing these substantial losses and mounting pressure from shareholders, the decision was made to close BuzzFeed News (Figure 58).



Figure 58 – The last headline of the BuzzFeed News.

By 2023, the pressures of the digital landscape, combined with the challenges of platform dependency, took their toll. BuzzFeed News, once a symbol of digital media's promise, closed its doors. This closure is a stark reminder of the volatile nature of the digital media ecosystem. While BuzzFeed News has shuttered, its legacy remains — a testament to the innovation, opportunities,

challenges, and impermanence of the digital age. BuzzFeed News' closure serves as a cautionary tale in the digital media industry, underscoring the inherent risks of over-reliance on platform-driven strategies. As the dynamics of the online news ecosystem continue to evolve, the BuzzFeed News saga will likely be studied as a critical lesson on the imperatives of adaptability, diversification, and the dangers of placing too much trust in the unpredictable nature of tech platforms.

In juxtaposition, HuffPost, owned by the same parent company, traced a different trajectory. While sharing the digital playground with BuzzFeed News, HuffPost's strategy leaned more towards cultivating a direct, deeper rapport with its audience. Rather than placing all its stakes on the volatile rhythms of platform algorithms, HuffPost diversified its approach, prioritizing audience loyalty and direct engagement. The divergent paths of BuzzFeed News and HuffPost, operating within the same national context, accentuate the intricate challenges media companies face in the digital age. Their stories underscore that, while navigating the labyrinthine online news ecosystem, a diversified, multi-pronged strategy, balancing both platform reach and direct audience engagement, proves crucial for sustainability. The journeys of these two media organizations poignantly reflect the broader lessons of adaptability and strategic foresight in the rapidly changing digital landscape.

1.3.2 Brut: a unique model for online news.

Brut, the media platform branded as "100% video", is a revolutionary take on today's media consumption habits. Available as a free mobile application on both iOS and Android, it provides a unique blend of news, live events, documentaries, and more. Some of its content is exclusively accessible through paid access, offering a blend of free and premium experiences. The app's intent is to curate a news feed specific to user interests, allowing users to even engage in live chats with creators and reporters. It is a one-stop platform offering reports, documentaries, podcasts, and live broadcasts. Brut emerges as a symbol of modern journalistic innovation. Hailing from France, this digital entity seamlessly combines traditional journalistic values with the dynamism of social media, crafting an entirely new paradigm in storytelling and audience engagement.

A shift in media consumption trends has been noted in the survey on the cultural practices of the French, conducted by the Ministry of Culture in 2020. While information consumption remains consistent across age groups, there's a notable rise in video as a medium of choice (Lombardo and Wolff, 2020: 28). Video news, specifically designed for social network dissemination, has become particularly popular in recent years. Brut, founded in 2016, rapidly emerged as the sector leader in France and ventured into live broadcasts using platforms like

Facebook Live. This initial domestic success paved the way for its expansion into the global market, including the US, India, UK, Mexico, China, and parts of Africa.

The growing prominence of Brut in the media landscape was further highlighted when President Emmanuel Macron chose the platform for an interview in December 2020. Until then, such media platforms, which predominantly target the 15-34 age group, were often overlooked, especially by traditional journalists. The choice by the presidential communication team to engage with Brut, which already boasted numbers in the millions for views and shares, underscores the growing significance and mainstream acceptance of this form of media.

With the rise of video content on social media platforms. In recent years, the media landscape has experienced a seismic shift. For millennials, these videos have now become the primary avenue for information consumption (Aubert, 2021; Lacroix, 2020). Brut's impressive portfolio boasts 30 videos created daily, drawing over 1 billion views per month from a staggering 250 million global viewers; the brand has effectively established its dominance with 10 million followers, active operations in 6 countries, and distribution reaching 60: Brut has now become one of the most influential brands in France, wielding significant influence over its audience (Lacroix, 2020).

In the vast landscape of online news, Brut emerged as a beacon of innovation. Their intuitive understanding of today's digital dynamics has led them to masterfully integrate a mobile-first approach that's deeply interwoven with the nuances of social media. Rather than just broadcasting information, they embed themselves within the online conversations that form the heartbeat of younger generations' digital experiences. What sets Brut's content apart is its impeccable design: it is concise, emotionally resonant, and tailored for the viral nature of our sharing age. They're not just targeting passive viewership; they are crafting stories that invite active participation and propagate through networks with organic fervour.

A distinguishing feature of this unique model is Brut's unwavering commitment to amplifying the often-muted voices. They traverse beyond the role of mere informers; they become facilitators, enabling individuals from diverse backgrounds to weave and share their own narratives. It is a refreshing departure from traditional news platforms; with Brut, the news feels less like a monologue and more like a community-driven dialogue. Opinions are welcomed, feedback is championed, and the lines between journalist and audience blur into a collaborative discourse.

At the heart of Brut's strategy is its commitment to authentic narratives. This commitment transcends conventional journalism—Brut isn't just a media house but a stage. It is a place where civil society doesn't just consume news but actively participates in its creation. As ordinary

individuals share their stories, Brut becomes a platform challenging societal norms and status quos (Aubert, 2021). The platform's astounding engagement metrics, with its billions of views and expansive global footprint, further cements its status as a digital juggernaut among millennials (Lacroix, 2020).

However, Brut's distinctiveness doesn't forsake the foundational pillars of journalism. They remain firmly anchored in the principles of editorial integrity. Behind the scenes, every story is subjected to rigorous checks and balances. While they ride the waves of online engagement, they ensure each piece of content stands robust against the tests of accuracy and truth. And, of course, the ever-present digital metrics play their role. As with any modern platform, the imperatives of engagement and revenue often intersect, pushing Brut to delicately balance virality with veracity.

By ensuring a careful blend of immediate news and enduring content, and implementing a rigorous validation process, Brut manages to combat the omnipresent shadow of misinformation. The undercurrent guiding Brut's *ethos* can be traced back to its French roots. French journalism, historically celebrated for its impeccable standards and advocacy-driven narratives, subtly influences Brut's philosophy. Although the platform takes a notably neutral stance, its commitment to amplifying marginalized voices echoes France's age-old journalistic tenets. This fusion of time-honored advocacy with contemporary neutrality represents a novel interpretation of journalistic purpose in the digital age.

Brut's format further underscores its unique position in the media realm—a harmonious midpoint between conventional journalism and social media. By imbibing the credibility and depth of traditional media and marrying it with the virality and interactivity of platforms like Twitter or Facebook, Brut crafts a symbiotic digital experience. This synthesis not only hints at the possible future trajectory of online news but also underscores the importance of a mobile-first consumption strategy, given the shifting preferences of today's audience. Brut's global success, transcending these cultural and geographical divides, is testament to its universal appeal. Its format resonates with audiences worldwide, showcasing that genuine narratives combined with meaningful engagement are universally sought after.

Yet, Brut's proximity to the social media realm does invite critique. The blend of journalistic content with social media's virality-centric algorithms raises questions about depth, credibility, and the risk of oversimplification. While these concerns resonate with the challenges faced by many digital outlets today, they underscore the fragile balance between maintaining journalistic integrity and catering to the digital consumption patterns of the modern audience. For now, Brut stands as a testament to journalism's adaptive journey in the digital era, as a novel archetype in the digital journalism realm. Their model harmoniously marries the immersive allure

of social media with the steadfast principles of traditional journalism. Its approach, successes, and challenges offer a panoramic view into the ongoing transformation of the news ecosystem, as it navigates the crosscurrents of technological progress, audience evolution, and the eternal essence of journalism. In their stride, Brut is redefining the benchmarks for online news, navigating the intricate dance between engagement and integrity with unparalleled grace.

1.3.3 The Canary: digital revolution?

The UK's media landscape has long been characterized by powerful newspapers and broadcast networks with deep-rooted histories and significant influence. Over the decades, this landscape has seen a consolidation of ownership, with a few major players dominating the media market. This concentration of media power has often led to critiques about a lack of diversity in voices, perspectives, and representation in mainstream media. Against this backdrop, The Canary was founded in 2015 by Kerry-Anne Mendoza and her wife Nancy Mendoza.

The website increased in popularity around the time of the 2017 United Kingdom general election. It was initially funded through a combination of advertising and a group of about 1500 supporters, but by 2020 had moved to a largely reader-funded model. According to the first, and former editor-in-chief, Kerry-Anne Mendoza, The Canary was created in October 2015 with five founding members in an attempt to “diversify the media” in the UK, building on their skepticism of the mainstream media (Daly, 2017).

The UK's political and social climate over the past decade, marked by events like the Brexit referendum and its aftermath, the rise of grassroots movements, and debates over issues like climate change, immigration, and economic inequality, created a fertile ground for alternative media. There's been a growing demand for media outlets that can offer narratives different from the mainstream, particularly those that challenge the status quo and give voice to the marginalized.

In January 2020, when we first started looking into The Canary, it stood as a distinct voice in the UK media system. Its premise, already radical, promised a fresh perspective contrasting with the dominant voices of the mainstream media. However, beneath its façade, The Canary mirrored much of the traditional media structure it critiqued: a top-down hierarchy with a distinct division between the directors and the journalists at the coalface. By October 2022, a significant shift occurred. The departure of one of the directors opened a Pandora's box of internal discrepancies, and in a move that seems poetically aligned with its outward-facing ethos, the workers staged a revolt (Connolly & Connolly, 2021; Apple and Topple, 2022). They transformed The Canary from a traditional, vertically structured organization into a cooperative — an entity run collaboratively by its workers. The news site's recent transition from a traditional hierarchical structure to a

worker-led cooperative signals a significant moment in its evolution (Figure 59) — albeit one with nuances that deserve careful examination.

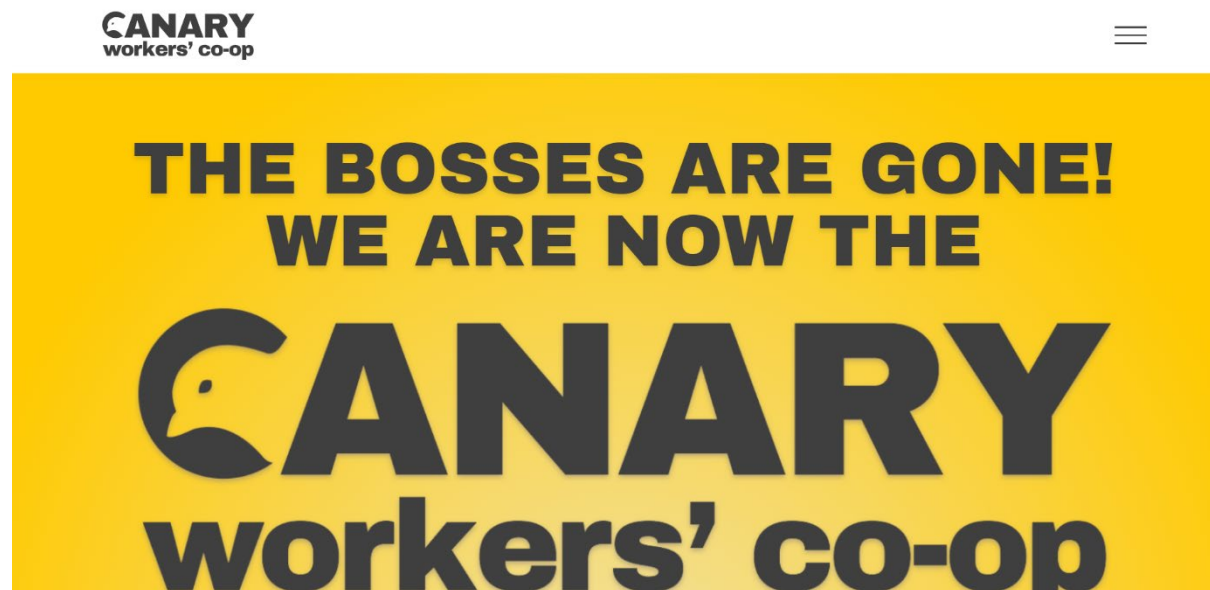


Figure 59 – Rebranding of the The Canary into a Co-op under the headline “The Bosses are Gone”.

At face value, this transformation might suggest a democratization not only of the organization’s internal workings but also of its journalistic practices. But a deeper look reveals that these are distinct domains. The Canary’s transformation highlights the inherent tension between the values espoused by alternative media and the economic pressures that sometimes push them into traditional capitalist structures. The restructuring represents a bold move in the realm of media ownership. In a world where the majority of media outlets operate under capitalist, top-down hierarchies, a worker-led cooperative stands out. This isn’t just an alternative structure but a symbolic, and perhaps radical, statement against the capitalist norm.

The media landscape, driven by profit margins and shareholder interests, can sometimes sideline stories that challenge the status quo or aren’t commercially viable. By positioning itself as anti-capitalist, The Canary inherently challenges this norm. This structure aligns The Canary more closely with its principles of challenging established power dynamics and advocating for the marginalized. Internally, this surely offers a sense of empowerment, shared responsibility, and collective ownership. For the journalists and staff, working in a cooperative provides a tangible experience of the principles they champion, fostering a stronger connection between the organization’s mission and its day-to-day operations.

For the readers and supporters of The Canary, this transition can enhance trust (Figure 60). Knowing that stories aren’t being written under a shadow of hierarchical editorial control or hidden financial motivations brings a new level of authenticity. The site’s transition to a worker-

led cooperative also reinforces its commitment to the principles it writes about, providing a beacon of hope for those who seek a more egalitarian and just media landscape.

4 October 2022 at 1:33 am

I'm all for people forming worker's cooperatives and wish that there were many more of these in the UK than there currently are. However, though you obviously had genuine grievances with your former directors/editors, I can't see that trashing them in a series of public articles serves any positive purpose whatsoever. Had you simply announced that you had become a worker's cooperative, I'd have thought "well done and good luck" and looked forward to what would come next, hoping that you would eventually become a shining example of what can be achieved when workers work together for a common goal. I still do think that, but the fact that you've felt the need to enroll your supporters in what sounds to me like a series of personal grievances exacerbated by some degree of mismanagement has left me feeling like an unwilling witness to the last days of a messy and ugly divorce. Good luck to you all. I won't be continuing on the journey with you.

[Log in to Reply](#) [Report comment](#)

4 October 2022 at 7:37 am

I am in total disagreement with the previous commentator. As a fairly long term subscriber to the Canary, always grateful for my daily dose of truth and facts dragged out from behind the MSM smokescreen, I think there's no better way to turn over a new leaf than to bring to readers' attention the truth behind the recent overhaul of this trusted independent journal. If you hadn't provided this truth, I'd obviously have been blissfully unaware, but I no longer feel comfortable with blissful ignorance in this world of deceit, lies and corruption so your approach has enhanced my support because I now trust the Canary even more than I did previously to "keep it real". All of us can behave in ways that we know aren't according to our expressed ethos, so it's good to bring this to light without naming and shaming, necessarily. Otherwise, we show ourselves up as hypocrites, ultimately, and arguably even worse than the Capitalists we are fighting against. So, upwards and onwards – fly high, bird of truth!

[Log in to Reply](#) [Report comment](#)

Figure 60 – Comments from supporters of The Canary in the change into a co-op.

However, while the shift to a cooperative model is groundbreaking in terms of governance, it didn't usher in a change in the business model. The supporter-based system, with its ad-free experience for members, predates the internal upheaval and remains consistent, even though this system, by their own account, faced management challenges (Anderson, 2022).

Moreover, in terms of journalistic practices, The Canary's approach hasn't seen the same level of revolutionary change. The Canary's transformation into a worker-led cooperative symbolizes a marked shift in media ownership, particularly in its embrace of horizontal organizational structures. This approach, at a glance, might be interpreted as a transition towards a more participatory and inclusive model, allowing for greater interaction, feedback, and collaboration between the news platform and its audience. Delving deeper, the reality appears more nuanced. While the organizational structure has become horizontal, their journalistic practices remain rooted in traditional paradigms.

Despite their revolutionary change in governance, The Canary has retained a clear delineation between professional journalists and the general public. In January 2021, at the time Editor-and-Chief, Drew Rose, was direct in saying "We don't use UGC". In this, he meant that the core content — the journalistic articles and main stories — of the news site are produced by

professional journalists and not by the general public (Drew Rose, January 2021)¹²³. In this sense, they are maintaining a distinction between professional journalism and content contributed by the broader public, a policy that has been maintained under the news organizational format of the company.

Yet, The Canary often incorporated content from social media in their stories. While we consider this to be a form of use of UGC, The Canary viewed these inclusions as supplementary or illustrative, rather than core to their journalistic mission. Under the cooperative, UGC seems to have vanished in the sense of incorporating social media content to help illustrate their stories. Still, The Canary did have and continues to have comment sections, where their supporters, by contributing and sharing their opinions, inadvertently create their own content on the news site.

The Canary's strategy evokes questions about the true essence of participation in the media landscape. The Canary does strive to amplify marginalized voices, but this amplification is filtered through their mediation, a form of gatekeeping that echoes conventional journalistic norms. The concept of participation here is more about representation and the diversity of perspectives in stories, rather than directly including the public in the storytelling process. Nonetheless, the news site's journey underscores the complexities inherent in media reform. Adopting a cooperative structure is undoubtedly revolutionary in terms of governance. Still, it does not necessarily imply an overhaul in journalistic methodologies or business strategies. Their stance, particularly on UGC, reinforces their commitment to professional journalism while navigating the challenges and opportunities presented by modern media dynamics.

2. From the Inside Out: The User-Media Dynamic

After studying the user-media company relationship in 80 news sites from eight countries, we find ourselves asking the question, in the end, what is the point of engagement (participation, User-Generated Content)? Does the difference between engagement and participation matter in the daily practice of online journalism? In theory, yes; but in the practice of news sites, from the perspective of media organizations, it seems to matter very little, beyond the fact that promoting actual participation seems to be far more work than just providing the tools and spaces for the audience to engage online.

Engagement and participation are essential to reader relationships in journalism because they help to create a sense of connection and community between the news organization and its audience. Engagement refers to the level of interaction and involvement that readers have with

¹²³ Drew Rose is former Editor-in-Chief of The Canary. Exchanges via email were conducted with the journalist in April 2021. This is the only instance where statements and information from the exchanges with Mr. Rose are used.

the news organization and its content, while participation refers to the degree to which readers actively participate and contribute to the news organization's work.

When readers are engaged with a news organization, they are more likely to be interested and invested in its mission and work. They are also more likely to be loyal to the organization and be willing to financially support it. Engagement can be fostered through a variety of strategies such as providing engaging and relevant content, interactive features, and opportunities for readers to provide feedback and contribute to the news organization's work.

Participation, on the other hand, goes one step further and allows readers to actively contribute to the news organization's work. This could be through things like submitting letters to the editor, participating in polls and surveys, or even contributing to the news organization's reporting through crowdsourced information. When readers participate in this way, they feel more connected to the organization and more invested in its mission and work.

Engagement and participation also play a crucial role in building trust and credibility between the news organization and its audience. When readers are actively engaged and participating, they are more likely to trust the organization and believe in its mission. This is because they have a sense of ownership and investment in the organization's work. All that makes it so engagement and participation become essential to reader relationships in journalism because they help to create a sense of connection and community between the news organization and its audience. They foster loyalty, promote trust, and increase the willingness of readers to financially support the organization.

The difference between the concepts may seem thin in practice, but it plays a factor when you consider news organizations are facing a delicate balance between *public interest* and *interest of the public*, between journalistic logic and business logic (Masip et al., 2015). If the balance opts for the second, the democratic function of journalism's public service is unraveled and with it one of its normative pillars (Ruiz et al., 2011). But journalism, and the changes the profession has faced, have been in the context of a capitalist society, as the modes of production associated with capitalism have transformed the journalist's profession by recategorizing news as a product.

The current mode of organization of journalistic vehicles as companies interferes with the transformation of facts of social interest into news, and what approach they take to make them interesting for the *presumed* audience of the news organizations, through the hierarchy of information and the choice of criteria for reporting (Fonseca, 2008). The conflict between social function and market interests is deeply rooted in journalism, as it is an important part of its development process. While the social function is essential for journalism to exist as a part of democratic society, companies need to maintain public interest with market strategies that are

guided by financial and non-social interests. There is a decline in the news as the expression of journalism – understood as current, relevant, and public interest information – and the rise of the idea of information, the provision of services and entertainment. The dominant capitalist logic in the journalistic business causes changes in the criteria of news. The criteria of relevance and public interest give way to those of *interest to the public*. (Fonseca, 2008)

The structural changes in the media, in the productive routine and in professional activities are due to the different stages of capitalism and the respective hegemonic accumulation regimes in each period: therefore, as a new cycle emerges in the capitalism, a new conception would be taking shape, waiting for identification and characterization (Fonseca, 2008). Therefore, the changes in the journalistic industry that have been occurring since the last decades of the 20th century and that were accentuated at the beginning of the 21st century are reflections of the current stage of capitalism, post-industrial, added to the boiling of the new technologies of communication and information.

The organization of post-industrial journalistic production is characterized by the multimedia standard, the segmentation of editorial content and the new profile of the journalist in the communication conglomerates (Fonseca, 2008). It is entrenched in the context of digital capitalism, in which economic and social activity is centered on the exchange of digital information using data networks. Data becomes the most important commodity and internet becomes a meta structure of the digital economy, with the web being the backbone of all services within the network economy. This correlates to three significant changes in business and distribution models' journalism has been experiencing in the past two decades: the switch from analogue to digital, the rise of social networks on the internet, and now the domain of smartphones (Bell and Owen, 2017). In this last phase, it has been shaken by the dominance of social networking platforms and technology companies, which hold a large part of the advertisers' revenue.

The adoption of participation mechanisms by media organizations is fully consolidated (Domingo, 2008; Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Masip and Suau, 2014). The introduction of the opinions and evaluations of the users, as well as the sending of their own informative materials or other forms of interactivity are already a characteristic of the media on the internet, which have incorporated participation as part of a broader strategy. The media admit various forms of participation by readers, identifying great differences between the different models used by the media (Deuze, 2001; Masip and Suau, 2014). The choice of participation mechanisms and other issues such as moderation controls established on the content provided by users, are conscious decisions that are related to the objectives and the personality of the organization.

As media organizations continuously promote participation, they tend to prioritize the economic benefits it can generate (Vujnović et al., 2010), in attempts to retain the audience through technological solutions (Chyi and Lee, 2013), paying little attention to the audience as a public beyond the data offered by web analytics, which are not few. The progressive reduction of the audience to quantitative data affects the foundations of journalistic culture and the decision-making of journalists themselves (Anderson, 2011). As a result of this new relationship with the audience, mediated by metrics, in the trial to determine what is news and what is not, the wishes of the readers are increasingly important; but demarcates a logical change in the profession from a focus on public interest to the *interest of the public* (Masip, 2016).

Understanding how to reach audiences, how to keep them, and how to thread each piece of journalism through a complex maze of different sites and applications has fundamentally changed the way newsrooms operate (Dahlgren, 2010; Hayes et al., 2007). There is an extraordinary transfer of control from the sender to the receiver. This opens the way for a communication that we could call self-centric, since it is based on the individual decisions of the recipient, given the huge range of options that the internet opens to him. Communication becomes self-centered because I have access only to what I want, when I want it, in the format I want it and where I want it – audiences begin to consume information from anywhere, in any way, and in any space. It goes from a model based exclusively on supply, to a model that focuses on demand. Users determine what to consume, how and where. Mobility and interactivity mark media consumption. Faced with changing media use, media companies need to innovate to remain profitable (McCluskey and Hmielowski, 2012; Carpes da Silva and Sanseverino, 2020).

The public may find it easier to participate in a plurality of channels and platforms, being able to demand to be heard or claim their own spaces; while news organizations rethink and renew their practices, though still being able to choose how, when, and where to engage their audience. But as we often question why the potential of User-Generated Content for news production is not explored by media outlets, we do have to ask: does the general public actually want to routinely contribute? Various investigations have shown that audiences are less active than imagined (Purcell et al., 2010, Bergström, 2008; van Dijk, 2009; Suau, 2015; Masip et al., 2015; Guallar et al., 2016), especially when participation requires a greater degree of commitment.

The public that determines how, where and what information is desired. From this autonomy, new projects emerge that prioritize the participation of the public, sometimes as a matter of survival and others, although rarely, because we understand that the public's involvement is directly related to the demands of a contemporary society. Studies have shown that a minority of users actually participate and contribute with their own content (Karlson et. al 2015). Audiences

on news sites are hesitant to produce material in a journalistic context (Bergström 2008; Chung 2008). There has been speculation to why that is, from the reluctance of the audience to give up on this role of consumer to the matter that news has been a traditionally and exclusively attributed as journalists' job (Chisholm, 2004; Hujanen and Pietikäinen, 2004; Roscoe, 1999). We can ponder if newsrooms' continuous and successful embrace of UGC will help them build trust with their public and encourage the audience to contribute.

The culture of participation in contemporary society is not yet as present a practice as one might imagine, there seems to be more discourse than effective participation. This is due to the digital divide, the excess of information and demands for participation in various networks, in addition to aspects related to the asymmetric power relations that have permeated the history of communication between social groups.

Going on twenty years, digital journalism brought hope in making the media more democratic with the proliferation of web diaries, as a full interaction of the internet user was promised that would transform him into a producer of the news. Today, the exchange of communication and the inversion of roles between consumers and producers of news rarely occurs in digital newspapers, contrary to what cyberspace theorists professed. However, the impact of advanced communication technologies was reflected in the productive routines of all mass media, and digital newspapers evolved despite the resistance of most of them in relation to interactivity.

If we are honest, with more than 20 years of journalism done on the web and news organizations, they still have not found a way to *fully* interact and create a *meaningful* relationship with the user. And perhaps that is not something that they want. Limited spaces of participation tend to be more convenient, less work, but still provide financial return. Perhaps for now that is enough and new practices will only emerge when the dependence on engaging the user for financial sustainability becomes ever more pressing. Of course, there are experiences that are worth highlighting; but engaging the public and including it in journalistic process beyond the usual is not a trend amongst new sites but pointed practices from a few organizations – and they all do it differently.

Participation remains, in its majority, a *promise*, far more than a reality. Twenty years ago, digital journalism brought hope to make the media more democratic with the proliferation of newspapers on the web, as it was promised a full interaction of the user that would turn him into a producer. Today, the exchange of communication and the reversal of roles between consumers and news producers rarely occurs. Over the last two decades news providers have been forced to reconsider their methods of encouraging audience participation. Although all media nowadays allow forms of user participation on their websites, large differences can be identified between the

different models of participation pursued by each medium. The choice of participatory mechanisms and other issues such as the degree of the users' control over their own content, and the existing conditions for registration and personalization, are conscious decisions that are related to the organizations own objectives and personality.

As it comes down to, though we did see notable initiatives, that were highlighted in this thesis for their interesting approaches to participation, User-Generated Content and audience engagement; what we must outline is how much the pervasive logic of digital capitalism in a globalized scenario becomes determinant for the priorities of news organizations, despite their own discourses that public interest at the theoretical forefront of their journalistic initiatives. Cross-national differences, which were to be expected, did present in a historical context of the profession and the organizations own professional logic and practice of journalism; however, when it came to their relationships with the public, you could see how Western tradition and the globalization of online practices marked their tactics to handling the user. That is, using basic tools like share buttons, comment sections and newsletters. that have the same simple objective: engaging the user and gaining their loyalty as a customer. In an attempt to win back and/or expand their audience, communication entrepreneurs take the changes in their surroundings more seriously, seeking to adapt and even create some ideas that attract the user. However, their concern for the public can be summed up in a central interest: profit.

Though we recognize and understand the duality of journalism as a service and find it fitting to the current context of the profession, the logic that dictates the relationship with the user tends to come far more from the view of journalism as product to be sold, than as a public service that needs to be provided for the *comings and goings* of a democratic society. We have no solution for that; and though it is, of course, in many ways a criticism of the journalistic industry as it stands, how could it be any different? – when financial sustainability is a must, in a scenario dictated by big digital platforms, large media conglomerates, the precarity of digital labor and still more questions than answers when it comes to regulation and governmental interference.

We live in a world of codependent middle ground: the ideal of participation and the pressure of financial survival face-off as journalistic companies attempt to survive. Journalism works both from the point of view of public service and under the interests of the business, in what Traquina (2020) calls ideological and economic poles. The economic pole's motivations do not always delineate the publication of socially useful or relevant news. The economic pole defines the journalistic company as an industry subordinated to profit, deepening the character of news as a commodity. The paradox is that journalism as a business, despite being governed by the logic of private interest, is endorsed by the public that consumes it as the guardian of information of public

interest. Companies use this mandate to, in the name of the citizen's interests, select the information and narrate it, defining who would be able to speak and the parameters of what would be socially relevant.

We argue that User-Generated Content, seen as a contribution from the audience to the organization's journalistic practices, can become a part of building a relationship with you audience, but we recognize that placing that *you* inside the logic of the organization can take many forms and they don't have to mean calling for contributions. We defend that when you give a voice to your public, that should have a purpose, a meaning, beyond the marketing and benefit values that can appear when you open a comment section or do stories about popular memes on social networks – not that this doesn't have an important merit when it comes to financial survival; but does it matter when earning the loyalty of your public? Only if you use it right. And that doesn't mean innovation, third party moderators and state of the art AI. It means listening, interacting, and making the voices be heard.

In practice, we have seen that engagement is more common in online journalism than participation. Online news organizations often focus on increasing engagement by providing interactive features such as commenting, voting, and social media sharing, to encourage readers to spend more time on their sites, interact with the content and come back for more. This is especially true for news websites and social media platforms, where users can directly interact with the news content.

Participation, on the other hand, is less common in online journalism, as it requires a different type of engagement from the audience, it is more about empowering citizens to actively participate in the democratic process by giving them a voice in the news. It is a way for the audience to be part of the news-making process, rather than just consuming it. However, some online news organizations have started to incorporate ways for readers to contribute their own perspectives and information, such as through crowdsourcing or User-Generated Content, which can be seen as a form of participation.

From the point of view of news organizations, it is worth noting that it is not that one is better than the other, but rather that both engagement and participation are important for the survival and viability of online journalism, as they can help to increase the reach and impact of news, foster a more engaged and active readership, and provide valuable feedback and insights for journalists. But is there a way forward for engagement and participation in journalism that advances beyond what technology makes possible, that defies what's comfortable for newsrooms and its established practices, that manages to survive crushing financial demands and puts the public first?

Take The Intercept Brasil, one of the organizations we studied that uses User-Generated Content in an incredibly meaningful way for storytelling and truly turns the public into part of their journalism. It continues to use the resources of the newsletter, as well as their social networking pages, to ask for users who follow them for money. The access to their content is free – as they believe in the current context information such be easily available to all, and they don't use adds – to be accountable, as they say only to the truth, so they depend on crowdfunding to keep afloat, and currently they exist in a month-to-month basis, not knowing if they will continue to be able to stay open. Here they are, opening a space for true public participation, but why is that not enough for their financial survival?

We have other outlets who also depend exclusively on the public for financial survival, though they put up paywalls and work on a membership basis. Mediapart from France and Krautreporter from Germany, for example, have proven able to maintain financial sustainability, be free from advertising, and give space for their members to participate in their journalism, though in different manners. On the other hand, The Correspondent, which proposed to be a global news organization, based on a membership model, had to close its doors, despite their bold approach to member participation, which is quite similar to the one from Krautreporter. So why do some organizations thrive while others struggle and fail? It has to do with the national context they are inserted, the political and economic climate, their history and tradition... factors that go beyond the relationship they propose with their public. While internal factors provide valuable insights into user-media company relationships, they offer an incomplete picture. External factors, especially those tied to national settings, play a pivotal role in shaping this relationship and understanding the broader media landscape.

The online news ecosystem, though universal in many aspects, is deeply influenced by the national settings in which media organizations operate. As we transition from understanding the foundational internal factors – like the inherent nature of the media organization, its business model, and the place of the user, as well as engagement channels like comment sections and newsletters – it is evident that these alone don't suffice to comprehensively gauge the intricate relationship between users and media companies. Especially when our *corpus* of study encompasses countries, predominantly Western, that have each navigated globalization, modernity, and capitalism in distinct ways.

These countries – the UK, US, Netherlands, Germany, France, Spain, Brazil, and Argentina – though sharing many commonalities in their media landscapes, are also distinct in terms of their historical, cultural, and political nuances. These subtleties play a crucial role in influencing media consumption patterns, trust dynamics, and overall engagement. While internal

factors provide foundational insights, the broader context in which these media organizations operate plays a role that cannot be overshadowed.

CHAPTER 11

EXTERNAL FACTORS OF RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN USER & MEDIA COMPANY

While internal dynamics are pivotal, they exist in a larger ecosystem of external influences. This chapter flips our perspective, focusing on the external factors that affect the media-user relationship. Through a critical look of the tools, features and spaces used for engagement and participation in our *corpus*, we examined different news organizations and their approaches to financial sustainability and user interactions. We understand that while some thrive, others struggle and fail due to various aspects that touch *precisely* on their national contexts, and go beyond their internal factors, such as their nature or business models; their choices regarding the usual strategies for engagement (comment sections, newsletters, and share buttons).

Thus, considering the complex online news ecosystem, our *corpus* of study, and the analytical work from previous chapters, we determined **six factors**¹²⁴ that can be relevant to why the national context of a media organization matters to its relationship with the audience/public: 1) **Government Regulations** (Sehl, 2021; Freedom House, 2020; Newman et. al, 2020); 2) **Language** (Jankowski and van Selm, 2006; Shaver and Bock, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2019); 3) **Cultural Relevance** (Hanusch, 2018; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; American Press Institute, 2014); 4) **Revenue** (Picard, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2020); 5) **Audience Loyalty** (Reich and Nirel, 2020; Chen and Satterthwaite, 2019; Newman et. al, 2020); and 6) **Niche Market** (Ahmed and Rafiq, 2018; McKinsey and Company, 2019). These external factors to media companies influence not only the content creation and dissemination strategies, but also affect the relationship with their audiences/public.

These six external factors are not just arbitrary choices; they are rooted in empirical evidence and scholarly works that highlight their influence on media-user dynamics. The rationale for the choice of these six external factors, which we believe play a crucial role in shaping user-media company's relationships, are:

- **Government Regulations:** The operating landscape of any media organization is substantially determined by the regulations set forth by its governing bodies. Such regulations can either foster a thriving media environment or curtail freedom, affecting user trust and engagement. Regulations either bolster or impede a

¹²⁴ For the purpose of this work, we outlined these six factors with the goal of orienting our research and understanding when differences between countries can matter for participation and engagement, without the intention to study in-depth each factor in particular. We note that the relationship between each of these factors and media companies can be a rich and interesting point of further study.

transparent media-user relationship (Sehl, 2021; Freedom House, 2020; Newman et. al, 2020).

- **Language:** In a digital world, language is more than a medium of communication; it is an identity. The choice of language in content determines reach, inclusivity, and relevance. Language not only dictates audience demographics but also influences content interpretation, thereby shaping media-user dynamics (Jankowski and van Selm, 2006; Shaver and Bock, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2019).
- **Cultural Relevance:** The significance of aligning content with cultural norms and values cannot be overstated. A media entity's understanding and acknowledgment of its audience's culture often dictate the depth of its engagement and resonance with its audience (Hanusch, 2018; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; American Press Institute, 2014).
- **Revenue:** The financial model underpinning a media entity has profound implications on its content and strategies. Whether they rely on subscription models, ads, or paywalls, these choices influence user accessibility, content quality, and ultimately, trust. There is a direct link between revenue models and user engagement levels (Picard, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2020).
- **Audience Loyalty:** In an era of information overload, loyalty isn't just desired, it is crucial. Media organizations thrive on returning users, and their strategies are often tailored to foster such loyalty (Reich and Nirel, 2020; Chen and Satterthwaite, 2019; Newman et. al, 2020).
- **Niche Market:** With the rise of specialized content domains, targeting niche markets has become a strategic move for many media organizations. By serving content tailored to specific audience segments, media entities can foster deeper engagement and establish themselves as authoritative voices in their domains (Ahmed and Rafiq, 2018; McKinsey and Company, 2019).

These factors can impact a news organization's ability to reach and engage with audiences, as well as their financial viability. Government regulations and language can affect a news organization's capacity to operate and communicate with audiences outside of their national borders. Cultural relevance can impact the audience's interest in the news and information being produced. Revenue is crucial for the survival of news organizations, and focusing on a profitable national market can ensure financial stability. Audience loyalty can also impact revenue, as loyal

audiences are more likely to subscribe or engage with advertising. Finally, focusing on a specific niche market within the national market can allow news organizations to differentiate themselves and appeal to a specific audience, which can help them stand out in a crowded market. Of course, there may be other factors that are important to consider depending on the specific news organization and market, however these six factors were chosen to be highlighted in this work because they were aspects that became evident throughout our research process that cross the different news organizations and markets that composed our *corpus*.

1. Government regulations

Digital news platforms around the world are influenced by national government regulations, cultural tendencies, historical backgrounds, and individual media company policies. The way countries regulate, and mediate online discourse offers insights into their core values and priorities. National government regulations can have a significant impact on user participation in news sites, particularly when it comes to issues related to free speech, privacy, and online security. not adequately protected. This makes the relationship between national government regulations and user participation in news sites complex and they can vary widely depending on the specific regulatory environment. While regulations aimed at protecting the public from harmful or illegal content can be beneficial, they must be balanced against the need to promote free speech and public participation, which are essential components of a healthy and vibrant democracy.

Countries have different legislations regarding free speech, some establishing clear limits to what you are allowed to say or not in the public sphere, while others have very few restrictions, if any. Freedom of expression is a human right protected by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and by the constitutions of several democratic countries. It concerns the right of everyone to freely express opinions, ideas, and personal thoughts without fear of retaliation or censorship by the government or other members of society. This ideal, however, has found legal limit in many countries in speech characterized as hateful. In the option of criminalizing or not hate speech, the debate arises of what constitutes censorship, and of the legality of imposing limits on speech – and each country has the right to opt how to act.

In the **United States**, the First Amendment of the Constitution forms the cornerstone of media operations. Publications balance fostering discussions and adhering to legal limitations, such as avoiding incitement to violence. Although the Constitution offers protection, private entities, including media organizations, can define boundaries for user interactions in their online spaces (Napoli, 2001). The **UK** promotes free speech but not without caveats, especially concerning hate

speech or defamation. Consequently, its digital platforms reflect a mix of free expression and user safety (Curran and Seaton, 2018).

France intertwines its commitment to human rights with a focus on societal harmony. Drawing a line between free speech and hate speech, the country has criminalized hate expressions. This mandates online platforms to ensure content moderation reflects the nation's cultural and historical legacy (Zeldin, 1980). In **Spain**, the constitutional right to free expression has limitations. The nation's past brushes with authoritarianism inform a cautious approach to online discourse, especially in sensitive political areas (Closa and Heywood, 2004).

Germany's Nazi history has informed its stringent laws against hate speech. This vigilant approach underscores the nation's awareness of the dire implications of unchecked hate online (Bauböck and Tripkovic, 2017). In the **Netherlands**, liberal values coexist with a cautionary approach to hate speech. Dutch platforms reflect this synthesis, promoting extensive discussions within clearly defined limits (Vasta, 2007).

Brazil treads a more precarious path. While the Federal Constitution of 1988 enshrines press freedom and expression, journalists often navigate a perilous environment. The country's regulations emphasize the responsibilities accompanying free speech, particularly concerning racial or religious sentiments (Segato, 2007). Finally, **Argentina's** media landscape, though constitutionally protected, shows tensions between the government and media entities. Its platforms reflect this dynamic, advocating for open debate while maintaining a careful distance from potential government backlash (Waisbord, 2002).

However, beyond explicit government regulations, the broader legal landscape in which these platforms operate often exerts a more profound influence. Media platforms globally are continually wary of legal pitfalls like defamation. For instance, if a user's comment on a news site defames an individual or an entity, the platform can potentially be held legally responsible, leading to significant financial and reputational costs. The European Union's GDPR serves as an exemplary case of how legal frameworks, even those not explicitly targeting media, can reshape user engagement strategies. GDPR's stringent data protection mandates mean platforms have to be extra careful about how user data, even in comments or user-generated content, is managed and shared. Furthermore, intellectual property concerns, potential misleading endorsements in user comments, and broader privacy concerns drive platforms to adopt proactive moderation stances. The legal costs associated with any potential infringement can be monumental, not just in terms of immediate financial implications but also in the longer-term loss of user trust and platform reputation.

For example, The New York Times' management of its comment sections is informed by both its commitment to promoting constructive discussion among its users and its legal obligations under the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, which protects free speech: "the Times seeks to promote a culture of robust debate and engagement among its readers, and it encourages comments that express a range of perspectives and opinions, even if they are critical of the Times or its reporting. This approach reflects the Times' commitment to upholding the principles of free speech and open dialogue, while also maintaining a constructive and respectful environment for readers to engage with the news" (Nicole Taylor¹²⁵, March 2021).

Free speech laws in the United States generally protect individuals' right to express their opinions without censorship or restraint from the government. However, this protection does not necessarily extend to private entities such as news organizations that operate online comment sections. News sites can create rules and guidelines for comment sections and have the authority to moderate or remove comments that violate these rules. While users have the right to express their opinions, they must do so within the parameters set by the news site: "the Times may take steps to protect its reputation and brand, these efforts are typically aligned with its broader commitment to upholding the principles of free speech and open dialogue." (Nicole Taylor, March 2021). A comment that violates the rules will be removed, but without infringing on the commenter's free speech rights. While government regulations define the basic structure of this landscape in each country, the shadow of potential legal repercussions often looms larger, compelling media platforms to adopt moderation policies that might sometimes be more restrictive than what government regulations alone might mandate.

2. Language

Language is the primary medium through which information, ideas, and culture are communicated. Different languages carry distinct cultural nuances and perspectives, shaping the way news is presented and understood. In a global context, language diversity can both facilitate and hinder effective news dissemination. While a single news story can reach a wider audience when translated into multiple languages, linguistic barriers can also limit the reach and impact of news, particularly if the target audience is not proficient in the language of the news source. In the ever-evolving landscape of global news dissemination, the language factor stands as a pivotal cross-national consideration that significantly impacts the outreach and influence of news organizations.

¹²⁵ Nicole Taylor is the Director for External Communications of the New York Times. Exchanges were conducted with Ms. Taylor via email from March 2021. Her statements will be used throughout this thesis from this point forward, always between quotations mark, and, if necessary, information she provided will followed by the reference (Nicole Taylor, March 2021).

The decision to produce content in a specific language carries both advantages and challenges, shaping the organization’s ability to connect with diverse audiences worldwide.

2.1 Nuances of Language in a Cross-National News Landscape

In the rapidly globalizing world of digital media, the age-old adage, “lost in translation,” takes on a profound significance. As news organizations stretch their wings beyond borders, they find themselves navigating the intricate web of languages. This web is not just about words, but also the cultural, historical, and societal stories those words tell. The relationship between media platforms and their audience is delicately intertwined with linguistic nuances, especially in diverse nations. By delving deep into countries like the US, UK, Spain, France, Germany, Netherlands, Brazil, and Argentina (Table 47), we uncover the complexities and subtleties of language. Language, in its myriad forms and contexts, influences participation, shapes engagement, and molds perceptions in the digital news sphere across different nations.

Table 47 – Dominant Language in Countries of the Corpus.

Country	Dominant Language
US	English (significant Spanish-speaking population)
UK	English
Spain	Spanish
France	French
Germany	German
Netherlands	Dutch (with English & German proficiency)
Brazil	Portuguese
Argentina	Spanish

To capture a cross-national perspective on how language intricacies shape the media landscape specifically in the context of the US, UK, Spain, France, Germany, Netherlands, Brazil, and Argentina, we outlined four elements that help elucidate various language nuances:

- **Linguistic Diversity & News Consumption:** This column assesses the variety of languages spoken in each country and how this influences news content production

and consumption. It provides insight into the multi-linguistic challenges or benefits that media organizations might face. For instance, in the US, news outlets not only cater to a predominantly English-speaking audience but also to a significant Spanish-speaking demographic. In contrast, countries like Spain have an added layer of regional languages, such as Catalan, further affecting the media landscape.

- **Colloquialisms & Dialects:** Every language isn't just monolithic; it consists of regional variations, idioms, and slang that can differ substantially from one region to another. This column delves into those unique regional flavors within each country's dominant language. For instance, the UK, though predominantly English-speaking, has rich dialectal diversity ranging from Cockney to Geordie, which media outlets might use to resonate more with local audiences.
- **Cultural Connotations:** Language isn't just about words; it is about the weight, history, and emotion those words carry. This column highlights the deeper cultural, historical, or socio-political meanings certain terms or phrases might have in each country. For instance, in Germany, words might carry connotations rooted in post-WWII nuances or the East-West German distinctions, nuances that media must be aware of to communicate effectively.
- **Translation & Localization:** As news sites aim for global reach, the challenge isn't just about translating words but localizing content to fit cultural and social norms of the target audience. This column reflects how each country deals with the challenge of making foreign news relevant and understandable to its local population. For instance, in Argentina, the unique form of Spanish spoken, influenced by Italian and local history, requires tailored translation and localization strategies.

By understanding these nuances, one gains insight into the multifaceted challenges and opportunities media organizations face in resonating with their diverse audiences. Table 48 provides a condensed yet comprehensive snapshot of the intricate connections between language and media in the countries of our *corpus*.

Table 48 – The four elements to Understand Language Nuances illustrated by the context of eight countries of our corpus.

Country	News Consumption	Colloquialisms & Dialects	Cultural Connotations	Translations & Localization
US	English and Spanish content due to Spanish-	Vast regional variations: Southern English,	Influences from immigration, civil rights, regional	Catering to specific Hispanic communities like

	speaking population	MidWestern dialects, Northeastern accents, West Coast speech patterns	distinctions, pop culture	Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban; local references
UK	Primarily English	Rich dialectal diversity: Cockney, West Country, Scouse, Geordie	Colonial history, class distinctions, regional variations (English, Welsh, Scottish contexts)	Adding global references given British culture's widespread influence
Spain	Spanish with regional languages like Catalan	Regional languages/dialects: Catalan, Basque, Galician	Regional distinctions: Castilian vs. Catalan or Basque; Moorish influence	Localization for regional languages and cultural nuances
France	Primarily French	Parisian French vs. regional variations like Provençal, Breton	Literary and philosophical traditions, colonial history	Consideration for French societal norms, history, culture
Germany	Primarily German	High German (Hochdeutsch) vs. regional dialects like Bavarian, Low German	Post-WWII nuances, East-West German distinctions	References to German history, culture, societal values
Netherlands	Dutch with many English versions	Standard Dutch vs. regional dialects like West Flemish, Limburgish	Trading history, colonial past, European crossroads influence	Focus on cultural localization given high English proficiency
Brazil	Primarily Portuguese	Brazilian Portuguese vs. regional variations (e.g., São Paulo vs. Rio)	Indigenous influences, Portuguese colonial history, regional variations	Diverse cultural tapestry of Brazil: Carnival to Amazonian influences
Argentina	Primarily Spanish	Rioplatense Spanish with Lunfardo slang, Italian influences	Indigenous influences, Spanish colonization, political/economic histories	Argentine Spanish uniqueness, with Italian influence and local history

In the digital realm of media, understanding the intricacies of language is tantamount to grasping the very pulse of an audience. The words we use and the contexts in which we use them

hold the power to either bridge divides or deepen them. In the ever-globalizing world of news dissemination, several linguistic facets, intricately intertwined with socio-cultural underpinnings, shape the relationship between media companies and their users (Couldry, 2018).

One of these facets is the broad linguistic diversity and the subsequent patterns of news consumption. In areas rich in linguistic diversity, news platforms often grapple with the challenge of catering to both dominant and minority language groups (Downie, Mihelj and Koenig, 2012). Ignoring this diversity could alienate significant portions of the potential audience. Yet, while reaching an audience is one challenge, truly resonating with them is another. This is where the play of colloquialisms and dialects comes in. Regional variations in language can either add a local flavor or, when misused, alienate those outside the region (Bell, 1991).

Digging deeper into the language, we find words layered with cultural connotations—meanings and emotions rooted in a nation's collective memory and history. Media organizations tread a tightrope here; the power of a single term, laden with historical or cultural weight, can significantly shape the reception of a message (Hall, 1997). Lastly, as news organizations venture into global territories, the twin challenges of translation and localization surface. It is not enough to merely translate words; the essence of a message, molded by culture, values, and norms, must be transported intact (Bielsa and Bassnett, 2009).

Navigating the labyrinth of language nuances is both an art and a science for media organizations. Beyond mere words, language serves as a vessel for culture, history, and shared human experience. As media ventures further into the digital age, building bridges with audiences will depend on not just speaking their language, but understanding the stories those words tell. Only by respecting and celebrating these intricacies can media foster genuine, lasting connections in an increasingly globalized world (Thussu, 2009).

2.2 Language and localities

The inclination of news organizations to focus their efforts on producing content in a single language, often tied to their national origins, arises from a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and practical factors. These factors collectively shape the manner in which news is disseminated and absorbed within a specific linguistic context.

Many news organizations have their origins deeply rooted in specific countries or cultural contexts, evolving as localized or national entities catering to the information needs of their immediate communities. Despite the evolution brought by technology and global communication, the core commitment to their national audiences and languages remains unwavering.

The prioritization of the primary audience, those within the country of origin, is a natural course for news organizations. By delivering news in the language commonly spoken by the majority of their readership, these organizations cater to the immediate preferences and requirements of their core audience. This linguistic alignment ensures that news directly resonates with the individuals it aims to inform.

The cultural relevance of news cannot be separated from the language in which it is presented. Producing news in a specific language allows news organizations to weave in cultural nuances and local perspectives seamlessly. These subtleties often fail to translate accurately, underscoring the necessity of language alignment to offer authentic and pertinent news coverage that connects with local readers.

However, the pursuit of multilingual news production necessitates substantial resources, including translation services, multilingual staff, and technology infrastructure. Smaller news organizations, particularly those with a community focus, may grapple with effectively allocating these resources to accommodate multiple languages. For many, the primary objective remains serving the immediate needs of their communities.

In the competitive realm of news media, differentiation is pivotal. News organizations often establish their distinctiveness by offering unique perspectives, expertise, or coverage angles. Focusing on content linked to their national origins positions them as authoritative sources for domestic news, bolstering their credibility and prominence within the market.

Language proficiency plays a key role, as journalists and editors are typically more adept in their native language. This linguistic mastery allows them to craft content more efficiently and effectively. Producing content in other languages could entail additional efforts to ensure translation accuracy and maintain high standards of reporting.

Yet, the potential for inadvertent or intentional cultural and political bias emerges when news organizations solely emphasize content aligned with their national origins. Such a narrow focus can restrict the range of perspectives presented to readers, potentially hindering a comprehensive understanding of global events.

It is important to note that while these factors have led to the prevalence of news organizations producing content primarily in a single language connected to their national context, the media landscape is evolving. The digital era, coupled with heightened global connectivity, has prompted several news organizations to acknowledge the advantages of multilingualism. This recognition has spurred a shift towards offering content in multiple languages, appealing to diverse audiences and embracing the potential of a more interconnected world.

In an era defined by unprecedented interconnectedness and globalization, the landscape of news media is undergoing a discernible transformation—one that revolves around the recognition of language diversity as a potent tool for audience engagement. This shift signifies not only a response to the evolving demands of an interconnected world but also a strategic acknowledgment of the potential inherent in catering to diverse readerships on a global scale.

The practical examples that have emerged in this context serve as compelling exemplars of the news media's evolving approach toward multilingualism. These instances bear witness to a deliberate departure from insular linguistic confines toward a more expansive, inclusive, and international perspective. From long-standing journalistic giants to emergent digital platforms, these news organizations are charting a trajectory that transcends linguistic confines to disseminate content that reverberates with audiences far beyond their immediate borders.

The New York Times, a prominent American newspaper, has expanded its international presence by offering content in various languages. It produces content in languages like Spanish and Chinese, recognizing the global reach of its brand and catering to non-English-speaking audiences interested in international news. Deutsche Welle, Germany's international broadcaster, provides news in multiple languages, including German, English, Spanish, and Arabic. By catering to diverse linguistic audiences, Deutsche Welle contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of global events, particularly from a German perspective. Mediapart, an independent online news outlet based in France, has gained recognition for its unique approach to journalism and its embrace of multilingualism. While primarily publishing in French, Mediapart also offers select articles and content in English. El País, a widely respected Spanish newspaper, has embraced multilingualism to enhance its global presence and engage with audiences beyond the Spanish-speaking world. The newspaper offers content not only in Spanish but also in English through its "El País in English" section.

2.3 Insular linguistics

The persistence of insular linguistic confines within the news media landscape can be attributed to a range of factors, including resource constraints, digital disparities, and broader challenges inherent in global communication. These factors collectively contribute to the reluctance or inability of some news organizations to fully embrace multilingualism and expand their reach beyond their linguistic boundaries.

- **Resource Constraints:** One of the central challenges faced by news organizations is the allocation of resources. Producing content in multiple languages demands additional financial investments for translation services, multilingual staff, and

technological infrastructure. Smaller and less financially endowed news outlets might find it arduous to divert resources from their core operations, thereby constraining their ability to adopt a comprehensive multilingual approach.

- **Digital Divide:** The digital divide, characterized by unequal access to technology and the internet, poses a significant barrier to achieving widespread multilingual content dissemination. In regions where digital penetration is limited, news organizations face challenges in reaching diverse audiences through online platforms. This scenario disproportionately affects communities that may rely on traditional media formats, leading to a concentration of linguistic content within specific mediums.
- **Language Proficiency and Expertise:** Producing news content requires linguistic proficiency and cultural understanding. Journalists and editors are typically more adept in their native languages, which might hinder their ability to efficiently produce content in other languages. Furthermore, accurate translation necessitates skilled translators who can convey nuances and subtleties, often a scarce resource.
- **Prioritizing Local Audiences:** News organizations often prioritize serving their immediate communities and national audiences, particularly in countries with linguistic diversity. This focus stems from the understanding that local issues, cultural nuances, and domestic policies are of primary concern to their readers. As a result, catering to a wider linguistic audience might be perceived as diverting attention from their core constituency.
- **Technical Infrastructure and Adaptation:** Adapting news production and dissemination strategies to accommodate multiple languages requires adjustments to technological infrastructure, content management systems, and distribution channels. For some organizations, these technical adaptations might pose logistical challenges, slowing down their integration of multilingual content.
- **Cultural and Political Considerations:** In certain contexts, the news media might be influenced by cultural or political factors that favor a single language or viewpoint. This could lead to a reluctance to diversify content by language, as doing so might be perceived as diluting the prevailing cultural or political narrative.

While these challenges contribute to the persistence of insular linguistic confines, it is important to note that news organizations' approaches are evolving. Advances in translation technology, increasing global connectivity, and recognition of the benefits of a broader audience

are gradually eroding these barriers. As the media landscape adapts to these changes, it is anticipated that news organizations will continue to find innovative ways to transcend linguistic constraints and foster a more interconnected global discourse.

2.4 Multilingual News

When news organizations craft content in a language that aligns with their target audience, a deep and meaningful connection can be established. The familiarity of language allows news outlets to cater to cultural nuances, offering news and information that resonates at a personal and communal level. This connection can foster a sense of trust, engendering loyalty and engagement among readers who perceive the content as relevant and impactful.

However, this language-focused approach is not without its constraints. The very linguistic alignment that fosters connection can inadvertently exclude non-native speakers from accessing the information. The intricacies of language can become barriers, hindering comprehension and leading to misinterpretations. Furthermore, individuals who lack proficiency in the language might find themselves unable to access the content altogether, resulting in missed opportunities for engagement.

To transcend these limitations and to forge a global connection, news organizations must adopt strategies that embrace linguistic diversity. The imperative lies in the production of content in multiple languages or, alternatively, providing translation services. By offering news in different languages, organizations effectively dissolve language barriers and open their content to an international readership. This approach enhances accessibility, ensuring that a wider range of individuals can engage with and understand the information presented.

In the intricate landscape of global news dissemination, the strategic utilization of multilingualism emerges as a powerful tool wielded by news organizations to transcend borders, connect with diverse audiences, and enrich the discourse on a global scale. Two prime exemplars of this approach are the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Al Jazeera, each adopting unique multilingual strategies that reflect their distinct objectives and resources.

The BBC, a pioneering entity in the media domain, has harnessed the potency of multilingualism to establish a resounding presence across the world. Operating across a spectrum of languages—English, Spanish, Arabic, among others—the BBC transcends the confines of linguistic barriers, creating an unbroken thread of connection with audiences spanning continents. This strategic approach not only enlarges its sphere of influence but also encapsulates the *ethos* of cultural resonance. By delivering news that holds significance in specific cultural contexts, the BBC generates a profound rapport with its readership. Simultaneously, this multilingual prowess fosters

inclusivity, allowing non-native speakers to partake in the global dialogue. The BBC's multilingualism not only mirrors its dedication to impartial journalism but also serves as an instrument for global cohesion.

On the other hand, Al Jazeera's multilingual strategy encapsulates a more deliberate mission—to counter the pervasive dominance of Western perspectives in the media realm. Conceived as a reaction to this perceived imbalance, Al Jazeera's foray into multilingualism, particularly its presentation of content in Arabic and English, serves as an avenue for the amplification of underrepresented narratives, particularly those from the Middle East. Bolstered by substantial financial support from the Qatari government, Al Jazeera emerges as a distinct voice in the global discourse. Its multilingual content strategically bridges gaps between cultures and continents, serving as a counterpoint to entrenched biases.

The privilege of being well-funded entities significantly facilitates the execution of these multilingual strategies. The BBC's expansive budget and global network of correspondents enable the creation of content tailored to various languages. Similarly, Al Jazeera's backing allows it to carve out a niche as a platform for alternative perspectives, drawing attention to narratives that often evade mainstream discourse.

Both organizations extend their influence beyond their parent companies' geographical borders, enabled by their multilingual endeavors:

- The BBC, with its multilingual repertoire, reaches millions globally, not only among native English speakers but also among those engaging with its content in other languages. This expansive reach solidifies its position as a global news leader.
- Al Jazeera, with its strategic delivery of content in Arabic and English, has managed to traverse boundaries, garnering a considerable following beyond its Qatari origins. Its multilingual content facilitates an alternative perspective on global affairs, resonating with audiences worldwide.

In essence, the BBC and Al Jazeera epitomize the transformative potential of multilingualism in the realm of news dissemination. While their strategies diverge in their objectives, they collectively underscore the transformative role of language in breaking barriers, connecting with diverse readerships, and invigorating the global narrative.

In a world marked by linguistic diversity, news organizations operating within countries where multiple languages are spoken face a compelling challenge: how to effectively communicate and engage with their audiences across linguistic divides. This challenge is met with a range of strategies that reflect the intricate relationship between language, culture, and identity. Drawing from global examples, we delve into how news organizations navigate these complexities within

national contexts, where the tapestry of languages is rich and varied. From Canada's dual-language approach to Switzerland's multilingual regions, from India's diverse linguistic landscape to Belgium's linguistic divisions, and from South Africa's array of official languages, we explore how news organizations craft their strategies to bridge linguistic gaps, foster inclusivity, and enrich the discourse in a multitude of tongues.

In Canada, for example, a country linguistically diverse news organizations must navigate the complexities of catering to both English and French-speaking communities. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) stands as a prime example of how a news organization can address this linguistic diversity. With English and French as official languages, the CBC operates in both languages, recognizing the importance of providing news content that resonates with both language communities. This dual-language approach acknowledges the historical and cultural significance of both English and French in Canada's identity, while also ensuring that news reaches citizens in the language, they are most comfortable with. By offering news in multiple languages, the CBC fosters inclusivity and contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Canadian society, politics, and culture.

Switzerland's linguistic diversity, stemming from its four official languages—German, French, Italian, and Romansh—presents a unique challenge and opportunity for news organizations. Swiss news outlets such as the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SRF), Radio Télévision Suisse (RTS), and Radiotelevisione svizzera (RSI) are exemplary in their response to this challenge. Operating in different languages, these organizations cater to the linguistic preferences of various regions and language communities within the country. By producing content in multiple languages, Swiss news organizations acknowledge the regional identities that are closely intertwined with language and create a platform for citizens to engage with news in their preferred language. This approach respects the cultural and linguistic tapestry of Switzerland while also facilitating effective communication and understanding among its diverse population.

In a nation as linguistically diverse as India, news organizations recognize the significance of offering news content in multiple languages to bridge language barriers and cater to citizens across the linguistic spectrum. The Times of India, for instance, provides news in both English and various regional languages. By doing so, the news organization acknowledges that language is an integral part of identity and that people across the country consume news in languages that resonate with their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This multilingual approach ensures that news is accessible to individuals who might not be proficient in English, which is often used as the *lingua franca* for administrative and national-level communication. News organizations that offer

content in multiple languages in India contribute to a more inclusive and informed society by enabling citizens to engage with news in the languages they are most comfortable with.

Belgium's linguistic divisions between Dutch, French, and German-speaking communities have implications for news organizations operating within the country. For instance, VRT (Flemish Radio and Television Broadcasting Organization) caters to the Dutch-speaking community, while RTBF (Radio Télévision Belge Francophone) serves the French-speaking community. These news organizations recognize that language plays a pivotal role in reflecting regional identities and political dynamics. By offering news content in different languages, these organizations respect the linguistic diversity of the nation and ensure that citizens receive news that is culturally and linguistically relevant to their respective regions. This approach contributes to effective communication within Belgium's linguistic communities while also fostering a sense of belonging and representation.

In South Africa, a nation with 11 official languages, news organizations must navigate a linguistic landscape that reflects the country's diverse cultural makeup. The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) demonstrates how news organizations can embrace linguistic diversity to ensure that news reaches citizens across different language communities. By producing news content in various languages, including English, Zulu, Xhosa, and Afrikaans, the SABC acknowledges that language is a powerful conduit for communication and cultural expression. This multilingual approach enables citizens to engage with news in languages that are integral to their identities, fostering a deeper understanding of national and local issues. By recognizing the importance of linguistic diversity, news organizations contribute to social cohesion and promote effective communication in a nation with rich linguistic traditions.

In each of these examples, news organizations navigate the intricate relationship between language and identity within national contexts marked by linguistic diversity. By producing news content in multiple languages, these organizations bridge linguistic gaps, facilitate cross-cultural communication, and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of local, national, and global events. In doing so, they uphold the principle that language is not only a means of communication but also a vehicle for preserving cultural heritage, fostering inclusivity, and promoting informed citizenry.

2.5 Language, localities, and user relationships

In the complex landscape of news media, the strategic choice of prioritizing local audiences—particularly in regions marked by linguistic diversity—echoes a fundamental recognition: audience loyalty is the cornerstone of a news organization's financial viability. This

decision is anchored in a mosaic of considerations that intricately weave together the relationship between news outlets, their audiences, and the intricate socio-cultural tapestry of their respective regions. While the allure of expanding linguistic horizons might beckon, the prudent emphasis on local audiences emerges as a valid, and even pragmatic, avenue.

Central to this emphasis is the notion of relevance and context. News media, as a conduit of information, seeks to provide content that resonates with the lives of its readers. For local audiences, this means offering news that directly impacts their communities, delving into issues, events, and policies that shape their daily existence. This prioritization ensures that news remains intimately intertwined with the local context and resonates with the immediate concerns of its readership.

Cultural nuances, an inherent facet of diverse societies, accentuate the wisdom of this approach. By focusing on local audiences, news organizations can immerse themselves in the intricacies of cultural contexts. This meticulous attention, far from being merely cosmetic, is pivotal for not only maintaining accuracy but also demonstrating a deep-seated respect for local sensitivities. This nuanced reporting fosters trust within the community, an invaluable asset in the news media landscape.

The cultivation of expertise is another dimension underpinning the preference for local audiences. News organizations that specialize in covering local issues inevitably cultivate a reputation as authorities in matters that directly affect their region. This specialized knowledge is a potent ingredient in building audience loyalty and asserting a commanding presence within the local media ecosystem.

A symbiotic relationship between news organizations and their readerships materializes through community engagement. Prioritizing local audiences opens the door to direct interaction, forming a sense of community and mutual understanding. This engagement not only solidifies reader loyalty but also encourages active participation and feedback, which in turn shapes the editorial trajectory and editorial priorities of the news outlet.

The economic imperative of financial sustainability further underscores the validity of prioritizing local audiences. In an era where revenue models are shifting, audience loyalty becomes the bedrock of a news organization's financial health. Local audiences, who perceive news outlets as vital conduits of information tied to their immediate realities, are more likely to subscribe, purchase newspapers, and support local media through advertising. These sustained revenue streams underpin the stability necessary for producing quality journalism.

The essence of this approach also lies in the spotlight it casts on unique local stories. Prioritizing local audiences serves as a mechanism for unearthing narratives that might be

overshadowed by the global news agenda. These local stories contribute to a deeper understanding of the diverse tapestry of experiences that shape societies, adding depth to the collective discourse.

While the allure of catering to a wider linguistic audience may seem enticing, the underlying wisdom of prioritizing local audiences is anchored in the pivotal role news organizations play within their communities. By fostering audience loyalty, these organizations position themselves as integral components of the local information ecosystem—catalysts of informed discussions, facilitators of connections, and mirrors reflecting the realities of their communities. In essence, the emphasis on local audiences is far from a concession; it is a strategic acknowledgement of the profound impact news organizations wield as architects of shared understanding.

The public's stance on whether news consumption should adopt a multilingual approach or adhere to native languages is an intricate matter shaped by individual perspectives, cultural backgrounds, and the nuanced context of news consumption. Rather than being defined by a singular, universally applicable answer, this issue is a spectrum, marked by a myriad of factors that influence people's preferences. In this exploration, both sides of the spectrum come into focus, shedding light on the complexities at play.

Opting for news in one's native language is often driven by a quest for cultural relevance. This choice delves into the core of local context, cultural intricacies, and societal dynamics that translations might overlook. Consuming news in one's native language provides a visceral connection, forging a deeper understanding and a more profound emotional link.

However, language proficiency emerges as a pivotal determinant in this discourse. Varied levels of fluency in languages beyond one's own add a layer of complexity. Engaging with news in a language that isn't native could potentially lead to misinterpretations, which could ultimately obscure the comprehension of intricate news stories.

Furthermore, the ease of understanding cannot be underestimated. Opting for news in one's own language eliminates the need for translation, resulting in a seamless and efficient consumption process. This is particularly relevant during breaking news or when updates are time sensitive.

On the flip side, a preference for a multilingual approach finds its roots in the aspiration for a global perspective. For certain individuals, the allure lies in exposing themselves to diverse viewpoints, which in turn fosters a broader, more holistic understanding of global events. This approach nurtures a more informed perspective on international affairs.

Beyond this, a multilingual strategy carries the promise of cross-cultural engagement. For those engrossed in global affairs, consuming news in different languages provides direct insights

from source countries, enhancing comprehension and offering a firsthand perspective on issues of global significance.

Moreover, the concept of inclusivity underscores the value of a multilingual approach. By offering content in multiple languages, news organizations can cater to multicultural societies and international readerships. This inclusive strategy recognizes the diverse needs of expatriates, immigrants, and readers with a penchant for news beyond their own borders.

Yet, a harmonious blend of these preferences emerges as the most pragmatic option. Some readers may gravitate towards native-language news for local updates while simultaneously embracing multilingual content for a broader view of global issues. This duality serves to enrich cultural understanding and foster a well-rounded global perspective.

Consequently, news organizations grapple with a nuanced balancing act. To cater to both preferences, they endeavor to provide a mix of localized content and encompassing international coverage in various languages. This approach seeks to strike a delicate equilibrium between the familiarity of cultural resonance and the quest for global insights that define today's interconnected world.

In essence, the trajectory a news organization takes—be it a multilingual approach or one anchored in localized news—hinges on factors like target audience, objectives, and the diverse needs of readers. This dynamic interplay encapsulates the essence of a constantly evolving media landscape that strives to simultaneously honor the need for familiar narratives and the curiosity to explore the world beyond.

Language emerges as a pivotal determinant in the success of news organizations' global endeavors. While producing content in a specific language cultivates a deep connection with a specific audience, it can inadvertently hinder international outreach. The solution lies in embracing linguistic diversity through multilingual approaches or translation services. By breaking down language barriers, news organizations can foster trust, understanding, and a truly global readership, ensuring their impact resonates across cultures, continents, and languages.

3. Cultural relevance

News organizations occupy a pivotal role in shaping public perception and disseminating information about global events. In today's diverse and globalized society, the significance of cultural relevance in news dissemination has become paramount. The ability to establish a strong rapport with audiences' hinges on this cultural alignment, which fosters engagement, trust, and ethical reporting. Cultural relevance stands as a cornerstone for news organizations aspiring to forge profound connections with their audiences. People are naturally drawn to news that

resonates with their lives, values, and concerns. By tailoring content to reflect cultural intricacies, news outlets can effectively foster resonance and engagement.

Furthermore, cultural relevance serves as a bedrock for credibility and trust. When news content acknowledges and respects the cultural diversity of its audience, it conveys an understanding of diverse viewpoints. This process not only enhances the organization's credibility but also validates the perspectives of the audience. This alignment goes on to fuel engagement and loyalty, fostering active participation and dialogue around news content. The concept of cultural relevance introduces a sense of community, thereby augmenting the news outlet's value as a source of information rooted in the interests of the community.

Cultural misunderstandings can lead to misinterpretation and bias. To mitigate these potential risks, adhering to cultural relevance becomes pivotal. In this era of globalization, news organizations wield the capability to reach global audiences. However, effectively communicating with diverse cultures necessitates adaptation in reporting styles, language usage, and visual elements, thereby fostering inclusivity. Ethical considerations are inherently tied to cultural relevance. The responsibility to avoid perpetuating stereotypes and biases underscores the need for cultural sensitivity in news reporting, ensuring equitable and accurate representation. The sphere of cultural relevance extends to news format and delivery as well. Visual elements, tone, and style significantly influence audience engagement. As such, news outlets may find it necessary to diversify delivery methods to accommodate the varied expectations and preferences of their diverse audience.

Practical examples vividly demonstrate how media organizations actively tackle the complex challenges of cultural relevance in their news reporting. Localized Content caters to the specific needs of diverse regions. Global outlets like BBC and CNN effectively address distinct audience requirements by creating regional editions, ensuring that news stories resonate with the local populace and acknowledging their unique concerns. Language Adaptation further extends this effort to connect with varied language-speaking populations. Through the provision of news in multiple languages, including the use of subtitles and audio content, media organizations ensure that language barriers are surmounted, enabling a broader audience to access and engage with the news.

Recognizing the significance of cultural nuances and the avoidance of stereotypes, newsrooms invest in Cultural Sensitivity Training. This initiative fosters a deeper understanding of various cultural perspectives, enhancing the accuracy and appropriateness of news content. Diverse Representation within reporting teams serves as a potent strategy to present a broad spectrum of viewpoints. Journalists from various cultural backgrounds offer distinctive insights,

effectively countering biases and enriching the quality of reporting. Avoiding Offensive Content is a delicate yet vital consideration. The careful selection of images, headlines, and language is imperative to ensure that news content is respectful of cultural diversity and does not inadvertently cause offense.

Engagement with communities brings media organizations closer to the cultural heartbeat of various demographic segments. Meaningful interactions with cultural communities, be it through attending events or collaborating with local organizations, empower news outlets to report news that resonates more authentically. To resonate with diverse cultural preferences, news organizations adopt tailored content formats. Understanding that different cultures engage with news in distinct ways, some may prefer longer, in-depth articles, while others gravitate toward concise and visual-heavy content. Media organizations recognize that feedback from their audiences is invaluable. Feedback and Interaction mechanisms, such as comments, surveys, and social media, facilitate a deeper understanding of audience sentiments, guiding content refinement.

Cultural News Analysis represents another strategy that enriches audience understanding. By providing context that delves into cultural histories and norms, media organizations foster deeper insights into the implications of global events within their cultural frameworks. Local Partnerships further enhance the authenticity and accuracy of news reporting. Collaboration with local news outlets or journalists helps provide more comprehensive and localized coverage.

The selection of Story Selection is a strategic approach that embraces locally impactful narratives. While global news remains essential, highlighting stories that directly touch the lives of local audiences bolsters engagement and relevance. Diverse Storytelling Formats represent yet another avenue for engaging audiences across cultures. Utilizing podcasts, video documentaries, and interactive graphics, news organizations tap into different mediums that cater to distinct preferences.

Ensuring accuracy and accountability is paramount, and media organizations adopt practices like Fact-Checking and Accountability. Transparent fact-checking processes and holding themselves responsible for inaccuracies help build trust with culturally diverse audiences. By striving for Balanced Coverage, media organizations counter the perpetuation of stereotypes. Presenting both the positive and negative aspects of cultures fosters a more holistic and accurate portrayal.

In the realm of “real-life” instances of media organizations addressing cultural relevance, noteworthy examples include Al Jazeera, renowned for its in-depth global coverage, provides cultural context alongside news stories to enable better comprehension of complex global events, thereby fostering understanding. NPR’s Code Switch exemplifies the exploration of culture’s

intersection with news, fostering a deeper understanding of societal dynamics and prompting meaningful conversations. The BBC's Pidgin Service effectively bridges communication gaps by delivering news in a language that resonates with West and Central African audiences.

The New York Times' "The Daily" Podcast ensures cultural context is interwoven alongside news stories, enabling listeners to grasp the significance of events within cultural contexts. The South China Morning Post mixes international and region-specific news, providing a comprehensive view that acknowledges the cultural and geopolitical landscape. Through various formats like videos, podcasts, and interactive content, The Quint engages its audience and reflects its commitment to diverse media delivery.

AJ+ adopts a visually engaging format, accompanied by cultural analysis, catering to a youthful global audience's preferences. BBC News Hindi targets Hindi-speaking Indian audiences with news relevant to their cultural context, further emphasizing the importance of linguistic and cultural alignment. France 24 leverages its multilingual approach to provide diverse cultural perspectives, underscoring the importance of embracing a global viewpoint.

These instances illustrate how media organizations implement diverse strategies to ensure cultural relevance, ultimately forging connections, promoting understanding, and enhancing ethical reporting practices. In essence, cultural relevance is of paramount importance for news organizations in their quest to cultivate meaningful bonds, establish trust, and build credibility. A one-size-fits-all approach is inadequate in the face of a diverse global landscape. The acknowledgment of cultural differences empowers news organizations to effectively cater to an informed, engaged, and loyal audience, all while adhering to ethical reporting standards.

The interplay between language, cultural relevance, and news consumption creates a dynamic tapestry that shapes how individuals perceive and engage with information. Language, being a fundamental vehicle of communication, significantly influences news consumption patterns. People tend to gravitate towards news sources in languages they are comfortable with, aligning with their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. For instance, a Spanish-speaking individual in the United States might prefer to follow news from Spanish-language sources to stay connected with their heritage.

Cultural relevance further colors the landscape of news consumption. News stories that resonate with cultural values, beliefs, and interests tend to capture people's attention more effectively. This can lead to the emergence of echo chambers, where individuals predominantly consume news that reinforces their existing viewpoints. Consider a person who is deeply passionate about environmental issues seeking out news articles and reports that align with their pro-environment values.

The localization of news content is another facet that showcases the interplay of language and cultural relevance. News outlets often tailor their stories to cater to local cultures and preferences. This could involve translating stories, highlighting topics of local importance, and utilizing culturally familiar references. For instance, an international news organization reporting on a global event might provide region-specific coverage to cater to diverse cultural sensibilities.

The rise of social media platforms has introduced new dynamics to the equation. Algorithms personalize content based on users' preferences, creating filter bubbles where individuals are exposed to content that aligns with their existing beliefs. This phenomenon can restrict exposure to diverse perspectives and limit cross-cultural understanding. Imagine a social media user encountering news articles that consistently reinforce their political stance, ultimately reinforcing their existing viewpoint.

In the context of globalization, individuals often develop hybrid identities that draw from multiple cultures. This influences their news consumption preferences, as they seek information that reflects their unique blend of cultural experiences. A person of mixed heritage might be drawn to news stories that touch upon both aspects of their background, resulting in a more diversified news consumption pattern.

Understanding the intricate relationship between language, cultural relevance, and news consumption is pivotal for fostering informed and inclusive societies. Recognizing how these elements interact can aid in promoting cross-cultural understanding, mitigating biases, and ensuring that news consumption remains a conduit for diverse perspectives rather than an echo chamber of singular viewpoints.

The impact of linguistic and cultural affinity on audience engagement is undeniable. When content is presented in a language that the audience understands and feels comfortable with, it becomes more accessible. Consider a travel vlogger who tailors their videos to the native language of their viewers, instantly capturing their attention. Cultural relevance takes this engagement a step further. Content that aligns with the audience's cultural values and beliefs strikes a chord. Think of a TV show that incorporates local traditions and customs, resonating deeply with viewers and encouraging them to tune in consistently.

The emotional connection formed through linguistic and cultural resonance is powerful. A stand-up comedian who skillfully weaves in culturally specific humor leaves the audience in stitches, creating a shared experience that lingers in their memories. Authenticity plays a pivotal role as well. When creators show a genuine understanding and respect for the audience's culture, it fosters trust. On the flip side, insensitivity can lead to disengagement, as seen when a brand's marketing campaign misses the mark with cultural references. Personalization takes engagement

up a notch. Tailoring content to individual linguistic and cultural preferences creates a unique bond. An app that provides localized news articles and recommendations understands that users want content that speaks to their specific interests.

Inclusivity matters, too. Content that features a diverse range of characters and perspectives appeals to a broader audience. An animated movie that showcases characters from various backgrounds not only entertains but also sends a message of representation and acceptance. The formation of communities cannot be overlooked. Content that brings together people who share linguistic and cultural affinities fosters a sense of belonging. An online forum where users can discuss shared interests in their native language cultivates a thriving community.

Avoiding misinterpretation is crucial. Content that fails to consider linguistic and cultural nuances risks being misconstrued. A miscommunication stemming from language differences can lead to unintended consequences. From a business perspective, localization can make a significant impact. Adapting products and services to different languages and cultures increases market reach. A global fashion brand that releases region-specific collections acknowledges that fashion tastes vary across cultures.

Cultural relevance is a vital factor for media organizations, transcending national boundaries and encompassing both geographical and non-geographical aspects. This intricate interplay significantly affects the dynamics between local and global contexts across various dimensions.

In terms of geographical considerations, media organizations must be attuned to the cultural norms, values, and sensitivities specific to particular regions. Adapting content to align with these regional nuances is crucial for effective audience engagement (Gudykunst and Kim, 2003). Furthermore, linguistic diversity is pertinent, prompting media outlets to provide content in languages relevant to specific geographic areas. Localizing content to resonate with cultural preferences enhances the connection with the audience (Wei and García, 2013). Acknowledging and respecting cultural traditions, holidays, and events unique to certain regions helps establish deeper audience rapport, bolstering cultural relevance (Pan and Kosicki, 1993).

Moving beyond geographical confines, cultural relevance extends to virtual communities formed online around shared interests and values. This facet enables media organizations to tap into these virtual communities and provide content that resonates with specific cultural contexts (Boyd, 2014). Moreover, cultural phenomena such as memes and viral trends often transcend national borders and gain global relevance. Media organizations that capture and analyze these trends can create content that appeals to a diverse range of audiences (Burgess and Green, 2009). Niche subcultures and communities also thrive in online spaces, enabling media outlets to cater to

specific cultural interests irrespective of geographic location (Hodkinson, 2017). Social media platforms amplify content, enabling it to traverse diverse cultural contexts and achieve heightened cultural relevance (Marwick and Lewis, 2017).

This interplay between cultural relevance and media has significant implications for the dynamic balance between local and global considerations. Striking this equilibrium is challenging for media organizations, especially when content quickly spreads beyond intended audiences (Al-Rawi and Gray, 2020). Embracing cultural relevance that extends beyond geography fosters the incorporation of diverse perspectives, promoting inclusivity in the portrayal of global issues (Gasher et al., 2013). The interconnectedness of online spaces also nurtures cross-cultural dialogue, providing a platform for discussions that bridge local and global viewpoints (Couldry and Hepp, 2017). Stories originating in specific local contexts can unexpectedly resonate globally, highlighting the interconnected nature of human experiences and demanding preparedness from media organizations (Hafez, 2007).

Cultural relevance's impact on media organizations stretches beyond geographic boundaries. It encompasses both tangible and digital realms, shaping the intricate relationship between local and global dynamics. Navigating diverse cultural contexts and creating universally resonant content is the complex task that media organizations face in this interconnected landscape. In a world where information knows no boundaries, the interplay between language, cultural relevance, and news consumption has become the tapestry that weaves our understanding of the world. As individuals, we are drawn to the familiarity of our linguistic roots, seeking news sources that echo the cadence of our language. Yet, cultural relevance paints the nuances that captivate our attention, creating chambers that either echo our convictions or bridge them with diverse viewpoints. With the rise of social media, algorithms have sculpted digital landscapes where affirmation is favored over diversity, challenging the quest for holistic understanding. As our identities harmonize in the global chorus, news consumption mirrors the kaleidoscope of our backgrounds, nurturing a hunger for narratives that reflect the mosaic of our lives. In an ever-evolving symphony, acknowledging the symphony of language and culture fosters an informed society that dances to the rhythm of inclusivity and comprehension.

3.1 The Global-Local Paradox: News Consumption in the Online News Ecosystem

In the context of our continually globalizing setting, the purview of news dissemination has transgressed traditional boundaries. However, in an intriguing counterpoint, the predilections of news consumers still manifest a palpable inclination towards the local. The advent of the digital age has proffered unparalleled access to global information, yet the inherent magnetism of local

and national narratives remains robust. In the competitive media landscape, the primary goal of any media organization is not just to disseminate information but to build and maintain a lasting relationship with its audience. The key to survival and profitability often hinges on understanding and leveraging the audience's preference for local news in the midst of a globalized information era.

The cornerstone of any successful media entity is its understanding of its audience. Knowing that people naturally gravitate towards local stories, events, and issues allows media organizations to curate content that is not only informative but deeply resonant. By consistently delivering content that mirrors the audience's lived experiences and concerns, media entities can foster loyalty and trust. For media organizations, understanding the intrinsic human tendency to connect with local narratives isn't just a matter of content strategy; it is a business imperative. By building a strong local connection, media entities can not only ensure sustained audience engagement but also carve a niche in the market that is financially rewarding.

Among the salient factors contributing to this proclivity is the concept of cultural resonance. Notwithstanding the copious global data available, individuals inherently seek narratives that echo their individual experiences and align with their intrinsic worldviews. Reports pertaining to local events or dilemmas invariably elicit a more profound emotional connection, attributable to the familiarity born from shared experiences and collective memories. The role of language in this dynamic is paramount. While English is ubiquitously acknowledged as the *lingua franca* in the digital realm, news rendered in one's language possesses an unparalleled intimate allure. The intricate nuances, rich subtleties, and cultural connotations inherent to native languages provide an unparalleled depth, a dimension frequently lost in translation.

Furthermore, news of a local or national nature often bears a direct bearing on its recipients. Be it a transformative policy, an unforeseen natural calamity, or a pivotal economic shift, local news addresses matter that exert a direct influence on the quotidian existence of its consumers. By contrast, international news, albeit enlightening, occasionally lacks this immediacy. From a psychological vantage, the consumption of local news engenders a profound sense of community. It acts as the sinew, a connective fabric intertwining individuals. Immersion in accounts of local happenings or personages engenders a fortified sense of belonging, thereby reinforcing communal affiliations. Lastly, the attribute of trustworthiness is pivotal. Amidst the escalating dissemination of fake news and misinformation, there is an evident proclivity amongst individuals to trust local news outlets, perceiving them as less predisposed to bias and more rooted in veracity. This sentiment is accentuated by the longstanding relationship between news establishments and their local communities.

Although news is now globalized, the public remains largely local. While people may have access to the same tools and share common ideas and ideals across borders, they tend to be drawn to news sources that have a geographical and cultural connection with them. This shared background could include language, history, culture, or politics that come from being raised in a particular place. People tend to seek out a local perspective when they consume news, looking for coverage that is relevant to their region or hometown. This means that while there are numerous news organizations to choose from, national news sources tend to be the first choice for many audiences. Even though we can easily get news from all over the world, we often still prefer stories that feel close to home. The local perspective, shaped by our shared history, culture, and experiences, offers a unique and relevant connection that global stories can't always provide. This balance between worldwide news and local stories defines how we consume news today.

4. Audience loyalty

In today's rapidly evolving media landscape, audience loyalty has become a cornerstone for the survival and success of news platforms, particularly in the online realm. This loyalty is more than mere habitual consumption; it is a bond of trust, appreciation for content authenticity, and a deeper emotional connection to the platform (Chyi and Lee, 2013). Audience loyalty is a crucial concept in the realm of media and journalism, particularly in the context of online news consumption. It refers to the degree of attachment, trust, and repeated engagement that an audience demonstrates toward a specific news organization over time. Audience loyalty plays a significant role in shaping the dynamics of the relationship between the public/audience and news organizations, and this relationship can be influenced by cross-national factors in an online context.

The age of digital information has democratized news access but has also flooded consumers with a deluge of choices. Amidst this overflow, the commitment of an audience to consistently turn to a specific source is grounded in its perceived reliability, comprehensive coverage, and the unique perspective it offers. In fact, in an era marked by the rise of misinformation and "fake news," a consistent delivery of fact-checked and unbiased content is paramount for retaining audience trust (Tandoc et al., 2018). However, authenticity in content delivery is just one part of the puzzle.

Modern news consumers are not mere passive recipients; they seek platforms where they can interact, share opinions, and even contribute (Hermida et al., 2012). Such active participation mechanisms foster community building, drawing readers back not just for the news but for the sense of community and shared values. Platforms that adeptly blend user engagement with

personalization of content – tailoring news feeds based on user preferences or geographic relevance – create a user-centric experience, amplifying their appeal (Thurman and Schifferes, 2012).

Furthermore, as the digital sphere blurs geographic boundaries, online news platforms cater to a diverse, global audience, making it imperative to understand and respect cross-national influences. Cultural sensitivities, localization of content, and awareness of global political and social landscapes significantly influence the formation of loyalty, especially in a diverse user base (Bruns and Highfield, 2016). A misstep in cultural understanding can alienate users, while apt localization and context-specific content can strengthen bonds. This delicate balance introduces several key dynamics that shape the relationship between online news platforms and their audiences.

Trust and Credibility play a foundational role in audience loyalty. News organizations that are perceived as consistent, accurate, and unbiased find favor with their audiences, regardless of geographical boundaries. The cross-national nuances like cultural backgrounds, media literacy levels, and historical relationships with media influence the perception of credibility (Tandoc et al., 2018). A prime example is *The New York Times*. With a rich history spanning over 160 years, it has consistently emphasized quality journalism. However, with challenges like "fake news", financial pressures, and threats to media independence, maintaining top-tier reporting has grown challenging. Their strategy involves reminding readers about the importance of quality journalism and that subscriptions directly fund the tireless efforts of reporters globally, facilitating a better understanding of news. This initiative places The New York Times at the heart of a national dialogue on the significance of a free press and fact-based reporting.

In this interactive age, **User Participation and Engagement** offer a platform for readers to be more than passive consumers. However, the nature and degree of engagement can vary based on societal norms and cultural contexts (Hermida et al., 2012). Participation emerges as a powerful tool not just for winning over the audience but for enhancing profitability. Various forms of media participation strengthen audience relationships, bolster trust, and can cultivate a community sense. This sense of belonging and fidelity is paramount, especially in today's volatile audience ecosystem where factors like Google positioning or friend recommendations play significant roles in information consumption. Loyalty becomes a foundational pillar ensuring media sustainability. The essence of such fidelity is not just interactivity; it centers around delivering quality content. More profoundly, it is about including the audience in a shared information project — participation with a purpose reflecting democratic culture.

One of the defining aspects of this comparison lies in the difference between a membership-based model and a traditional news company. Krautreporter's membership approach

fosters a sense of community, allowing members to actively participate in the editorial process. This level of interaction fosters collaboration and mutual understanding between the publication and its readership. On the other hand, Der Spiegel's traditional approach positions it as a source of general news that covers a wide array of topics, catering to readers who seek a one-stop destination for a diverse range of news stories.

The reader engagement strategies of these two entities further highlight their distinct approaches. Krautreporter's membership model encourages a sense of community, allowing members to actively participate in the editorial process: "Krautreporter's existence is solely due to our members. They significantly enhance our journalism. Our editorial team and reporters involve readers from the article's inception. This starts with topic identification, where members can indicate desired article subjects, suggest themes for the team to address, or pose questions about current political happenings or societal changes." (*Anonymous*, November 2022)¹²⁶. This level of interaction fosters collaboration and mutual understanding between the publication and its readership. In contrast, Der Spiegel, due to its broader appeal, engages readers through comments sections, social media interactions, and interactive features, maintaining an open platform for discussions and opinions on a wide variety of subjects.

Through true media participation, news organizations can strengthen ties, foster trust, and potentially craft a sense of community. This is crucial in today's fluctuating audience landscape where search engine rankings or peer recommendations influence information consumption patterns. True loyalty is not just about interactivity, but primarily about delivering quality content and involving the audience in a shared information venture. This links to the dynamics of **Community Building** on online platforms provides an avenue for users to connect, discuss, and share views. The universal appeal of certain news events might resonate differently across cultures, which can shape the dynamics of these communities (Bruns and Highfield, 2016).

Mediapart is a leading example. Describing itself as a "quality participatory media", Mediapart's objective is to cultivate a community of contributing readers, shaping an intellectual community offering the "best of the debate". They envision the online journal as an indispensable information tool for every member, emphasizing personalization and integration. Furthermore, they introduce an innovative pact between journalists and readers, bypassing the prevalent logic of audience and free information. Le Club underscores the reciprocal relationship between the platform and its subscribers. As Livia Garrigue remarked: "Le Club is crucial for the relationship

¹²⁶ Exchanges were conducted via email in November 2022 with a member of the Krautreporter news team, who requested to remain anonymous. Statements from the journalist will be used throughout this thesis from this point forward, always between quotations mark, and, if necessary, information he provided will followed by the reference (*Anonymous*, November 2022).

with the reader because to each new subscriber we say: you are a reader but also an active part of our ecosystem, you have a voice through the possibility to use your blog space whenever you want.” (Livia Garriguei, February 2020).

Transparency and Accountability serve as pillars for establishing trust. By being clear about editorial processes and ensuring a diverse representation, news platforms solidify their position as reliable sources. Upholding transparency and being receptive to diverse cultural perspectives bolster loyalty. Elda Sona from The New York Times underscores this sentiment, stating, “Transparency fuels trust, which is one of our most valuable assets and the reason why readers come back to us every day looking for experiences that help them understand the world, inform and entertain, and make better decisions in their lives.” (Elda Sona, April 2021).

Lastly, the **Responsiveness and Accessibility** of news platforms in the online context set the tone for audience relationships. Rapid, meaningful interactions can bolster loyalty, especially in an era where immediate engagement is not just appreciated but expected (Hermida et al., 2012). **Red/Accion** emphasizes the relevance of profound audience connection. Ariana Busadoff¹²⁷, journalist of the organization, explained that “an active relationship with the audience fosters loyalty. Knowing that behind every story is an attentive journalist, genuinely interested in readers’ interests and opinions, is invaluable. This personal touch, absent in larger hegemonic media, is our significant advantage. It ensures continued readership and adds unparalleled value to the content.” (Ariana Budasoff, January 2021).

The importance of **Content Relevance and Personalization** cannot be overstated. News organizations that can adapt and curate their content, respecting the cultural, linguistic, and local nuances of their global audience, secure a loyal readership base (Thurman and Schifferes, 2012). On the same line, the significance of **Adaptation to Local Norms** in reporting cannot be ignored. Properly contextualizing news, while respecting local sensitivities, endears news platforms to their readers (Chyi and Lee, 2013). While a global audience can provide a larger audience and revenue base, a greater diversity of perspectives and voices, as well as an international perspective in covering stories and issues that may be overlooked by national news organizations; for the time being at least, news media that aim for a national audience can be considered stronger in certain aspects – a necessity for financial sustainability – such as their ability to understand specific cultural, social, and political contexts of their own country and being able to provide news and information that is relevant and meaningful to their national audience. They also may have a more

¹²⁷ Ariana Budasoff is a journalist for Red/Accion. Exchanges were conducted with Ms. Budasoff via Whataspp, in audio format, in January 2021. Statements from the journalist will be used throughout this thesis from this point forward, always between quotations mark, and, if necessary, information she provided will followed by the reference (Ariana Budasoff, January 2021).

loyal audience, as they have been serving the same community for a long time in the case of many legacy news media, or simply because they are serving their own community, and know the issues that concern them in the day-to-day from a local perspective.

Incorporating these dynamics thoughtfully is the linchpin for news organizations aiming to cultivate and sustain audience loyalty in the digital age. A loyal audience can provide a stable source of revenue and help to expand the audience base. Audience loyalty in the online news ecosystem rests on a blend of content quality, engagement, transparency, and cultural adaptability. As media platforms navigate this environment, nurturing this loyalty remains paramount.

5. Revenue

The landscape of journalism is one that is deeply affected by both global convergence and divergence, driven largely by cultural, technological, and, crucially, economic factors. The phenomenon of globalization, especially in the realm of Western media, underscores the universality of certain challenges faced by the news industry, irrespective of geography or culture (Chalaby, 2000). Among these challenges, the relationship between revenue and journalistic integrity is paramount.

Indeed, the survival of news organizations hinges on a steady flow of revenue. This financial lifeblood is what facilitates the production of quality content and the sustenance of operations (McChesney, 1999). The bidirectional relationship between news organizations and their readers is integral to this equation. As readership engagement intensifies, it can catalyze an upswing in income streams like subscriptions, memberships, and donations. Such a dynamic suggests that building a rapport with readers can augment the value proposition for audiences, which can subsequently heighten their propensity to financially back the organization (Tandoc et al., 2015).

Yet, the pursuit of revenue can sometimes come at the cost of the core principles of journalism. Prioritizing revenue generation might steer news outlets towards sensationalism, sacrificing the very *ethos* of accurate and reliable reporting (Zollmann, 2017). Balancing the imperatives of revenue generation with the ethical duty to provide meaningful news is thus essential in fostering a lasting bond with the audience.

Legacy or digital, large-scale or boutique, media enterprises universally grapple with the conundrum of aligning journalistic endeavors with business imperatives. The quintessential debate surrounding the compromise of news values for business gains is emblematic of this struggle. This dilemma has not only been the subject of academic discourse but has also been depicted in popular culture. J.K. Rowling's character, Rita Skeeter, from the Harry Potter series, encapsulates this

tension. While she asserts the public's right to the truth, she also acknowledges the paper's primary objective: sales.

Every media entity, regardless of its scale or model, operates within the larger paradigm of a market-driven capitalist system. This reality makes the pursuit of financial viability inescapable. If commercial considerations tower over other priorities, it raises the inevitable question: Is the very nature of the journalism produced inherently subservient to business objectives? This complexity of the relationship between the commercial and the journalistic is aptly illustrated by the evolving business models in the news industry. The decline of traditional advertising in the digital age has compelled many, special digital news natives, to reimagine their revenue strategies (Picard, 2014):

Advertising is dead. For many years to come, part of the journalism industry will continue to live off of advertising. But that sun has already gone out. We are living the 8 minutes and 20 seconds that its light takes to reach us. In the digital environment, advertising, as it is conceived today, has also become another factor that causes infoxication. We need media that have the courage to look for new business models and other ways of relating to brands. And brands and companies that have the courage to relate to their audiences in a new way: (Ariana Budasoff, January 2021).

Furthermore, some news organizations, like Krautreporter, have embraced a distinct philosophy: "Since its founding in 2014, Krautreporter has refrained from advertising and is financed exclusively through readers. We believe that when it comes to advertising financing, the interests of the medium and the reader often diverge and, in the worst case, even contradict each other. At least that is our impression, readers want to be informed calmly and objectively and would rather understand the background and connections than be bombarded with new, unrelated bits of news every five minutes." (*Anonymous*, November 2022).

Prominent established news outlets, such as El País, The New York Times, and Le Monde, have successfully adopted subscription models, capitalizing on their longstanding trust and renown as legacy print media institutions. Their histories, coupled with a reputation for producing high-quality journalism, allow them to foster a significant paying subscriber base. For these giants, the trust they've accumulated over decades acts as a compelling proposition for audiences to financially support their operations.

On the other end of the spectrum, newer or more niche news organizations, like The Intercept Brazil, have turned to crowdfunding as their lifeline. For these outlets, their relationship with the public is paramount, not only for financial sustenance but also for their credibility and influence: "Stimulate a feeling of community among audiences and supporters, which can then convert into more subscribers to our newsletter and strengthen our collective funding." (Samanta

do Carmo, March 2021). This sentiment underscores the crucial interplay between community, trust, and revenue for modern journalism organizations.

While innovative business models like those adopted by Krautreporter, Red/Accion and The Intercept Brasil suggest a shift towards direct financial engagement with readers, advertising continues to play an instrumental role in revenue generation, particularly for media outlets that utilize mixed business models. In the ever-evolving media landscape, where monetization strategies are constantly being tested and adapted, many outlets are diversifying their approaches, doing whatever is necessary to ensure their financial viability.

It is also vital to acknowledge the nuances introduced by national contexts. Different countries possess unique media landscapes molded by distinct histories, policies, and audience behaviors. For instance, the media consumption habits in countries with strong public broadcasting systems, such as the UK or Sweden, differ greatly from those in countries dominated by private media enterprises (Hallin and Mancini, 2004).

The regulatory environment in some countries may favor subscription models, while others might still derive a significant portion of their revenues from traditional advertising due to factors like audience demographics, advertiser preferences, or even technological infrastructure (Napoli, 2011). Additionally, socio-cultural factors such as trust in media, willingness to pay for news, and general media consumption habits can also vary widely between countries, further influencing revenue streams (Newman et al., 2017).

Therefore, while overarching global trends and challenges impact the media industry universally, the granularity of national settings cannot be overlooked. These local dynamics play an indispensable role in shaping the revenue models and sustainability of journalism within specific geographical confines. In essence, the media landscape is a matrix of intricate relationships and challenges. The future of journalism hinges on its ability to strike a harmonious balance between commercial imperatives and its foundational duty: informing the public faithfully.

6. Niche market

In the diverse landscape of digital journalism, niche news sites have carved out a distinct and influential presence. These specialized platforms, often centered around particular topics or interests, offer in-depth coverage that caters to specific and passionate global audiences. Whether it is science, geopolitics, or social issues, these niche news sites have found their footing in an increasingly interconnected world. In the realm of news organizations, a strategic focus on a specific niche market within the broader national landscape holds significant importance in shaping their relationship with their audience.

Niche markets offer a treasure trove of opportunities for news outlets, as they enable these organizations to deliver news and information that resonates deeply with a specific audience. This, in turn, fosters the development of a robust and loyal readership base. One of the key advantages of catering to a niche market is the efficient allocation of resources. Niche news organizations can streamline their efforts, concentrating on the unique interests and needs of their target demographic. For instance, a news outlet specializing in technology news can captivate the attention of tech enthusiasts, paving the way for revenue generation through targeted advertising or subscription models tailored to this specific group. Furthermore, in an oversaturated news landscape, the pursuit of a niche can serve as a vital strategy for news organizations to distinguish themselves from the competition. By honing their focus on a particular area, they carve out a distinctive identity and reputation as a trusted source of information within that niche.

The terms “independent” and “niche” can sometimes be confused or used interchangeably in the context of news media, but they refer to different characteristics of media outlets:

- **Independent:** This term typically refers to the ownership and operational structure of a media outlet. An independent news platform operates without ties to larger media conglomerates, government influence, or corporate interests. Their independence often allows them more editorial freedom, as they aren’t beholden to the interests of parent companies or certain stakeholders. Examples of independent media outlets might include crowdfunded platforms or those funded by memberships and subscriptions.
- **Niche:** This term describes the content focus or audience target of a media outlet. A niche news platform specializes in a particular subject, region, or topic. This specialization can range from technology, environment, and health to specific regional news or even more narrowed focuses like cryptocurrency or vegan lifestyles. The key characteristic of a niche platform is its tailored content, catering to a specific audience segment.

In the world of digital media, there’s a surge in platforms that could be described as both independent and niche. The low barrier to entry in the digital realm means that individual journalists or groups can launch platforms focusing on specific topics without needing the backing of a large corporation. However, not all independent platforms are niche, and not all niche platforms are independent. For instance, an independent platform might provide comprehensive news coverage on a wide range of topics but do so without the backing or influence of major media players. Conversely, a niche platform might focus solely on a specific topic (e.g., tech

reviews) but could be owned by a larger media conglomerate. While the two terms have distinct meanings, their confluence in the digital age, where many platforms strive for both editorial independence and specialized content, can lead to some confusion.

Mediapart, from France, has often been caught between the blurred lines between niche and independent platform. Founded by Edwy Plenel in 2008, the news site distinguished itself in the French media landscape primarily due to its ad-free, subscription-based model and its emphasis on in-depth investigative reporting. Its commitment to independent journalism without reliance on advertising does set it apart from many mainstream outlets. While its focus on investigative journalism gives it a specialized edge, its wide coverage of various topics makes it more than just a niche platform. In essence, Mediapart is a testament to the potential success of independent journalism platforms in the digital age, even when they do not strictly cater to a niche audience.

The practice/proposal of journalism of a company, or the language in which it is published, can be powerful tools to carve out a niche in the crowded news media landscape, beyond the idea of covering a specific topic, culture, or geographical location. By focusing on these aspects, news sites can cater to specific audiences, ensuring their content remains relevant, engaging, and valuable to their target demographic.

Krautreporter is a niche website that has carved out a unique space in the national media landscape of Germany. Launched in 2014 with a successful crowdfunding campaign that raised \$1.38 million from 17,000 individuals, Krautreporter had an ambitious start. However, the early excitement was followed by the sobering reality of retaining its initial supporters, as it lost 70 percent of them when the second year came around. The initial setback could be attributed to a couple of key factors. First, Krautreporter did not initially ask its crowdfunding contributors to become recurring members from the start. Second, there was a disconnect between what the crowdfunding supporters expected Krautreporter to be and what it actually delivered once it started publishing. This disconnect prompted the need for a new value proposition.

Krautreporter responded to this challenge by shifting its focus to emphasize the “explainer” nature of its coverage. Instead of churning out a high volume of stories, the platform concentrated on helping its members gain a deeper understanding of the world. This shift was aimed at making the value proposition of Krautreporter clear to both existing members and potential new ones. One of the distinctive aspects of Krautreporter’s approach is its emphasis on community-driven journalism. Unlike traditional subscriptions to newspapers like The New York Times or Der Spiegel, where readers typically expect a transactional relationship (money for access to content), Krautreporter engages its members in the reporting process. This community

engagement aspect was challenging for some readers to grasp initially, as it was a departure from the conventional subscription model.

Despite the initial hurdles, Krautreporter has managed to build a membership base of 13,676 members with a rolling annual retention rate of 54.8 percent. This retention rate indicates that they have been successful in retaining a significant portion of their members over time. The platform recognizes the importance of member retention, as it is more cost-effective and less labor-intensive than acquiring new members. Moreover, long-term members become valuable both as financial contributors and as brand ambassadors.

Krautreporter's success demonstrates that offering a distinct news experience in a niche market can be viable. However, it also underscores the importance of being transparent and clear about the unique value proposition in order to keep members engaged and committed to the platform. In a media landscape where traditional models are being challenged, Krautreporter's approach serves as a reminder that innovation and community engagement can be key drivers of success.

In the dynamic landscape of German news media, two influential players, Krautreporter and Der Spiegel, offer a study in contrasts when it comes to reporting, storytelling, and their unique perspectives on journalism. While both share the common goal of informing and engaging readers, their distinct approaches, editorial focuses, and targeted audiences set them apart. Krautreporter, operating as a niche news site, stands out for its commitment to in-depth and investigative journalism. Embracing a membership-based model, the publication relies on the support of its dedicated readers to sustain its quality journalism and independence from commercial pressures. Krautreporter's approach involves diving into complex societal issues, often adopting a slower news cycle to ensure a meticulous and comprehensive exploration. This approach finds resonance among readers who seek meticulously researched articles offering nuanced insights into various topics, such as politics, culture, and technology. Krautreporter's niche focus allows it to cater to an audience that values depth, context, and a more reflective understanding of current events.

In contrast, Der Spiegel, a traditional news company with a long history, caters to a broad and diverse audience. Renowned for its extensive reporting and visual storytelling, Der Spiegel operates with the intent to reach a large readership both domestically and internationally. The publication embraces a faster news cycle to provide real-time updates on a wide range of topics, including politics, economics, sports, and cultural features. Der Spiegel's blend of shorter news articles and comprehensive features is complemented by using multimedia elements that enrich the reader experience. By adopting a broad approach, Der Spiegel seeks to serve the information needs of a wide spectrum of readers who value staying informed in real time.

A pivotal point of distinction between these two outlets lies in their philosophy of targeting niche markets through innovative journalistic approaches. Krautreporter, by advocating for slow news and emphasizing in-depth coverage, appeals to a specific audience that seeks comprehensive understanding rather than mere headline updates. This unique approach disrupts the traditional notion of journalism as a conveyor of immediate information, opting instead for a methodical exploration of complex subjects. Krautreporter's membership model not only sustains this niche focus but also allows its readers to actively shape the content that aligns with their interests.

On the contrary, Der Spiegel's traditional journalism model remains firmly rooted in delivering timely and diverse news coverage to a wide audience. By providing a mix of content across various topics, Der Spiegel caters to the broader masses that value quick and comprehensive updates on a myriad of subjects. This adherence to traditional norms solidifies Der Spiegel's position as a trusted source of information in a fast-paced news environment.

News sites can also target a niche market by using a different language than the official or dominant language of a country can be a strategic approach for several reasons, though it also comes with its unique challenges. In the vibrant city of Buenos Aires, Argentina, amidst a predominantly Spanish-speaking media landscape, The Bubble emerged as an unconventional news site in 2013. Founded by Spanish journalist Adrian Bono and U.S. economist Emily Hersh, this English-language platform sought to bridge the information gap for English-speaking residents and visitors in the country. This article traces The Bubble's distinctive journey, explores its niche identity, discusses the intricacies of sustaining such an endeavor, and reflects on the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The founders envisioned a news source that would resonate with an audience typically underserved by mainstream media. Their focus was clear: to make Argentine politics, culture, and the economy accessible to English speakers. However, The Bubble's distinctive character lay not just in its language but also in its unconventional editorial approach. In a media landscape marked by tradition and formality, The Bubble dared to adopt a youthful, sometimes irreverent voice, appealing to those who sought an alternative perspective.

The Bubble's audience primarily consisted of English-speaking expatriates, tourists, and bilingual Argentines. It targeted a demographic spanning from young adults to middle-aged readers, who appreciated its fresh perspective on the nation's affairs. Its content, ranging from news articles to videos and event guides, catered to a diverse set of interests within this demographic. Yet, despite its unique approach and clear audience, sustaining The Bubble proved challenging. The site relied heavily on advertising revenue and in-person events to remain financially viable. The COVID-19 pandemic cast a long shadow on these revenue streams.

Advertisers tightened their belts, and the restrictions on gatherings took a toll on event-based income.

Language barriers posed another hurdle, particularly regarding expansion plans. While the founders had initially considered reaching out to other Latin American countries, they grappled with the complexities of maintaining an English-language site in regions predominantly conversant in Spanish or Portuguese. Localization efforts and resource allocation presented formidable obstacles. The pandemic, a global disruptor, brought unique challenges. As news consumption gravitated toward pandemic-related content, The Bubble's engagement and readership may have waned. Adapting to this shift was no small feat, and it further underscored the site's vulnerability in a rapidly changing media landscape.

In 2021, The Bubble reached the end of its journey. The founders, Adrian Bono and Emily Hersh, embarked on new ventures, and the website closed its digital doors permanently. The site's legacy raises pertinent questions about the sustainability of niche news outlets in non-native languages within diverse and dynamic media landscapes. The Bubble's story is emblematic of the intricacies and challenges that niche journalism faces. The site's niche identity, coupled with the hurdles posed by the pandemic, offers valuable insights into the evolving nature of modern journalism, especially when set against the backdrop of globalization and the need for innovation in media enterprises.

The Bubble once carved out a distinctive niche in Argentina's media landscape, primarily catering to the English-speaking expatriates, tourists, and the international business community. Its content was a curated blend of cultural events, local insights, and tailored news, resonating deeply with its select audience. While its revenue might have been driven by ads targeted at expatriates, collaborations with businesses keen on this demographic, or unique membership offerings, The Bubble's editorial approach set it apart. Content was meticulously crafted to mirror the unique experiences of the English-speaking populace in Argentina. However, the challenges of the pandemic in 2021 led to its untimely closure, emphasizing the fragile nature of niche media outlets amidst global crises.

On the other side of the spectrum, Clarin stands as a stalwart in Argentina's media arena. Offering extensive Spanish-language coverage that spans across politics, economics, culture, and sports, this media giant aims to captivate a broad and diverse readership. Supported by a medley of revenue streams, including advertising, print, and digital subscriptions, Clarin's operations are underpinned by its ability to draw in a vast audience. Its editorial approach remains rooted in convention, focusing on both national and international headlines and delivering comprehensive content tailored to a wide array of interests.

Engagement dynamics showcase marked differences between the two. While Clarin, with its expansive reach, navigates fluctuating loyalty due to changing audience preferences and evolving news consumption habits, The Bubble, in its operational years, enjoyed strong engagement and loyalty. Its content, speaking directly to its niche, ensured readers felt a deep resonance with the issues and stories presented. In reflection, Argentina's media landscape was once diversified by both the specialized approach of outlets like The Bubble and the mass appeal of titans like Clarin. The juxtaposition of their trajectories illuminates the intricacies and challenges that define the media world, particularly during unpredictable times.

In a Spanish-speaking country, establishing an English-language news site can serve several strategic purposes. Such a site naturally caters to expatriates, tourists, and the international business community who might struggle with the local language. By doing so, it acts as a bridge, offering a global audience an understanding of local news and cultural happenings. Interestingly, this approach can also be appealing to advertisers. Many businesses targeting this particular audience, often with a higher disposable income, find it an apt platform for reaching their desired clientele. Furthermore, exclusive partnerships could emerge with businesses that specifically cater to expatriates or tourists. On the educational front, locals looking to hone their English skills might find real-world content from such a site beneficial.

However, it is not without its challenges. The very nature of targeting a niche means that the potential audience is limited, especially when juxtaposed against mainstream media outlets. As global news networks expand and offer localized content, the English-language site might find itself in competition with brands that have deeper pockets and wider recognition. Content creation also poses a challenge: striking the right tone that addresses both local news relevant to the target demographic and broader stories for an international audience is a fine balance to maintain. Moreover, translating local nuances, humor, and cultural references into English can sometimes lose the essence of the original content. Financially, depending so heavily on a specific audience might render the business model susceptible to economic fluctuations, particularly those that impact tourism or the expatriate community.

Niche news sites, while specializing in specific topics, can also cater to global audiences, offering them tailored content that resonates with their interests, going beyond the idea of a niche market in a national context. Some operate under the wing of colossal media empires, benefiting from the resources and reach these conglomerates offer. Others carve out their path, relying on their distinct voice and specialized coverage. Take, for instance, Al Jazeera English, a niche news site operating within the global media conglomerate Al Jazeera. It provides comprehensive coverage of Middle Eastern and global affairs, serving an international audience with specialized

insights. Its affiliation with a large parent company offers unique advantages, including access to financial resources and a global distribution network. Similarly, BBC Future, a niche site within the BBC, focuses on science, technology, and health stories from a global perspective. This niche content benefits from the BBC's established brand recognition and cross-promotion, reaching readers worldwide who seek specialized insights into these fields.

This affiliation with established media giants, enjoyed by niche sites within large and financially stable media companies, offers a unique set of advantages. Access to robust financial resources, infrastructure, and talent pools allows niche sites to flourish without the initial challenges faced by their independent counterparts. They can tap into the financial backing, cross-promotion opportunities, and diversified revenue streams that come with the territory.

On the global stage, these niche news sites have another distinct advantage: they transcend geographical borders and language barriers. Their specialized content, curated for a global audience, finds resonance with readers regardless of where they reside. This global reach is amplified when these niche sites are part of larger media conglomerates, leveraging the parent company's distribution channels and brand recognition. Yet, while these niche news sites within large media companies enjoy these benefits, they must navigate the delicate balance of maintaining their specialized focus while aligning with the broader goals of the parent company. Corporate dynamics and expectations can add layers of complexity to their operations.

Independent niche news sites stand out as beacons of specialized information and unique perspectives. Unlike their counterparts housed under larger media conglomerates, these platforms operate without the safety nets of financial backing and brand recognition from parent companies. Their journey, while dotted with its own set of challenges, brings forth remarkable stories of determination, resilience, and innovation.

At their core, independent niche news sites have the liberty to pursue stories that matter most to their target audience. Platforms like The Diplomat, which focuses on geopolitics in the Asia-Pacific, or TechDirt, which delves deep into technology news, policy, and its impact on society, serve their audiences with meticulously curated content. Their distinct editorial voices aren't just products of their specialized focus, but they are also embodiments of their independence. This freedom allows them to delve deeper, question harder, and present stories from angles that might be unconventional or even controversial. The digital age, with its democratized access to publishing tools, has made it possible for these niche sites to flourish. For example, Bellingcat, an independent international collective of researchers and citizen journalists, uses open-source techniques to investigate a range of topics, from conflicts to corruption. Their work highlights the power of collective intelligence and the digital tools at our disposal.

However, the path of independence comes with its challenges. Funding and sustainability remain perennial concerns. Without a larger entity's financial muscle, these platforms often rely on a mix of advertising, subscription models, crowdfunding, or grants to stay afloat. Scroll.in, an independent news outlet from India, for instance, integrates a blend of sponsored content and traditional advertising to generate revenue, ensuring its incisive reportage remains accessible to its readers. Furthermore, the digital landscape itself is ever evolving. Algorithm changes by major search engines or social media platforms can impact the visibility and reach of their content. The battle for attention amidst a deluge of information means they must constantly innovate in their content presentation, delivery, and engagement strategies.

Niche news sites beyond national contexts have found their niche in the vast landscape of digital media, offering targeted content to engaged global audiences. Those fortunate to be part of well-established media conglomerates, such as Al Jazeera English and BBC Future, have distinct advantages, with access to resources that bolster their financial sustainability and reach. However, they also face unique challenges as they strive to preserve their specialized identity while operating within the larger media ecosystem. Nonetheless, these niche sites play a vital role in providing valuable and focused journalism to a world hungry for diverse perspectives.

7. Interrelated and Interdependent Factors

In an increasingly interconnected world, media organizations are faced with the challenge of resonating with a global audience while navigating myriad barriers. At the heart of this challenge are government regulations which, while designed to maintain a degree of control over content dissemination, can inadvertently constrict freedom of expression and stifle creativity. This regulatory environment intersects with the potent twin challenges of language and cultural relevance, acting as gatekeepers to audience engagement. A media organization's content, delivered without careful attention to linguistic nuances and cultural context, risks alienation and misunderstanding. Yet, the equation is far more multifaceted. Media outlets must also grapple with the financial implications of their operations, from sourcing revenue to investing in content tailored for niche markets. The intertwining of these factors creates a dynamic, often precarious, landscape for global journalism. With advancements in technology promising more interconnected news delivery, the question remains: Can media organizations find a harmonious balance between staying true to their national roots while engaging a worldwide audience?

Government regulations can impact media organizations by limiting freedom of expression and content creation, which can reduce audience loyalty and revenue. On the other hand, lenient regulations can increase competition and impact revenue streams. Language barriers

can limit the reach of media organizations, as they may need to produce content in multiple languages to cater to a wider audience. This can be challenging, especially if the organization doesn't have the necessary resources. Language barriers can also impact the cultural relevance of media organizations. Cultural relevance is crucial for media organizations to maintain audience loyalty and revenue streams. They need to produce content that resonates with their audience and connects with their culture. Failure to do so can lead to decreased audience loyalty and revenue.

Revenue is essential for media organizations to sustain their operations. It can be influenced by government regulations, audience loyalty, cultural relevance, and niche markets. Revenue streams can determine the level of investment that media organizations can make in content creation and distribution. Audience loyalty is critical for media organizations to retain viewers and readers. It can be influenced by the quality of content, cultural relevance, language used, and revenue streams. If media organizations fail to produce content that resonates with their audience or struggle to monetize their content, they may lose their audience to competitors.

Niche markets can be an essential target for media organizations, particularly in a competitive market. Niche markets are typically smaller audiences with specific interests, and media organizations can target these audiences by producing specialized content. Cultural relevance and language barriers can impact niche markets, but if media organizations can produce content that resonates with these audiences, it can lead to increased audience loyalty and revenue streams.

Government regulations can limit the ability of news organizations to reach a global audience. Political and legal restrictions may also prevent globalized journalism. Governments and corporations may have interests that conflict with globalized journalism's ideals, leading to restrictions on freedom of the press, censorship, and propaganda to sway public opinion. These factors can limit news organizations' operations and hinder their ability to report objectively and accurately.

Technological infrastructure can also pose a significant barrier to globalized journalism, particularly in regions with limited internet access or low connectivity. Adapting content to be accessible on various devices and platforms can be challenging in areas with limited technological infrastructure. Furthermore, globalized journalism can be expensive and require significant resources to produce and distribute content across different regions and cultures. News organizations may need to develop new business models to support globalized journalism in an industry facing declining revenues and increased competition.

But more than anything, language and cultural differences are what we found in our research to be in the biggest limit for the reach of news organizations beyond their national

borders. It starts from something as basic, but time consuming and expensive as the to translate and culturally adapt content to appeal to diverse audiences. Even with the internet, news organizations often produce content in specific languages, which limits the ability of non-native speakers to access it. Cultural differences can also affect the way news is reported and the type of information that is considered newsworthy.

In the realm of news media, the intrinsic interconnection between language and cultural relevance becomes apparent. Language, beyond mere communication, serves as a potent vessel for cultural expression, encapsulating values, idioms, and historical references that shape cultural identity. When news is conveyed in a specific language, it carries with it not only information but also the cultural nuances that resonate with speakers of that language. This connection extends further as language significantly influences the perception of events. Expressing ideas in different languages can yield varying connotations, necessitating accurate translation that captures not only literal meanings but also intended tones and cultural contexts. Moreover, news often references cultural elements, historical occurrences, and local figures, demanding an understanding of the cultural backdrop to grasp the full significance.

Cultural context is essential for idiomatic language as well, given that idioms and expressions are deeply rooted in culture and often lack direct equivalents in other languages. Accurate translation becomes challenging without considering cultural implications, risking the loss of intended messages or misinterpretation. Language's impact extends to news framing and values. Different cultures can frame news stories differently based on distinct values and perspectives. A culturally sensitive approach ensures the recognition of these nuances, respecting diverse viewpoints and presenting news in a manner that resonates with varied audiences.

This integration of language and culture also bolsters audience engagement and connection. When news is delivered in a language familiar to the audience, a sense of familiarity and trust is cultivated. This trust extends to the news's cultural relevance, acknowledging the audience's cultural context and bridging the gap between producers and consumers. Inclusivity and representation are outcomes of this connection. By offering news in various languages and ensuring cultural relevance, media organizations reach diverse communities and demonstrate a commitment to valuing and respecting these communities. Ultimately, this synergy between language and cultural relevance enhances cross-cultural understanding. Media organizations that recognize and utilize this connection contribute to fostering empathy and enhancing communication across cultures. As such, language's role in news media goes beyond communication; it is an integral element of cultural exchange, understanding, and representation.

Cultural and linguistic affinity play a crucial role in the relationship between the audience and a journalistic company. This can establish a connection and create a sense of shared identity and culture. When a news outlet produces news in a language commonly spoken in a region or country, it can attract an audience from that area. Similarly, if a news outlet produces news that reflects the values and interests of a particular culture, it may resonate more with people who identify with that culture. Furthermore, cultural, and linguistic affinity can shape the content of news, as a news outlet attuned to the cultural and linguistic nuances of its audience may produce news that is more relevant, engaging, and that speaks directly to their concerns and interests.

Audiences may also seek news from national media companies due to familiarity, comfort, and trust in their reputation. National media companies may produce news in a language and style more familiar to their audience, which is important for people who are not fluent in other languages or who have a strong attachment to their national culture. National identity and pride also contribute to the preference for national news outlets. Moreover, national media companies may have better access to local news and events, which can be of particular interest to people living in the same country or region. While these factors can contribute to audiences seeking out news produced by their national media companies, individual preferences and other factors can also influence media consumption.

Despite these challenges, advancements in technology and changes in media consumption patterns suggest that journalism may adopt a more interconnected and globally focused approach in the future. Nevertheless, achieving this goal will require the collective efforts of journalists, media companies, and governments to overcome these obstacles and create a more inclusive global media landscape – though that seems unlikely as news organizations would need to develop new business models to support globalized journalism, which can be challenging in an industry facing declining revenues and increased competition, and which is still figuring out how to deal with the present break in paradigms in the profession.

CHAPTER 12

A CROSS-NATIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE USER-MEDIA COMPANY RELATIONSHIP IN THE ONLINE NEWS ECOSYSTEMS

In an increasingly globalized world, the dynamics of the media landscape are rapidly shifting. Digital technology and the rise of online communities have broadened horizons, allowing for a diverse array of voices to reach audiences across continents. Yet, while the digital revolution promises universal accessibility, it also introduces a new set of challenges. Informed by insights both from within media organizations and from comparisons between them, we endeavor to elucidate patterns, draw parallels, and subsequently contextualize our empirical findings within the ambit of our theoretical framework.

Our research undertook a cross-national examination of 80 news websites across eight nations: the United States, the United Kingdom, Spain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Brazil, and Argentina. We posited that these nations significantly influence the media topography and the multifaceted interactions between media institutions and their constituent audiences. Through a meticulous bibliographic scrutiny, documentary review, and profound analysis of the digital platforms constituting our study, we probed the primary mechanisms these sites employ to engage their readership. Furthermore, we examined the integration of User-Generated Content by these media entities. Supplementing this, dialogues with representatives from 15 media conglomerates enriched our understanding, enabling us to deduce the nuances of how cross-national variances influence the modalities of audience engagement by media organizations.

Two primary research questions drove our inquiry: RQ(1) What are the convergences and divergences between the spaces created and hosted by news organizations to engage and encourage participation from the user according to their country of origin? RQ(2) How/when does the national context of a media company become a variable for their relationship with the user? In this chapter, our inquiry orbits around these seminal queries that underpinned this research. We scrutinize both the commonalities and disparities inherent in the nexus between users and media corporations within the digital news milieu. We also deliberate on the conditions under which internal organizational dynamics prevail in shaping these interactions, in contrast to the circumstances where external factors and national backdrops become more salient.

Our findings revealed that the relationship between audiences and their national media outlets is neither static nor straightforward. With the ubiquity of the internet and social media, traditional notions of local have been redefined, now spanning beyond physical boundaries to digital realms. Moreover, the internal workings of a media organization and the external national factors play pivotal roles in determining the user-media relationship. However, their significance

can vary, sometimes dominated by internal strategies, while at other times overshadowed by external national contexts.

The intricate dance between globalization and news dissemination illuminates the myriad challenges and opportunities inherent in fostering a globally informed society. As the lines between local and global continue to blur, media organizations must tread with both caution and creativity. It is no longer sufficient to merely produce news; today's media must navigate linguistic, cultural, and digital complexities to ensure that their content is not just far-reaching but also resonant and impactful. As we move forward in this digital age, understanding these dynamics becomes crucial for media organizations aiming to build lasting, meaningful relationships with their audiences, irrespective of where they reside.

1. What are the factors that can affect the relationships between media companies and the user?

Internal and external factors play a crucial role in shaping the media landscape and the relationships that media organizations have with their audiences. Understanding the unique challenges and opportunities posed by each factor is crucial for media organizations to build strong relationships with their audiences and effectively engage with them. By taking them into consideration, media organizations can create content and engage with their audiences in ways that are meaningful and impactful, ultimately helping to strengthen the relationships between media organizations and their audiences in a cross-national context. Internal and external factors are interrelated and often interdependent, but some may become more relevant for the relationship news sites build with their users given a national context.

We consider that the media landscape has undergone significant changes in recent years, with the rise of digital technology and the proliferation of news sources. In a globalized world, media outlets have a wider potential audience, which can include people from different cultures, languages, and backgrounds. This can make it challenging for media outlets to cater to the diverse needs and interests of their audiences. The relationship between audiences and national media companies is complex and multifaceted, and it is influenced by a variety of factors, including individual preferences, cultural and social norms, and the availability and accessibility of different news sources.

Audiences may tend to look for news produced by their national media companies, but this is not always the case. With the rise of the internet and social media, people have access to a wide variety of news sources from around the world, and they can easily compare and contrast different perspectives and viewpoints. While some people may have a preference for news

produced by their national media companies, others may seek out news from other countries or sources that they perceive to be more objective or trustworthy. Additionally, people may be drawn to news sources that focus on specific topics or issues, regardless of their national origin. The dynamics of online journalism have disrupted traditional notions of “local” and “global,” expanding their definitions to encompass digital and online communities. As a result, the relationship between journalism, the public, and the audience has become more intricate and interconnected. Media organizations must navigate this complex landscape, recognizing that the factors influencing journalism’s impact are not bound by physical borders but are shaped by the digital interactions of diverse online communities.

In this context, cross-national differences have become increasingly relevant when it comes to media organizations and their relationships with their audiences and their approaches to participation and user engagement. There is the intricate interplay between globalization, and news dissemination highlights the challenges and opportunities in creating a globally informed society. While technology has made it easier to disseminate news globally, it is important to navigate the linguistic and cultural complexities to ensure accurate and meaningful communication across borders.

1.1 Convergences in Strategies for Engagement and Spaces Participation

In the realm of media engagement, one might anticipate that the unique national contexts of various organizations would be the predominant drivers of their strategies. Upon in-depth examination from the preceding chapters, we discern that cross-national differences in media organizations’ engagement and participation strategies are not predominantly influenced by their national contexts. Instead, internal factors emerge as integral into determining the strategies used for engagement, the spaces created for participation and the uses of User-Generated Content.

The **nature** of media organizations, whether they are rooted in contemporary digital practices or have a legacy background, profoundly impacts their engagement strategies. Digital-first entities like HuffPost or The Intercept Brasil have been molded by the *ethos* of the online age, inherently prioritizing real-time engagement and harnessing the power of immediacy inherent in the digital world. On the other hand, legacy stalwarts like The New York Times, Le Monde or the BBC, while steeped in their rich histories, have found themselves navigating the digital transformation, blending their time-tested methods with innovations required by the digital age. Thus, whether an organization was born in the digital age or has evolved from a legacy background informs its approach to user engagement.

Yet, the nature of the media outlet is just one piece of the puzzle. The **underlying business models** play an equally, if not more, significant role, considering their strategies for revenue and monetization models significantly influence their user engagement techniques across nations. Consider The Guardian, with its reader-funded approach: its engagement strategies are often tailored to foster a deep sense of community and sustained connection. The same applies for digital natives The Krautreporter, Mediapart and Red/Accion. Conversely, outlets that are predominantly advertisement-driven might embrace engagement methods that prioritize breadth of reach, seeking to captivate as wide an audience as possible, such as the case of the British The Daily Mail. These decisions, while financial on the surface, profoundly shape the avenues and intensities of audience engagement.

But beyond the digital-legacy divide and economic imperatives, the heart of any media engagement strategy is often its journalists. Professional practices and the inherent **place of the user** in a media organizations idea of journalism – the values, beliefs, and principles they champion, alongside the function/role the public/audience have in them – can greatly determine the depth and nature of their interactions. Organizations like The Intercept Brasil, with a core emphasis on investigative journalism, naturally create an engagement environment rooted in trust and depth, emphasizing the importance of professional practices in crafting engagement narratives. Intimately linked to this is the envisioned role of the public in the organization’s journalistic mission. Organizations that perceive their audiences as collaborators in the storytelling process tend to embrace more participatory strategies, such was the case of The Correspondent, and is the case of The Krautreporter.

So, where does nationality fit in all this? While national contexts undoubtedly add layers of complexity to media engagement strategies, they often take a backseat to these more profound internal determinants. The core strategies and spaces that media organizations employ to engage their users seem to be more deeply rooted in considerations like digital legacy, business priorities, journalistic *ethos*, and perceived user roles than in the exteriorities of national contexts. Apparent divergences based on nationality become secondary when evaluating the media engagement strategies’ core determinants. Despite seeming divergences based on nationality, the actual discrepancies in media engagement strategies are more deeply rooted in internal considerations like business priorities and journalistic beliefs, rather than the exterior national contexts. In essence, while the backdrop of nationality provides a flavor to the media engagement narrative, it is the internal dynamics that truly shape the story’s contours.

Nonetheless, even if we can see a pattern to the tools for interactivity, strategies for engagement and employment of User-Generated Content adopted by the Western news organizations we studied, most outlets still produce content having their national audience as a main target. This makes it so we can affirm that the national variable matters for news sites and the relationship they establish with the user.

1.2 Divergences due to National Settings

In the age of digital globalization, where boundaries seem to blur and news stories can transcend continents in a matter of seconds, there remains a steadfast truth: local matters. Despite the rapid proliferation of global news networks and the ease with which we access international news, media outlets are often tethered to their roots, ensuring that their content resonates with their primary audience: the national populace.

At its core, news is not just about relaying facts; it is about crafting narratives that resonate, inform, and engage. For this very reason, even international giants with bureaus spanning the globe find it imperative to cater to their core demographic. CNN, for instance, despite its international reach, maintains a U.S.-centric focus in its prime-time programming, ensuring that American events and concerns are at the forefront. Similarly, the BBC, while boasting a global perspective, remains quintessentially British in its prioritization of domestic events, reflecting the interests and sensibilities of its primary audience.

This deep-seated focus on the national audience isn't merely a nod to tradition but stems from a recognition of audience needs. People seek news not just for global events but to understand how those events might impact their local community, their jobs, their lives. A currency fluctuation in Europe or a trade deal in Asia might have implications for a local business owner in Ohio or a farmer in Wales. Media outlets, in recognizing this, strive to bridge the gap between global events and local implications.

Furthermore, trust plays a pivotal role in this equation. Audiences tend to trust and engage more with news sources that reflect their lived experiences, values, and concerns. In addressing the immediate concerns and interests of their national audience, media outlets foster a sense of camaraderie and reliability. It is a silent affirmation that, while the world might be vast and complex, the immediate concerns of the audience remain paramount to the news organization.

Therefore, even as media outlets adopt global engagement tools, platforms, and strategies, the heart of their content remains anchored in the local, the national. This focus on the national audience underscores a salient point: the relationship between news sites and their users is deeply intertwined with national context. While tools and tactics might be global, the essence of content

and the bond it fosters with the audience is invariably local. The national variable, far from being obsolete, remains a cornerstone in the intricate dance between media organizations and their audiences.

Therefore, we consider the six factors external factors we outlined that affect media companies – **government regulations, language, cultural relevance, audience loyalty, niche market** and **revenue** – affect the users news manage to reach and engage. The factors are intrinsically interconnected and influence each other and point to the fact that journalism faces several barriers to becoming fully globalized and reaching a worldwide audience. Though news media can be considered globalized to some extent, it is not a fully global industry yet. We recognize again that the rise of the internet and social media has made it easier for news organizations to reach a global audience, and many are now focusing on expanding their reach beyond national borders. However, not all news organizations have the resources or the desire to go global, and many still focus on serving a specific national market.

Modernity may be a global trend, but its impact is not uniform across countries and regions. The historical, cultural, and social context of each nation shapes the way modernity is experienced and understood. Factors such as colonization, cultural diversity, social structures, media perspectives, and socioeconomic disparities contribute to the global yet unequal nature of modernity. The historical context of each country influenced its trajectory of modernity. Government regulations play a crucial role in dictating media's direction and freedom across nations. Historical events, particularly colonization, have left lasting impacts on nations' regulatory environments, often delineating the trajectory of media freedom and reach. Language acts as another major determinant in the dispersion of media content. Linguistic diversity is pivotal in shaping content accessibility and resonance across different national audiences. The transition of media in the 19th century, facilitated by innovations like printing, only underscored the importance of language in media distribution and consumption.

The cultural backdrop of nations often dictates their media narratives. As nations integrate modern media concepts, they do so through the lens of their unique cultural and traditional values. The nuances in this integration play a role in determining media's cultural relevance and its broad reception. Audience loyalty, though rooted in cultural and societal constructs, presents varying patterns cross-nationally. Distinct societal structures, whether they are based on class, caste, or gender, significantly influence media consumption trends. Such dynamics are integral to understanding the depth of audience engagement and the subsequent challenges that media outlets face. The global media landscape is replete with niche markets, molded by specific local conditions, historical contexts, and interests. Whether influenced by the dominance of Western

media or propelled by efforts to maintain indigenous values, nations cultivate unique content niches. These niches cater to particular audience segments, thus offering tailored resonance. Finally, revenue streams in the media industry are shaped by various challenges and opportunities. The digital divide remains a significant factor that might limit populations from accessing contemporary media platforms. How nations maneuver these challenges to harness revenue opportunities is crucial to understanding their media ecosystem's sustainability.

The globalization of journalism is not merely a straightforward journey towards a universal media landscape. It is a complex mosaic of intricacies, shaped by numerous factors that intertwine and intersect in various ways. From the historical imprints of colonization to the pervasive influence of language, from the rich tapestry of cultural contexts to the economic realities of revenue generation, the global reach of news media is both enabled and constrained. While the internet and technological advancements have bridged many gaps, they have also unveiled new challenges and dimensions to the story, with multifaceted barriers and opportunities that shape the global media environment.

National differences matter when it comes to news organizations because each country has its own unique cultural, social, and political context. Language barriers can create a communication gap between media organizations and their audiences, making it difficult for media organizations to reach a global audience. This can impact the type of content produced, as well as the way media organizations engage with their audiences, as they may need to produce content in multiple languages to reach a wider audience. Cultural relevance is important because it determines the type of content that resonates with audiences and what topics are relevant to their interests. Media organizations that focus on cultural relevance are better equipped to engage with their audiences and build strong relationships with them. Understanding the unique challenges and opportunities posed by each factor is crucial for media organizations to build strong relationships with their audiences and effectively engage with them. News organizations that are aware of and understand these differences are better able to provide news and information that is relevant and meaningful to their audience. For example, the way a political issue is reported in one country may not be the same way it would be reported in another country due to cultural, social, and political differences. News organizations that are sensitive to these differences will be able to report the issue in a way that resonates with their audience.

Revenue is a critical factor for media organizations because it determines their ability to produce content and reach their audiences. Advertising and subscription revenue are the main sources of income for many media organizations, and their focus on national markets may be driven by the desire to reach a more profitable audience. Audience loyalty is an important factor

because it determines the level of trust and engagement between media organizations and their audiences. Media organizations that have been serving a specific national market for a long time may have a loyal audience and may prioritize them over a global audience. Niche market refers to the specific group of people that a media organization may focus on, and it is important because it allows media organizations to reach a more targeted audience and engage with them in a more meaningful way. By focusing on a niche market, media organizations can build strong relationships with their audiences and create content that is relevant to their interests.

However, as per the manner the companies choose to engage their users on their news and the strategies they use, it remains remarkably similar throughout the different countries. While these six factors point to why national settings still matter for media organizations, even in online and globalized world, and though we consider that though the audiences themselves might be unique for each medium due to national borders, they are called to become a part of new organizations processes in the same manner.

Cross-national differences should become ever more irrelevant and insubstantial in general for user-media company relationships when it comes to technological resources and strategies for engagement. That is not because national differences are ignored, but because as the market and the need to financially survive remain the principal motivator for how news media sees and handles their audience, undeniable patterns emerge in how news organizations handle their users: we continuously see the tools used for interactivity, the same approaches to engage the public, and the same ways in which User-Generated Content is adopted.

We see the relevance of a national context of media companies when we see the link between news and culture, news and language. One of the most fundamental reasons people need journalism is to receive accurate and reliable information. News outlets serve as a primary source of information for the public on a wide range of topics, including politics, business, science, and technology. This information helps citizens make informed decisions about their lives, and it is crucial for democracy to function effectively. Journalism plays a critical role in providing the public with information that is accurate, truthful, and reliable. The public looks for news they connect with, that are relevant to their reality, to their day to day lives, to their experiences and, in this, there is an intrinsic connection a national context of news, tied to language and cultural background, that goes beyond tools and strategies.

1.2.1 Global versus Local Interplay in Online News

In the modern era, the internet has ushered in a transformative age of interconnectedness, bridging geographical divides, and collapsing temporal boundaries (Castells, 2010). This dynamic digital landscape has profoundly altered the way we perceive and engage with both global and local

contexts. One notable area where this impact is keenly felt is in the realm of media organizations, which now face the intricate challenge of striking a delicate equilibrium between catering to overarching global issues and attending to the unique concerns and interests of specific communities (Chadwick, 2013).

The relationship between culture, media organizations, and their audience is indeed complex and multifaceted. Cultural relevance plays a significant role in shaping this relationship, with implications at both the national and community levels, especially in the context of online journalism. The dynamics of online journalism further blur the boundaries between local and global contexts. In this digital landscape, the terms “local” and “global” no longer exclusively refer to physical spaces but also encompass digital and online communities. This evolution makes it even harder to pinpoint physical borders to the factors that influence journalism’s relationship with the public and its audience (Pavlik, 2000; Hjarvard, 2008).

This transformation in online journalism introduces a new dimension to the interplay between local and global contexts, erasing the clear demarcations that once defined these terms. Historically, “local” and “global” were tightly linked to specific physical locations, referring to events within geographic boundaries or on a worldwide scale. However, the rise of the digital age has shattered this binary, expanding the scope of “local” and “global” to encompass not only geographic spaces but also the virtual landscapes of digital and online communities.

Within the contemporary digital realm, news, and information flow freely across geographical barriers, transcending traditional limitations. Online journalism thrives in a borderless environment, where stories attain global reach with the click of a button. An article published by a local online outlet can swiftly resonate with individuals spanning continents, catalyzing conversations and interactions that transcend physical distances. This seamless interconnectedness has fundamentally reshaped our perception and interaction with news, fundamentally altering the symbiotic relationship between journalism and its audience.

The very concept of “local” has evolved beyond mere geographic proximity. Online communities united by shared interests, identities, or causes coalesce as virtual localities. Participants hailing from disparate corners of the world and identifying with a specific community can engage with news stories that mirror their communal experiences. This dynamic generates microcosms of shared understanding within the expansive digital terrain.

Conversely, the concept of “global” no longer pertains exclusively to overarching global issues or international matters. Online platforms facilitate access to a diverse array of perspectives and narratives originating from varied cultures and regions. Consequently, individuals can attain deeper insights into global events and perspectives that might have remained inaccessible during

the pre-digital era. This infusion of global information enriches local contexts by offering a broader outlook on matters that might have initially appeared purely local.

However, this transition also poses a challenge: navigating the intricate digital ecosystem. With the dissolution of tangible physical borders, attributing specific influences to geographic factors grows increasingly intricate. The forces shaping journalism's relationship with the public and audience are no longer confined to specific locales. Instead, they intertwine with digital networks, online communities, and virtual interactions that transcend conventional boundaries.

In this context, media organizations confront the task of catering to a dispersed audience with a dual appetite for global awareness and local resonance. Achieving this balance requires a nuanced comprehension of the multifaceted ways in which digital communities interact and impact one another. It mandates recognition that an article gaining traction within a specific online community can ripple through other digital spheres, ultimately shaping public discourse on a global scale (Carlson and Lewis, 2015).

Furthermore, as the internet continues to blur the lines between global and local contexts, media organizations must navigate both opportunities and challenges. Striving to address global issues while simultaneously acknowledging the interests and concerns of distinct communities is a complex endeavor. Successfully doing so involves adopting a multifaceted approach that harnesses technology, interactivity, and an astute understanding of the diverse audiences they serve. By embracing this approach, media organizations can effectively traverse the intricate landscape of the digital era, creating content that resonates on both global and local scales (Hermida, 2010).

1.2.2 Lost in Translation? The Role of Language and Nationalism

From our *corpus* of 80 news sites, only one was made uniquely targeting an international audience and what they considered to be global issues: The Correspondent, based in the Netherlands. The news site is no longer in service, having been online for a little over a year. The website started with its Dutch counterpart and inspiration, De Correspondent, a member-funded news organization from the Netherlands. For them, publishing in English would enable them “to reach a huge number of readers – nearly a billion of them – from a variety of cultures around the world. That in turn will enrich our platform’s collaborative ecosystem” (Wijnberg, 2018; Pfauth, 2018).

The news site was officially launched in 2019. An independent platform, privacy-friendly and completely ad-free. However, before the site could ever get its bearings, 2020, the year of unpredictability hit, when hard news about the COVID-19 pandemic became a priority, and their proposal of slow journalism became unsustainable – it is not what the public needed, and when you depend on membership for survival, that becomes defining for the financial viability of your

enterprise. The decision to discontinue The Correspondent was made due to financial setbacks, which made their English language newsroom financially unsustainable.

News sites such as The Intercept Brasil, Red/Accion (Argentina), Mediapart (France), The Correspondent (Netherlands) and Krautreporter (Germany), interestingly all digital natives, attempted to build business model that differentiated them from legacy news media (Harlow and Salaverría, 2016; Requejo-Alemán and Lugo-Ocando, 2014), as they converged on their strategy to put the public front and center in their journalism, having that as ideal of journalism. From subscriptions to memberships and crowdfunding, their goal was making sure it was journalism funded by the public and, so, made for their public.

The Intercept Brazil asks for support through crowdfunding, appealing to their importance in a balance coverage of the country's polarized politics. Red/Accion, which works with a membership plan, puts their stories in the Argentinian context and focuses on a national audience. Even though they talk about all sorts of issues, they make sure to bring even to the international topics a local perspective (and often ask for their members to contribute with personal experiences for the stories to boot). Mediapart, a digital native that also has interesting tools for their audience, but has a more traditional journalistic style, plays into the same logic. Though it has an international version, it is built around a French perspective to the news. They all had time to build a loyal membership that was essential to them in a time of crisis.

Considering these three organizations – The Intercept Brasil, Red/Accion (Argentina), Mediapart (France) – and taking a closer look at The Correspondent and the Krautreporter, which has profoundly similar proposals in business models (membership) and strategies in participation, we can see how national settings are important in terms of survival for media organizations, especially those which are dependent on their relationship with the public for financial viability. The Krautreporter and The Correspondent were based on the logic that when you have a stake in something, you want to make sure it succeeds, so journalism that's supported not only financially by the public, but also by the knowledge or expertise of thousands of people rather than just a few is more likely to flourish. They worked under the same assumption that there is a payoff to being informed that the key to making that more evident for the public is to give them opportunities to participate, to contribute to the journalism they are following and choosing to trust.

The Krautreporter is proud to be a German-based, writing for a German speaking crowd, from a national perspective on a variety of issues – both local and international, having the same idea of The Correspondent that stories could bring not only the problem, but also proposals for solutions, which could be enriched by the participation of members. Something that is not a coincidence, as they are open about being inspired precisely by the Dutch De Correspondent, from

the initial crowdfunding to make the news site a reality, to the ideals that guided their journalism, now brought to live in a German-setting.

The Correspondent was brain child of the founders of De Correspondent (its Dutch counterpart and inspiration) – Ernst-Jan Pfauth, and Robert Wijnberg, and it quickly became the most participatory journalism crowdfunding project in history without even publishing a single story. It was a new idea and practice/proposal of journalism being sold to investors and the public. Over 30 days in November and December 2018, the Dutch member-funded journalism site raised \$2.6 million for its ad-free, inclusive English language platform The Correspondent. From the get-go, the platform wanted to include their members in their project: founding members were invited to become active participants in a movement for what they called *unbreaking* news. They wanted to change what news is about, how it is made, and how it is funded, and to contribute to a community of knowledgeable members sharing expertise from around the world.

It also meant adopting a ‘choose what you pay’ model. Their journalism was funded by their members. So how much is the price of a membership? “Instead of selling subscriptions or ads, we’re an ad-free platform funded by members, who don’t pay us to gain “access” to a “product,” but who become paying members because they believe in our cause” (Wijnberg, 2018). That price was what each person chose to pay. They decided this to be the best pricing model, closest to their values, because they believed in a pricing model based on trust, inclusivity, and solidarity.



Figure 61 – Tweet from Ms. Champagne.

We had exchanges with Nabeelah Shabbir, a journalist who was with The Correspondent from the start and Imogen Champagne, based out of Australia, the project's engagement editor. With Ms. Shabbir, she was the other point to their two-pronged approach to connect with their members. On her twitter account, after The Correspondent ended, she professed admiration for the project and the idea behind it and the sadness that it had failed, with a heartfelt thank you to the members she had the job – “and the pleasure” – of interacting with. On the same twitter thread, right below, she made a humored plea for suggestions on career pivots, that is, how to find a new job. Ms. Champagne went from praising and being proud of The Correspondent's project in September 2020 to being out of a job in December 2020 (Figure 61). Given how the project ended, and how it uprooted her life and sense of security, all in a matter of days, she chose to no longer speak about the project and her take on why it had failed.

All the excitement Ms. Shabbir had talking about the project was also over when we reached out to talk about the end of The Correspondent. Like the members themselves, the journalists' part of their international and quite small newsroom, were blindsided by the closure. They found out only a few days before the members themselves that their journalism experiment was coming to an end when they announced it in the 10th of December for the world at large, which for many of them meant being out of a job in a matter of weeks and right before the holidays. After that, Ms. Shabbir did not have much to say, beyond the canned phrasing that “it was a pleasure to be a part of this experiment, even though it ended” – which other members of the newsroom repeated, basically word for word – and how disappointed she was in all of it. Ms. Shabbir remained a true believer in The Correspondent's mission, but how the end of the news site was handled, the trust in the project and its management seemed to be broken. Was there truly no way to save the site? Should the journalists really have been kept in the dark about their financial struggles?

Despite being made to be an international news site, The Correspondent ended up being based out of the Netherlands alongside its founders, even if initially it was meant to have a newsroom out of New York. Even so, it still considered itself a transnational organization, made for covering stories that could matter to anyone and everyone around the world – news beyond physical borders. It had an international newsroom – and reporters who worked remotely from different sides of the world, written in English, with the design to reach a cross-national audience. The COVID-19 pandemic did make their time-spam to build loyalty and a member base incredibly short to survive a crisis; but they were unable to do what so many others did and have been doing, appealing to their national audience, with national issues. Without a pandemic perhaps The Correspondent would still be around and thriving – it is a what if we will never have an answer

too. Nonetheless, this is one point in which nationality comes into play, as it becomes one of the building blocks of the relationship between user and the media company.

This begs the fact that national audiences are still considered important for many news organizations today, as they can provide a significant source of revenue and readership; but the importance of national audiences for news organizations is a varying factor depending on the organization's strategy and target audience. Some news organizations may prioritize reaching a national audience, while others may focus more on reaching a global audience. The rise of the internet and social media has certainly made it easier for news organizations to reach a global audience, and many are now focusing on expanding their reach beyond national borders. Additionally, with the rise of digital media, many news organizations have shifted their focus to online content, which can be accessed by anyone with an internet connection, regardless of their location.

Interestingly, in terms of pure audience, the news site El País sees almost half of its traffic coming from outside Spain, mainly from Latin America and the United States. In terms of subscriptions, about 75 percent of the subscribers come from Spain. However, the closure of the Portuguese-language edition of El País in Brazil serves as a poignant example of the challenges news organizations encounter when attempting to reach global audiences, particularly when language is a significant factor. El País, originally published in Spanish, boasts an extensive network of correspondents across Latin America. With correspondents in São Paulo and a vast team of journalists in key capitals across the continent, El País has established itself as a comprehensive source of news and analysis in Spanish for the region.

Launched in 2013, the Brazilian edition of El País aimed to provide tailored content to Portuguese-speaking audiences, informing them about both national and global current events. Over the course of 8 years, it achieved significant audience engagement and digital subscriptions. However, the challenge of reconciling linguistic diversity with economic sustainability led to its discontinuation. The closure underscores the complexities of operating in multilingual contexts. While El País Brazil garnered substantial readership and digital subscriptions, it faced the inherent difficulty of competing within a market already served by its parent publication in Spanish. Language, as a crucial communication tool, played a significant role in shaping reader preferences and engagement. The decision to discontinue the Portuguese-language edition of El País reflects the intricate balance news organizations must strike between language, cultural affinity, and economic viability. It emphasizes that linguistic considerations are not solely about translation, but also about creating a distinct identity that resonates with the local audience.

Many major news organizations extend their reach by offering content in multiple languages, catering to non-native speakers worldwide. The BBC, known for its comprehensive international coverage, serves Spanish-speaking audiences with BBC Mundo, targets Arabic speakers through BBC Arabic, offers BBC Russia for Russian readers, and BBC Brasil for the Portuguese-speaking population in Brazil. Their dedication to multilingual reporting doesn't stop there; they cater to audiences with news in languages such as Pashto, Persian, Hausa, and Hindi. Their diverse language offerings reinforce their mission to inform, educate, and entertain a global audience.

In contrast, The New York Times had introduced "The New York Times en Español" for Spanish readers, though its scale was later reduced. While the NYT does provide some content in languages like Chinese, it doesn't maintain as expansive a multilingual presence as the BBC. Le Monde, a dominant French news entity, occasionally features English articles of global significance. However, its multi-language efforts are more pronounced through Le Monde Diplomatique, which, though historically linked, runs somewhat independently. This arm produces content in several languages, including English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, and Arabic, among others. As globalization advances, there's a growing demand for trustworthy multilingual news. Catering to this requirement, news giants aim to widen their influence and readership, fostering better cross-cultural communication and understanding. Yet, while this multilingual approach enhances accessibility, it also brings challenges, such as ensuring consistent editorial standards across diverse linguistic platforms.

Take the Netherlands as an example. News platforms like DutchNews.nl and NL Times ride on the advantage of the nation's large international community and its international business affiliations, effectively catering to their audience. In contrast, Deutsche Welle (DW), with financial backing from the German government, brings forth news with a distinct German lens, having the added advantage of resources that many others might not possess. Their influence is further amplified by their multilingual content offerings. In comparison, outlets like Argentina's The Bubble grappled with unique challenges, such as the relatively smaller English-speaking audience and the economic hurdles specific to the region. Such outlets might not be as resource rich as their European counterparts.

The success of English-language news sites in non-English speaking countries relies on various factors. Key among these is the demand generated by the English-speaking expats, tourists, and locals. Nations with robust international businesses or notable tourist activities often see a heightened demand for these English news outlets. Elements like the quality of journalism, the depth of genuine local insights over mere translations of international news, and a sustainable

revenue model, be it through ads or subscriptions, critically shape their prospects. The degree of competition, operational expenses, and the effectiveness of their outreach play supplementary but significant roles. The ambient conditions coupled with the strategic choices these media houses make eventually steer their success or decline in the market.

1.3 Globalized Journalism? Barriers, Implications and Possibilities.

In essence, while the globalization of journalism holds immense potential for bridging divides and fostering global understanding, it is a double-edged sword. Balancing the pros and cons will be the key to ensuring that journalism remains true to its core values while catering to a global audience. Journalism, as a cornerstone of democratic societies, faces numerous challenges in its journey towards globalization. One primary obstacle is the language barrier. With thousands of languages spoken worldwide, ensuring a news piece is universally understood is a monumental task. While translation tools have evolved, they are still far from perfect. Additionally, cultural differences cannot be overstated. What's relevant and intriguing in one culture may be inconsequential or misunderstood in another. These differences also affect how stories are approached, framed, and interpreted.

Another formidable barrier is government censorship. Many nations impose heavy restrictions on media, thereby manipulating or entirely obstructing the flow of certain pieces of information. This not only hampers the information-gathering process but also impedes the widespread dissemination of news. Furthermore, the economic disparities across regions play a significant role. Many parts of the world, particularly in developing nations, lack regular access to the internet or digital platforms, limiting their engagement with global news. Lastly, media ownership remains concentrated in many parts of the world. This concentration can severely limit the diversity of voices and perspectives available to the audience, undermining the very essence of a globalized journalistic endeavor.

In an ideal world, fully globalized journalism would mean universal access. Irrespective of geographical location, everyone would have access to any news outlet. The advent of automated translation could see news articles and broadcasts being instantly translated into myriad languages, allowing seamless consumption of content across linguistic barriers. Moreover, catering to a global audience would necessitate incorporating diverse perspectives. This might lead to international collaborations, resulting in richer, more multifaceted reporting. The global scope could also pave the way for uniform ethical and reporting standards, ensuring consistency and credibility in journalism worldwide. Finally, such globalized journalism could foster increased cross-cultural

understanding. Exposure to diverse perspectives and narratives would engender greater global empathy and mutual respect.

However, while the concept of global journalism sounds promising, it does come with its own set of implications. One major concern is the potential homogenization of news. As media outlets strive to cater to a global audience, there's a risk of creating generic content, sidelining unique, localized stories of paramount importance. Moreover, dominance by global media giants could lead to the loss of local media. These local outlets are often the backbone of journalism, focusing on local issues which might be overlooked by global conglomerates. Furthermore, centralizing news sources heightens the risk of increased bias. Fewer dominant voices could mean a unilateral narrative, devoid of the plurality journalism should ideally uphold. Nonetheless, globalized journalism could bring about greater accountability. With the whole world as their audience, news organizations might be more meticulous in ensuring the accuracy and fairness of their reporting. Lastly, serving a global audience would demand heightened cultural sensitivity from journalists. Stories would need to be approached and presented with a deeper understanding of various global nuances.

In an increasingly connected world, the idea of globalized journalism carries a certain allure. Imagine anyone, anywhere, tapping into any news source, gaining insights from myriad perspectives, fostering empathy, dismantling stereotypes, and building bridges between diverse communities (Couldry and Hepp, 2017). Such a world promises universal access and potentially democratizes the flow of information, amplifying marginalized voices and spotlighting underreported stories (Benkler, 2006). Journalism's strength undeniably lies in its diversity. Different outlets, born out of unique cultural, political, and social landscapes, ensure a rich tapestry of stories and interpretations (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). The promise of a globalized model, while offering universal access and understanding, might inadvertently dilute this diversity (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales, 2018).

Yet, history offers a cautionary tale. Media power, more often than not, concentrates in the hands of a few (Bagdikian, 2004). If this consolidation trend went global, we could face a singular narrative shaping global perceptions (McChesney, 1999). The vast reach of a global audience also means that the consequences of misinformation or biased reporting would be magnified exponentially (Zollmann, 2017). Moreover, in this drive towards a global narrative, there's a palpable risk of sidelining hyper-local news. Such news, though seemingly inconsequential on a global scale, plays an indispensable role in local governance and community cohesion (Meyer, 2002).

So, faced with the question of whether we want journalism to be fully globalized, there isn't a straightforward answer. The potential benefits of globalized journalism are vast, ranging from enhanced cross-cultural understanding to democratized access. However, if not approached with intentional caution and responsibility, it could spawn a homogenized, potentially manipulated news environment. Perhaps the most prudent path forward isn't an either/or proposition but a balance. A world where journalism retains its global accessibility but remains rooted in local, independent, and diverse voices might be the ideal we should strive for.

2. The Place of the User Revisited

The *place of the user* delves deep into the shifting paradigms of the digital news domain, highlighting the pivotal role of the audience/public pivotal in media interactions, news dissemination, and even content creation. Their significance goes beyond mere interaction; they are instrumental in shaping media practices and carving out new business models. Through this thesis, we constructed a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted dimensions that define the user's position within a media organization, shedding light on their ever-growing importance.

In Chapter 7, section 4, through a comprehensive analysis of the terminologies, declarations, and *ethos* of various news organizations using content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002; Bardin, 1977), patterns and divergences emerged, casting a revealing light on the place of the user in contemporary media dynamics regarding (1) their role and identity, that is how user are perceived and portrayed; and (2) the community and networked aspect of user perception, when the idea of users appear not just as individual entities but as part of a larger community or network that shares, discusses, and shapes news narratives collectively.

For example, Mediapart and Krautreporter's commitment to a collaborative model positions their readers not just as passive consumers but as proactive participants in the journalistic process. Such a model suggests a democratic approach, elevating the user from a mere recipient of information to a valued contributor. This contrasts starkly with the transactional relationship proposed by outlets like EL PAÍS and The New York Times, which, despite their extensive reach and influence, lean more towards viewing users as consumers or subscribers in a traditional business-customer model. Bridging these two paradigms, HuffPost and Red/Acción showcase a nuanced approach, acknowledging individual stories within vast contexts and emphasizing both the personal and collective aspects of journalism. Their narratives underscore users as both the subject of stories and as potential collaborators. On examining the community and networked facet, news organizations highlight the interconnectedness of today's digital readership. Mediapart's assertion that stories evolve when shared emphasizes an expansive, engaged user

network. Red/Acción furthers this notion by viewing every reader as an integral link in an overarching network.

Despite these varied perceptions and the myriad ways users are addressed—be it as subscribers, members, supporters, or customers—the core challenge remains. Many news organizations, irrespective of their stated *ethos* or business model, have not fully harnessed the technological promise of converting readers into writers. While the doors of journalism have seemingly opened to the public, the depth of this inclusion often does not meet the initial expectations of profound interactivity promised with the rise of the internet. In Chapters 8 and 9, we investigated strategies for engagement and spaces for participation and User-Generated Content, which highlighted the place of the user through the perspective of interaction, which considers (1) how users interact with the content (through comments, shares, likes, and other forms of digital engagement; and (2) their involvement in news processes (for example, crowdsourcing and User-Generated Content).

It is standard for news sites across countries to have features that promote user engagement; it is even standard for them to include UGC in news stories, especially for breaking news events and from viral content on social media. However, meaningful spaces for participation, in which users have a role in contributing to the news process, are still punctual, such as Le Club from Mediapart, that stands out as a continuous space for their users to publish content and Krautreporter's proposal of making news a continuous conversation with their members is also worth highlighting. But we have to recognize that this proposals work side by side with the sustainability of media organizations, how users contribute to the financial health of news platforms and their role in the evolving business models of digital journalism.

We discussed these as an element of the relationship between media companies and users throughout the thesis. The confluence of influence, power dynamics, and economic considerations has emerged as a dominant theme, reshaping the ways news entities operate and interact with their audiences. At the very core of this shift is the challenge of sustainability. Legacy media outlets, with their storied histories and reputations like El País, The New York Times, and Le Monde, have astutely pivoted to digital subscription models. This transition not only secures a steady revenue stream but also leverages the profound influence these entities have nurtured over decades.

However, not all news outlets can bank on a legacy. New-age platforms, such as The Intercept Brazil, have turned to crowdfunding, emphasizing an intricate power dynamic that hinges on the audience's support. Here, media survival is deeply rooted in genuine engagement and trust, making the audience an active stakeholder in the journalistic endeavor. Further expanding this

stakeholder perspective, the contributions of the audience to the financial health of news platforms are multifaceted. Direct payments through subscriptions or one-off contributions provide a straightforward revenue source. Still, these are contingent on the perceived value and quality of the content, emphasizing the importance of trustworthiness in journalism.

Yet not all financial contributions are direct. Many users, through their engagement with ad-integrated content, indirectly bolster a platform's revenue, shifting the power dynamics towards advertisers who value platforms with significant audience retention. Donations and crowdfunding, on the other hand, offer a more democratized approach to financial support. Through these methods, users can back outlets they believe in, seeing their contributions as both a validation and an investment in the media's future.

The online news ecosystem is characterized by its evolving business models, each reflecting the shifting landscape of power dynamics and economic imperatives. The industry's movement towards paywalls, microtransactions, membership models, and crowdfunding highlights a recognition of the user's central role in shaping content, determining its value, and ensuring an organization's financial viability.

The digital age has intricately woven influence, power dynamics, and economic considerations into the fabric of journalism. As news entities grapple with these shifts, finding the delicate balance between profitability and journalistic integrity remains paramount. The path forward, while rife with challenges, offers unparalleled opportunities for engagement, revenue generation, and redefining journalism in the digital era. In this content, *the place of the user* in the online news ecosystem becomes ever more complex and multi-faceted, shaped by both the self-perceptions of news organizations and the ever-shifting digital landscape. As the lines between user, contributors, and journalists continue to blur, it is imperative for the world of journalism to recognize, adapt, and cultivate this dynamic relationship, ensuring a more inclusive, collaborative, and evolving future for the media industry.

3. The Symbiotic Dance of User-Media Dynamics

In our journey through the intricacies of media dynamics, the resonance between the internal and external worlds has emerged as a compelling narrative. This delicate balance, akin to a harmonized dance, serves as the crux of media-user interactions, particularly when viewed through the lens of national settings. At the heart of any media organization lies its core—the nature it embodies, the business models it adopts, and the pivotal space it allots to its users. These internal facets, evident in tangible strategies such as comment sections and newsletters, lay the

foundation for any initial user interaction. However, while these are intrinsically vital, they merely represent one side of the coin.

As we shift our gaze beyond the confines of media institutions, a vast and dynamic landscape unfolds. It is in this expansive realm that the external factors, especially national settings, come to the fore. Far from being passive backdrops, these settings actively interact with a media organization's internal strategies, either bolstering or challenging them. It is a testament to the profound influence of external factors that government regulations, linguistic nuances, and cultural mores can significantly sway media narratives and user engagement. The intricate dance between internal content strategies and the external fabric of cultural norms and values is particularly evident when dissecting elements like cultural relevance and audience loyalty. The revenue streams a media entity relies on, or its choice to cater to a niche market, while inherently internal decisions, are also inextricably linked to the broader national socio-economic terrain.

Thus, as we draw our exploration to a close, it is evident that media organizations are not mere islands. They are entities intricately woven into the fabric of their surroundings. Their strategies, while shaped internally, are constantly in dialogue with the external world, tested and refined by the realities of their national context. While globalization and technological advances have led to certain standardized tools and strategies for online journalistic participation across various countries, national contexts, shaped by factors such as government regulations, language, cultural relevance, audience loyalty, niche market, and revenue, still play a critical role in the user-news organization relationship. Despite the increasing convergence of tools and strategies due to globalization, the manifestation and success of these tools and strategies are influenced by the unique cultural, political, and economic contexts of each country. This means that while media modernity is a global trend, its effects are varied, making it necessary for news organizations to maintain a balance between global reach and catering to local or national contexts.

The relationship between media and users isn't static; it is a dynamic interplay, choreographed by internal factors and influenced by external rhythms. To truly understand and appreciate this relationship, one must recognize it for what it is—a dance of complementarity, where moves and responses are influenced by both the immediate environment and the broader stage of national contexts. In this dance, neither partner leads throughout; they take turns, ensuring the performance is both balanced and engaging, reflecting the true essence of media dynamics in the digital age.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This PhD was developed as part of the JOLT project, which aimed to advance new theoretical insights, technical advancements, and best-practice guidelines for digital and data journalism, in the stated context where the internet and digital technologies brought profound disruption to journalism and news media. The guise of our PhD was to study the Politics and Ethics of User-Generated Content. We chose to explore User-Generated Content through the relationship formed between news organizations and their users in news sites from different countries and diverse types of media outlets. Studying news websites, and the relationship between media companies and their users is a worthy academic pursuit as the news media plays a critical role in shaping public opinion and understanding of current events. Additionally, these relationships are constantly evolving with the development of new technologies, making it an important area of study for understanding the future of news media. It can also inform the design and development of future news websites to make sure they are able to provide accurate and reliable information to their users.

We analyzed a cross-national *corpus* from the perspective of the news organizations (their journalists, editors, employees) to explore **what were the spaces created and hosted by media companies to engage and encourage participation from the user**. This allowed us to investigate the myriad of factors that affected the appropriation and use of User-Generated Content by news sites, such as the capabilities of each news site as a platform and the tools and features it provided for engagement, the nature (legacy media or digital native) and business models of the media companies, the practice/proposal of journalism of each news organization, and how they referred to their reader.

The *corpus* of 80 news sites from 8 countries enabled us to understand how and in what ways audience/public engagement/participation was occurring in different countries. The given empirical cross-national comparative analysis sought to answer: RQ(1) **What are the divergences and convergences between the spaces created and hosted by news organizations to engage and encourage participation from the user according to their country of origin?**; RQ(2) **How/when does the national context of a media company become a variable for their relationship with the user?** Through these questions, we wanted to understand how national contexts affected the relationships between media and their audience/public highlighting the cross-national convergences and divergences between the spaces that enabled participation and engagement in news sites.

The proposed research was qualitative in its approach, as the research choice required facing the challenges of a contemporary and changing object of study. We conducted case studies from January 2020 to April 2022, based on the *corpus* of 80 news sites from 8 countries. As empirical inquiries, they proved useful in an in-depth investigation of contemporary phenomena, such as the multiple paths taken by digital journalism with regards to UGC. The proposed case studies allowed us to consider their real-life setting, encompassing the contextual conditions that were pertinent for this research (Yin and Davis, 2007). The case studies were constituted of two concomitant activities: desk research with the bibliographical and documental review pertinent to our *corpus*, and platform research, which pertained to the review and analysis of the news sites selected for this study. We also used interviews to complement and enrich our findings.

Through six chapters we presented theoretical framework for journalism, its relationship with the audience and the changes brought on by the internet and digital media and aimed to show how the 80 news sites from our *corpus* and their respective media organizations, given their diverse national contexts, and varied journalistic characteristics (nature, business model etc.), are choosing to engage (or not) the user. We presented quantitative and qualitative data collected through platform analysis, documental research, and interviews regarding their uses of tools, features and strategies designed for audience/public interaction to answer the questions that motivated this investigation.

Our understanding was that, while there are cross-national differences in media organizations' strategies of engagement and participation, these differences are not primarily determined by the national contexts of these organizations. Instead, the strategies for user engagement across countries largely converge, with differences stemming from business models, professional practices, and the consequent place of the public in their proposal of journalism. In essence, despite initial appearances of divergence based on nationality, the actual differences in media engagement strategies are more closely tied to business considerations and journalistic philosophies than to the countries in which these media organizations operate.

Our thesis attempted to challenge or nuance conventional understanding by arguing that the perceived national differences in media engagement strategies might be overshadowed by business models and journalistic practices. We believe the research presented novel understandings into user-media organization relationships by adopting a contextualized approach and highlighting the importance of considering various factors that impact user behavior in different contexts. It also contributed to the field of journalism by providing valuable insights into how news organizations are adapting to the challenges and opportunities of online participation and the extent to which standardization of tools and strategies for participation in online journalism across

different countries has occurred. The conclusions drawn from our research could have broader implications for understanding media engagement, globalization of online practices, and the future of journalism.

1. Context of Research

With the advent of the internet, news organizations have been able to reach a much larger audience by publishing their content online. This has led to an increase in the number of news sources available to the public, as well as a greater diversity of perspectives. Additionally, news sites can provide multimedia content such as videos, animations, and audio, which print newspapers can't. The interactivity of news sites also allows readers to engage with the content in new ways, such as by commenting on articles or sharing them on social media.

First, it allows for a more engaged and active readership. By allowing readers to comment on articles and share them on social media, news sites can foster a sense of community among their readers, encouraging them to return to the site and engage with more content. This can lead to increased reader loyalty and a more invested readership. Second, interactivity can also provide journalists with valuable feedback and insights from their readers. Comments on articles can provide journalists with a sense of how their work is being received and what issues or angles readers are most interested in. This can help journalists to shape their coverage and produce content that is more relevant and engaging for their audience. Third, interactivity can also help to increase the reach and impact of journalism. Social media sharing can help to amplify the reach of news stories, making them more likely to be seen and shared by a wider audience. This can help to increase the public's awareness of important issues and promote public discourse. Finally, interactivity also allows for more collaborative and citizen-led journalism, where readers can actively participate in the news-making process and contribute their own perspectives and information.

However, it is essential to recognize the double-edged sword that interactivity presents. While it provides a platform for diverse voices, it can also give rise to misinformation, echo chambers, and online harassment. Comments sections can sometimes turn vitriolic, deterring productive discourse and potentially alienating readers. Moreover, the very tools that enable citizen journalism can also be used to spread unverified or biased information, undermining the credibility of journalism as a whole. Balancing these challenges with the undeniable benefits of interactivity requires both vigilance and innovation from news organizations. In the evolving landscape of digital journalism, the quest remains to harness the power of interactivity while upholding the integrity and trustworthiness of the news.

In this context, news sites become important – for the profession and for society itself – because they continue to fulfill the journalism’s primary function to provide information about current events and issues happening locally, nationally, and internationally. They help keep the public informed about important issues and allow for a better-informed citizenry to make informed decisions about politics, business, and other areas of life. Furthermore, news sites can also provide analysis and context for events, helping readers understand complex issues and make sense of the information they are presented with. But they go beyond traditional press, as digital practices allow for integration of new tools that have amplified interaction with the audience; but we must look beyond that to understand the new relationship that develops between journalism and the audience, and why these forms of engagement matter in an environment where the profession is fighting to survive, amongst failing business models and the rise and prevalence of platforms.

We delved deeply into over 20 years of studies regarding audience contribution into news production online, seeing that for the past decade, much of the academic interest into the implications of UGC in storytelling had faded after several studies considering how it affected work routines, the opinion of journalists in its uses, its practical and ethical implications, etc. Two decades after journalism began a transition to digital and online platform, and about a decade following articles that reflect the lackluster use of resources by the profession to successfully and continuously engage the user and encourage *actual* participation, we employed an extensive analysis of news sites in many ways to see if this panorama has changed.

2. Engagement & Participation

All 80 media organizations selected for this study had news sites accessible by desktop and by mobile browser and 63 had applications for mobile devices. As for mobile navigation, we found that though technology drove them to create a presence designed for mobile devices, that the user could easily access via smartphones and tablets. Considering, however, the manner in which news organizations were relating to the public with content designed for portable navigation, we noticed the relationship itself rarely changed with the transition in platform, as the logic behind resources (easily manageable) and participation (easily moderated), remained the same.

From our analysis, we perceived three factors that influence the spaces created for the public to engage with journalism, which are nature (digital native or legacy media) and business model, practice/proposal of journalism and the place of the public for their proposal of journalism (member, subscriber, supporter/ally, *just* the reader, costumer), but when it came to their

relationships with the public, we could see how Western tradition and the globalization of online practices marked their tactics to handling the user.

We identified three primary tools for our public engagement: *share buttons*, *newsletters*, and *comment sections*. Share buttons were present on 77 news sites and are a useful manner for media organizations to encourage the spread of their stories, to attract new users and bring more traffic to their websites. Present as an option for 73 news organizations, newsletters are an effective tool for news organizations to engage their audience and build relationships with readers. They provide an opportunity for exclusive content, interactive elements, and audience engagement, which can help news organizations to create content that is more relevant and interesting to their audience. Comment sections, which were present in 49 news sites, are an effective tool for news organizations to engage their audience and encourage participation from readers. They provide a platform for community building, audience engagement, and the representation of diverse voices, but they must be moderated properly to avoid negative effects.

Share buttons are the tool most homogeneously adopted by different countries because they are a simple and effective way to promote content and engage with audiences across different platforms. Unlike comment sections, which require active moderation and can be time-consuming to manage, share buttons require minimal effort from the news organization to implement and maintain. This is because share buttons are typically provided by social media platforms themselves and can be easily integrated into a website with a few lines of code. In addition, share buttons are a low-commitment engagement tool, meaning that they do not require users to provide personal information or register with a website in order to share content. This makes them more accessible and appealing to a broader range of users, who may not have the time or inclination to participate in more involved forms of engagement, such as commenting or subscribing to a newsletter.

Furthermore, share buttons allow news organizations to tap into the power of social media, which has become a ubiquitous part of modern life. By providing share buttons, news organizations can leverage the reach and influence of social media platforms to amplify their content and engage with new audiences, regardless of their location or language. Overall, share buttons are a popular and effective tool for news organizations to grow their audience, increase their visibility, and engage with users across different platforms and countries.

Social media platforms offer valuable opportunities for news organizations to reach a larger and more diverse audience, and to gain valuable insights into their audience's perspective, but the relationship between news organizations and these platforms is complex and multifaceted. The pose challenges such as the impact of platform algorithms, the spread of misinformation, and the pressure to monetize content. In order to effectively engage with their public, news organizations

must navigate these challenges and find ways to balance the opportunities and risks associated with social media platforms.

Social networks, with their array of new tools for production and interaction with the public, could have proven an asset to build meaningful relationships with the user and include them in each organization's journalism. However, we saw that it rarely happens, with these networks being used by most of the organizations we studied for the distribution and promotion of content, trying to reach more users, not connect with them. A few have been utilizing social media platforms to produce unique content and reach news audiences where they are, which is a trend that should move onwards as following the audience to where they are and attracting new and younger publics become ever more essential.

The Intercept Brasil attempted to create exclusive content for Instagram during the pandemic and a bit forward, but with a small newsroom staff and a struggle for money, they don't have a continued presence on the network with exclusive content. The Washington Post was an outlier, became a pioneer of explaining the news in TikTok trying to reach new generations and explain tough subjects in a more palatable way. The outlet creates exclusive content for the platform and now has a team (though small – one journalist and two interns) dedicated only to produce videos for the platform, which is a luxury of a large company.

Alas, from our study 80 news sites from 8 different countries we analyzed, we saw that though news organizations are plural and each company has their own principles, business model and objectives – which often lead to different perspectives of the public and, consequently, of what constitutes participation in spaces they host – in the end there are clearly common tools for interaction, and spaces that are consistently hosted, and the uses and meanings that are given to these resources across different companies and countries tend to remain similar.

Is there a limit to what can be done because of resources available – considering money and personnel? We seem to have the technology available to make true innovations when it comes to journalism, and to the engagement of the audience, so what are the hurdles we cannot get through? Is investing in this relationship not worth it or not feasible? If serving the public is a priority, according to their journalistic practice/proposal, should that not imply including them in the news process?

Between 2006 and 2008, there was a boom in interactivity. News companies throughout the world made their most radical changes in the digital and online world, adopting new tools and features that allowed for increased user participation (Domingo et al. 2008). From then on and throughout the 2010s, most countries' news media opened their websites to users' participation (Singer et al. 2011; Thurman 2008; Williams, Wardle, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2011). Nevertheless,

despite this first stage characterized by a certain optimism in the transformative potential of participatory journalism (Curran, Fenton and Freedman 2012), what we see now is that journalists and media institutions lost interest in further develop participatory options opened by new technologies that were first met with enthusiasm (Karlsson et al. 2015). Journalists may have lost the *relative* monopoly of news gathering and distribution, but news media organizations are still producing most of the news we consume today, even those that circulate through social media and aggregators.

When it comes to most news organizations and their websites, our research has not found encouraging novelties that bring the public into journalism. Though there are potentialities for journalism in opening the news process to the public, the generalization of participation mechanisms tends to be fundamentally due to economic motivations (Singer et al., 2011; Vujnovic et al., 2010, Rosenstiel and Michell, 2011; Becker, Clement and Schaedel, 2010).

3. User-Generated Content

As per the use of UGC in news stories, we categorized the uses from minimal to maximal, according to the role of the journalist in mediating the content. We also observed that most of this type of content comes from social networks, be it from viral videos and memes that become news for their popularity, be it from an unexpected event (natural disaster, for example) or from a place/situation which is difficult for journalists to access (Ukraine War, for example).

There are political and ethical matters that surround the appropriations of UGC by newsrooms, but that the situation has not profoundly changed in the past decades: User-Generated Content is used sparsely and punctually for news stories, viral content on social networks from users tends to be what gains more space; and features for participation tend to be those who are more easily applied and managed.

We can look at the organizations that chose to connect with their audiences in a way that goes beyond soliciting their feedback, turning their readers into storytellers, as a way forward. News sites such as The Intercept Brasil, Red/Accion Argentina, The Correspondent (Netherlands) and Krautreporter (Germany), interestingly all digital natives, attempted to build business model that differentiated them from legacy news media (Harlow and Salaverria, 2016; Requejo-Aleman and Lugo-Ocando, 2014). They proved to converge on their strategy to put the public front and center in their journalism, having that as ideal of journalism. Building strong relationships with readers is essential for the survival and growth of news organizations, as it helps to increase revenue, while providing a better service and content to the audience. Strong relationships with readers help news organizations to create value and promote their offerings, which ultimately leads

to an increase in revenue, which is vital for the sustainability of the news organization. By giving a voice to the public, these organizations put the user at the center of their work, and produced a quality, empathetic journalism, showing that there can be more to User-Generated Content and participation.

4. National Settings (*Still*) Matter

Our research employed a detailed documental and bibliographical research approach, in-depth platform analysis, as well as exchanges with members of 15 media companies to complement our findings. The study began with quantitative cross-national analysis in which we investigated the spaces media organizations provided for their users and how news companies engaged with their users through their websites, targeting comment boxes, newsletters and share buttons for social media and how they referred to their users (members, subscribers, etc.). We then investigated the spaces they gave to User-Generated Content on a routine basis and provided examples. Through this analysis, we were able to paint the landscape of participation/engagement that was taking place on the web in these 8 countries.

Research on engagement and participation in news sites across different countries required acknowledging and accounting for contextual factors and complexity. There were many factors such as national context, cultural differences, business model, and the idea of journalism that could influence user engagement and participation. It was challenging to develop a single thesis that applied to all cases, so the research aimed to generate nuanced and context-dependent findings that highlighted the interplay between different factors and how they influenced user-news organization relationships in specific contexts. For instance, situations where national context or media company characteristics were more salient in understanding user engagement and participation were identified. The research needed to be sensitive to the subject matter's complexity and diversity, adopting a contextualized approach that accounted for various factors influencing user behavior in different contexts.

We hypothesized that there were cross-national differences between media organizations, mainly due to cultural and language barriers with a diverse range of users. However, when it came to their relationships with the audience/public formed through the spaces of participation of their news sites, Western tradition and the globalization of online practices determined the employed strategies for handling the users, making the cross-national differences insubstantial for the relationships between the company and the audience/public. Thus, we believed we would see convergences in strategies across countries, which diverged not because of national contexts but rather due to business models, professional practice, and the consequential place of the public in

their proposal of journalism, with media organizations often diverging within their own countries but finding similarities with media in other countries.

Overall, our thesis aligned with our initial hypothesis, as it finds that globalization has led to the standardization of tools and strategies for participation in online journalism across different countries to some extent, as with the increasing use of digital technologies, news organizations around the world have adopted similar tools and strategies for engaging with their audiences online, such as social media, User-Generated Content, and interactive features; and yet, the extent of standardization varies depending on the cultural, political, and economic context of each country. Also, as news organizations may adopt similar tools and strategies for audience engagement, the ways in which these tools and strategies are used can vary widely. Therefore, our cross-national comparison of news sites from different countries provided valuable insights into how different media systems are adapting to the challenges and opportunities of online participation, and how cultural and contextual factors can continue to shape the way that news organizations engage with their audiences online.

We recognize yet again that the rise of the internet and social media has made it easier for news organizations to reach a global audience, and many are now focusing on expanding their reach beyond national borders. However, not all news organizations have the resources or the desire to go global, and many still focus on serving a specific national market. Modernity is a global trend, but its manifestation is shaped by historical, cultural, and social factors. The unequal distribution of resources, varying cultural perspectives, and socioeconomic disparities contribute to the diverse experiences of modernity across countries. Media plays a crucial role in shaping modernity, but factors such as ownership structures, cultural and language barriers, biases, and global power dynamics influence its impact, necessitating diverse and inclusive media representations.

Six factors – **government regulations, language, cultural relevance, audience loyalty, niche market** and **revenue** – that intrinsically interconnected and influence each other, play a role on why national contexts still matter for a user-news organization relationship. They indicate that journalism faces several barriers to becoming fully globalized and reaching a worldwide audience. In our research, we have identified that language and cultural differences are the main hindrances for news organizations to expand their reach beyond their domestic borders. One of the most fundamental challenges is the translation and adaptation of content to cater to diverse audiences, which is both time-consuming and costly. Even with the advent of the internet, news outlets typically produce content in specific languages, which restricts access for non-native speakers.

Additionally, cultural differences influence the way news is reported and the kind of information that is deemed newsworthy.

In the context of the complex interplay of historical, cultural, linguistic, economic, and technological factors significantly shape the global media landscape, reinforcing the reality that while media modernity is indeed a worldwide phenomenon, its influence is far from uniform; our thesis is the dynamic interactions of these factors in shaping news organizations' attempts to reach and engage a global audience, and the ongoing tension between the pursuit of international reach and the imperative to cater to national identities and contexts. Despite the globalization of news, people's interest remains primarily local. While individuals may share common values and tools across different countries, they still tend to gravitate towards news sources that are culturally and geographically familiar to them. This familiarity may be rooted in a shared language, history, culture, or political background that comes from being raised in a particular place. Consequently, people tend to seek news coverage that is pertinent to their locality or hometown, indicating that national news sources remain the preferred choice for many audiences, despite the abundance of news organizations available.

5. A Perspective for the Future

We do not believe the scenario for engagement and participation in online journalism to be hopeless, though it might often look stale and stalled. Change is a process, and journalism is still learning to navigate the digital and online environment through trial and error. Gutenberg introduced the printing press in 1450, which was the first breakthrough for mass production of information, but the first actual newspaper is from 1605, and the first newspapers failed because they did not have a proper business model, amongst other factors. If we look through that perspective, though digital journalism has been a reality for a couple of decades, now it is like in the early days, still trying to figure out what works and what doesn't, trying to build new business models and new modes of journalism, new ways to produce the news and to connect with the audience, finding out what works in a fast-paced world, with a competitive and grueling market.

It is true that journalism has been online for over two decades, but it is also important to note that the ways in which journalists use online platforms have continued to evolve and change over that time (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014). While the initial shift to online journalism may not have been a full-scale revolution, there have been significant developments in recent years that suggest a more transformative shift may be underway. For example, the rise of social media and the proliferation of mobile devices have fundamentally changed the way that people consume and interact with news. This has forced journalists to adapt their practices in order to engage with

audiences in new ways and to compete with a growing number of sources of information (Singer, 2013).

There has also been growing recognition of the importance of data journalism and the use of technology to uncover and analyze complex information. This has led to new collaborations between journalists and technologists and has opened up new opportunities for investigative reporting and accountability journalism (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014). Furthermore, the rise of alternative media and the decline of traditional news organizations has created new challenges and opportunities for journalists. This has led to a proliferation of new models of journalism, including nonprofit news organizations, cooperative models, and crowdfunding platforms (Hermida, 2010).

Overall, while the initial shift to online journalism may not have been a revolution, the ongoing evolution of the field suggests that significant changes are still underway (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014; Hermida, 2010; Singer, 2013). While online journalism has been around for over two decades, it is still relatively young compared to the long history of traditional print and broadcast journalism (Boczkowski and Papacharissi, 2011; Singer, 2018). The field is still evolving and adapting to new technologies, new audiences, and new business models (Anderson, 2013; Thurman & Fletcher, 2018). In fact, many of the most significant developments in online journalism have occurred in just the past few years, including the rise of mobile devices, the growing importance of social media, and the emergence of new forms of data-driven and collaborative journalism (Lewis and Usher, 2013; Tandoc et. al, 2018).

The online journalism landscape is still in a state of flux, with new media organizations emerging and existing ones adapting and experimenting with new approaches (Carlson and Lewis, 2015; Picard, 2014). This means that the field is still open to innovation and change, and there is still much to be learned about how best to use the online environment to support high-quality journalism. So, while online journalism has a relatively long history, it can still be considered a young and dynamic field that is constantly evolving and adapting to new challenges and opportunities (Singer, 2018). The proposed research agenda by Li et al. (2021) to explore this topic further, aiming to advance our understanding of audience engagement on digital news platforms can be a pathway for future studies that, like this one, attempt to contribute to a more robust and evidence-based understanding of audience engagement, which can help news organizations improve their engagement strategies and better serve their public.

6. Limitations

The realm of media, especially in the digital age, is vast, rapidly evolving, and multifaceted. Our research has sought to explore and shed light on this dynamic, particularly focusing on User

Generated Content (UGC) and audience engagement. While our findings have undeniably paved the way for a deeper understanding of these areas, it is essential to be cognizant of the inherent limitations we encountered in our journey. These limitations offer both a context for our conclusions and a roadmap for future research endeavors.

6.1 Perspective and Scope

Journalistic Enterprises Focus: Our primary lens was that of the journalistic enterprises. This approach allowed us a deep understanding of how media entities navigate the burgeoning landscape of UGC. However, this meant that the voices and perspectives of the very users generating content and driving engagement were not directly explored. Understanding user motivations, behaviors, and experiences through surveys, interviews, or direct observations would undoubtedly provide a richer, more holistic view of the media landscape.

Narrow Domain Exploration: While journalism and journalistic theory served as our anchor, several interconnected domains such as moderation, digital labor, evolving business models, and platform dynamics were touched upon tangentially. These areas, integral to the broader discourse of digital media, were beyond our immediate purview but warrant in-depth exploration in their own right.

Western-Centric Lens: Our research's geographical focus was largely Western-centric, homing in on select countries and news sites. While this provided detailed insights into these specific media systems, it potentially excluded diverse media paradigms, engagement patterns, and user behaviors found in non-Western contexts. An ideal exploration would adopt a more global perspective, incorporating diverse media ecosystems and cultures.

6.2 Methodological Considerations

Case Study Reliance: Our empirical approach primarily hinged on case studies. Though invaluable in offering deep dives into specific scenarios, this methodology may not capture the full spectrum of user-news dynamics. Additionally, with the rapid evolution of technology, there's an inherent risk that certain findings might soon be overtaken by newer platforms or technological shifts that reshape audience engagement.

Interdisciplinary Insights: Rooted largely in journalism theory, our research didn't deeply incorporate perspectives from other disciplines like sociology or psychology. Such interdisciplinary insights can offer profound understandings of user behaviors, motivations, and interactions, providing a more rounded view of the digital media landscape.

6.3 Other considerations

The digital media landscape is vast, multifaceted, and ever evolving. While any single study can provide valuable insights into specific areas, it is imperative to recognize the broader complexities that may not be immediately evident within a given research scope. As we delve deeper into the world of user-generated content in digital journalism, several pivotal considerations emerge, highlighting areas that might not have been the central focus but undeniably influence our understanding. From linguistic variations to technological advancements and psychological underpinnings, these dimensions enrich the tapestry of user interaction with digital news platforms. Let's shed light on these critical areas that warrant acknowledgment and further exploration:

- **Language Barrier:** If your research focused on English-speaking or Western-centric platforms, there might be nuances or engagement dynamics native to non-English platforms that remain unexplored. News consumption habits and user participation can differ significantly across linguistic divides.
- **Emerging Technologies:** The rise of augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and AI-driven news could introduce entirely new dimensions of user engagement and content creation. As of your last research cut-off, these might not have reached mainstream adoption and therefore, their impact could be underrepresented.
- **Algorithmic Influence:** Algorithms significantly influence content discovery and user engagement. The proprietary nature of these algorithms often means that their exact impact is challenging to quantify and understand fully.
- **Demographics and Socioeconomics:** Your research might not deeply consider variations in user participation based on age, gender, socioeconomic status, and educational background. Different demographic groups might engage with news differently, driven by varying motivations and technological adeptness.
- **Network Effects:** The impact of virality and network effects on user engagement might not be deeply explored. In the age of social media, stories that gain momentum on platforms like Twitter or Facebook can significantly influence user interaction patterns.
- **Emotional and Psychological Drivers:** Without insights from psychology, the emotional and psychological drivers behind user engagement and content generation might remain somewhat obscured.

- **News Format Variations:** With the rise of podcasts, vlogs, and short-form videos (like those on TikTok or Instagram Reels), the way users engage with these new formats might differ from traditional online news articles.
- **Policy and Legal Implications:** With growing concerns over fake news, misinformation, and privacy breaches, legal and policy shifts can significantly alter the media landscape. The implications of these shifts might not be fully addressed in your current research scope.
- **Bias and Subjectivity:** As is inherent with any research, there might be unintentional biases, both in the selection of news platforms and in the interpretation of findings. It is crucial to remain aware of these potential biases and how they could affect conclusions.

Every limitation presents an opportunity for more refined, focused, and comprehensive research. By understanding these constraints, researchers can design better methodologies, form more collaborative teams, and develop a more nuanced understanding of the ever-evolving digital media landscape. While our research offers invaluable insights into the realm of UGC and audience engagement during a specific timeframe and from particular perspectives, it is vital to understand its context and boundaries. As we move forward in the ever-evolving landscape of digital media, these limitations not only offer a foundation for our findings but also guideposts for future explorations, ensuring that our understanding remains both deep and broad. Our research, into the intricacies of the relationship between news media companies and their online users across national boundaries stands as a record of the evolving historical path of journalism, especially in the scope of the online news ecosystem. Given the rapid pace of digital transformation, the data unearthed from such research not only chronicles the nuances of our time but also lays the foundation for diverse perspectives and interpretations in the future.

7. Recommendations

While this is not the goal of this thesis, based on our empirical comparative cross-national analysis, we can point to a few suggestions for media organizations on optimizing engagement strategies. This aligns with the empirical-practical approach suggested by Li et. al 2021, regarding what are the most effective audience engagement strategies used by news organizations, and how can these strategies be optimized to improve engagement outcomes. In today's digital age, media organizations are presented with both unprecedented opportunities and unique challenges. As information flows freely across various platforms, the ability to engage and retain

audiences has become paramount for the sustainability of journalism and content creation. Understanding that the modern media landscape is user-centric is the first step in optimizing engagement outcomes. Effective audience engagement strategies are essential for media organizations to thrive in the digital age, some key strategies are:

- **User-Centric Approach:** To truly connect with your audience, it is crucial to understand their interests and needs. Conduct audience research and segmentation to identify your target demographic. By knowing what topics resonate with them, you can create content that is not only relevant but also compelling. This user-centric approach should guide your editorial decisions, ensuring that your content aligns with your audience's preferences.
- **Mobile Optimization:** With the increasing number of people consuming news on smartphones, mobile optimization is non-negotiable. Ensure that your content is not only accessible on mobile devices but also offers a seamless user experience. Responsive design, fast loading times, and mobile-friendly navigation are essential elements. This optimization extends to the formatting of articles, ensuring that they are easy to read and engage with on smaller screens.
- **Community Building:** Building a sense of community around your media organization can foster engagement. Encourage user-generated content, comments, and discussions on your platform. Create spaces for your audience to interact with both your content and each other. Moderation is crucial to maintain a positive and respectful environment where meaningful conversations can thrive.
- **Personalization:** Leveraging recommendation algorithms can significantly enhance user engagement. By analyzing user behavior and preferences, you can suggest content tailored to individual interests. This not only increases the likelihood of repeat visits but also keeps users engaged by offering them content they are likely to find relevant.
- **Newsletter Usage:** Email newsletters are a powerful tool for retaining loyal readers and keeping them informed about new content. They serve as a direct line of communication with your audience. Craft engaging and informative newsletters that provide a curated selection of your best content, along with exclusive insights and updates. Use segmentation to send personalized newsletters to different subscriber groups based on their interests.

- **Transparency and Trust:** In an era of misinformation, maintaining credibility is paramount for media organizations. Uphold trust by prioritizing accuracy and fact-checking. Clearly label opinion pieces to distinguish them from news articles. Additionally, transparency about your sources, editorial processes, and corrections helps build trust with your audience. When mistakes are made, address them promptly and transparently to maintain credibility.

These strategies should not be viewed in isolation but as part of a comprehensive approach to audience engagement. By adopting a user-centric mindset, optimizing for mobile, fostering community, personalizing content, utilizing newsletters effectively, and maintaining transparency and trust, media organizations can forge stronger connections with their audience, ultimately driving higher engagement and loyalty. Adaptation and continuous improvement based on audience feedback and analytics are key to long-term success in the ever-evolving media landscape.

8. Future Research

In an age where digital technologies continue to reshape the landscape of journalism and news dissemination, the Politics and Ethics of User-Generated Content within news organizations have become an intricate web of challenges, opportunities, and evolving dynamics. As we navigate this ever-changing terrain, it is imperative for future researchers to delve deeper into this multifaceted subject matter. Considering the findings and gaps in our research, other developments and questions emerged from our journey and we point out the following suggestions outline key research avenues that can further illuminate the complexities of UGC in the context of digital journalism and news media.

- **User Engagement Longevity:** There is a necessity for longitudinal studies exploring the repercussions of user engagement strategies deployed by news entities. Such studies can elucidate whether particular tactics cultivate enduring and substantial affiliations with readers and the ramifications on organizational trustworthiness and credibility.
- **Transnational Comparative Analysis:** Encourage a broader comparative analysis across nations, probing user engagement methodologies of news organizations globally, allowing for the discernment of global engagement trends and the implications thereof.
- **Regulatory Frameworks and UGC:** A deeper examination of both national and transnational regulatory parameters and their influence on news outlets' management

of user-generated content is required. This research could explore the interplay of legal considerations with content moderation guidelines.

- **Engagement Demographics and Patterns:** A meticulous exploration of user behavior in digital news realms would be beneficial. Identifying demographic-specific behaviors and regional discrepancies can refine user engagement approaches.
- **Technological Advancements in News Engagement:** With rapidly evolving technology, a dedicated investigation into the utility of nascent technologies like AI and blockchain in augmenting user participation and verifying content would be timely.
- **Media Literacy and Its Implications:** Evaluating the efficacy of media literacy campaigns and digital citizenship initiatives in molding user behaviors and endorsing responsible user-generated content would be of significant value.
- **Ethical Quandaries in Moderation:** News outlets face multifaceted ethical dilemmas in UGC moderation. An exploration into these intricacies, especially around contentious subjects, would offer valuable insights into media ethics.
- **Role of Social Media Platforms:** A focused investigation into how platform-specific algorithms and policies either enhance or impede user interactions with news sources can shed light on platform-media dynamics.
- **Monetization and User Engagement:** An in-depth analysis of how various monetization mechanisms, be they subscription-based or advertisement-centric, modulate user engagement would be instrumental.
- **Cultural Dynamics and UGC:** Delving into the intersection of cultural mores and user-generated content can highlight how distinct cultures interpret and engage with media.
- **UGC's Implications on Journalistic Integrity:** Given the integration of user-generated content in contemporary journalism, a study into its impact on journalism's core tenets of accuracy, impartiality, and transparency is vital.
- **UGC in Times of Crisis:** Investigating the unique challenges and prospects of assimilating user-generated content during emergencies, be it environmental or political, can refine crisis reporting techniques.

- **Potential of International Media Collaborations:** The potential for cross-border collaborations in the UGC era warrants exploration. Such synergies can bolster global event coverage, ensuring comprehensive and authenticated reporting.

These research areas can provide valuable insights into the evolving landscape of digital journalism, user engagement, and the ethical considerations surrounding the use of User-Generated Content. As this field of research continues to evolve, it is our hope that these suggested avenues of exploration serve as beacons guiding future scholars toward a more comprehensive understanding of how user engagement, technological innovations, cultural factors, and ethical considerations intersect within the dynamic landscape of news organizations. By venturing into these uncharted territories, we can collectively contribute to the advancement of responsible, ethical, and effective practices in the realm of digital journalism, fostering informed citizens and a more transparent, accountable media ecosystem for generations to come.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – CONTENT ANALYSIS CODING SHEETS

CODING SHEET

PORTRAYAL OF USERS IN NEWS SITE CONTENT

Media Company/News Site	
Content Title	
Date of Publication:	
Author/Byline	
Section of Website/Category	
URL/Source	
Observations	

CODING CATEGORIES

For each category, 'Yes' was marked if present and 'No' if not.

We noted down specific quotes or instances for every text to back up our coding decisions.

GENERAL			
TERM	DEFINITION	PRESENCE	SPECIFIC QUOTE/INSTANCE
Collaborator	Users are referenced as partners, contributors, or actively involved in the news process.	[Yes / No]	
Consumer	Users are mainly portrayed as passive readers, viewers, or consumers of the news	[Yes / No]	

	without active participation.		
Critic	The content mentions users critiquing, challenging, or questioning the content or the platform.	[Yes / No]	
Community Member	Users are described as part of a larger community or network around the news platform, emphasizing belonging or shared identity.	[Yes / No]	

BASED ON RELATIONSHIP			
TERM	DEFINITION	PRESENCE	SPECIFIC QUOTE/INSTANCE
Subscriber	Refers to users who pay to access the news platform, typically associated with legacy media, especially those with a print origin and paywalls. Represents a financial commitment.	[Yes / No]	
Costumer	Seldom used in the news media context. Focuses on the financial transaction between the user and the news site, stressing the commodification of news.	[Yes / No]	
Supporter	Indicates users who back the journalistic mission and values of the platform, more commonly referenced by digital native news organizations. Symbolizes a deeper, mission-driven relationship.	[Yes / No]	
Ally	A term suggesting the user's partnership with the platform in upholding its journalistic cause. Rarely used but signifies a profound	[Yes / No]	

	alliance with the news organization's mission.		
Member	Denotes users who are part of a larger collective, often pointing to membership models in journalism. Indicates alignment with the platform's values and can be seen in both digital native and some legacy media.	[Yes / No]	

APPENDIX B – QUESTIONS FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS



UNIVERSITÉ
TOULOUSE III
PAUL SABATIER



PhD Project on Politics and Ethics of User-Generated Content

Researcher: Gabriela Gruszynski Sanseverino
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Interviewer: X
[email](#)

MSCA Actions – [JOLT PROJECT](#)
Laboratoire d'Études et de Recherches Appliquées en Sciences Sociales (LERASS),
Université Toulouse III - Paul Sabatier

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS *OUTLET NAME*

1. What is your background? What was your formation on (college, post-graduate studies, etc)? What jobs did you do previously to this one?
2. How did you come to work on this job?
3. How would you describe your job to an outsider? What would you say you do, what your function is in this company?
4. How is your daily routine here? What activities are always a part of your day-to-day? Is there a hierarchy you answer to?
5. Are there established rules/regulations in the company that guide your job? Are there implied guidelines that you have learned to follow?
6. Are there problems you have to handle routinely? What are they? How do you manage them?
7. Which technology solutions do you employ in order to deal with the challenges of managing participation? Are you satisfied with them? What kinds of solutions do you think are still needed?
8. What's the importance of keeping a frequency on interactions with readers?
9. How important do you think transparency (in your decisions, your rules and guidelines, etc) for the relationship with the audience?
10. What would you consider to be the main challenges and advantages in keeping an active relationship with the public?

