Exploring Digital Native News Media

Ramón Salaverría

School of Communication, University of Navarra, 31009 Pamplona, Spain; E-Mail: rsalaver@unav.es

Submitted: 20 March 2020 | Published: 16 April 2020

Abstract
Digital native news media are becoming a blooming phenomenon, expanding globally. Up until now, however, the scholar community has paid little attention to online-born media, compared to the high interest devoted to the legacy media brands. Drawing upon the extant literature on this emerging topic, this editorial summarizes the empirical and theoretical contributions of the thematic issue entitled “Digital Native News Media: Trends and Challenges.” The author highlights that the studies selected for this thematic issue not only explore the innovative characteristics and opportunities of digital native media in thirty countries, but also provide a cautionary tale about their structural problems and limitations.

Keywords
digital journalism; digital native media; legacy media; media; newswork; online-born media

Issue
This editorial is part of the issue “Digital Native News Media: Trends and Challenges,” edited by Ramón Salaverría (University of Navarra, Spain).

© 2020 by the author; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

In 2020, 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 appeared on the Web, the imprecise label ‘new media’ was broadly used to designate all types of digital publications. 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, & Nielsen, 2016), ‘digital-native’ (Pew Research Center, 2015; Wu, 2016), ‘online-native’ (Harlow & Salaverría, 2016), or even simply as ‘pure players’ (Sirkkunen & Cook, 2012) or ‘start-ups’ (Naldi & Picard, 2012; Wagemans, Witschge, & Deuze, 2016).

No matter the term used, recent research has found that digital native media proceed according to specific principles, relatively different from those used by non-native media (Küng, 2015; Tandoc, 2018). 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 (Harbers, 2016) and more diversification in business models (Arrese & Kaufmann, 2016; Sirkkunen & Cook, 2012). Beyond such structural aspects, digital native media show also, at least to some extent, a specific implementation of news values (Canter, 2018; Kilgo, Harlow, García-Perdomo, & Salaverría, 2018) and a distinctive approach to covering the news (Higgins Joyce & Harlow, 2020; Thomas & Cushion, 2019).

To date, most empirical research about the digital native news media phenomenon has been limited to case studies, exploring either global-reaching brands (Tandoc, 2018) or some local cases (Harbers, 2016; Wagemans et al., 2016). However, one of the main limitations of case studies is that they usually focus on the most successful and well-developed examples, the characteristics of which hardly apply to the average publications. In order to get a more nuanced idea about the contributions and problems of the average digital native news media, broader studies are needed. This is the main contribution of this issue of Media and Communication: Offering a comprehensive overview of the characteristics and trends of digital native news media at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century.

This thematic issue consists of 14 research articles that explore the typology, strategies, and limitations of online media. The empirical studies, some of them com-
The multiplication of digital native news media that occurred in Spain during the years of the Great Recession (2008–2014). Also based on a large volume of data, almost 100,000 user-comments from three major Spanish digital native newspapers, Castellano Parra, Ayerdi, and Peña Fernández (2020) analyze the quality of the deliberative debate in the comments of those media’s news. For their part, Majó-Vázquez, Cardenal, Sagarra, and de Simón (2020) use algorithmic methods to determine the degree of informative relevance achieved by digital native news media in the country; according to their findings, the legacy news media retain control of the brokerage positions for the general population, but digital native media are gaining relevance among younger news consumers. Pérez-Díaz, Medina, and Langa (2020) also compare the Spanish legacy and native media, although in their case they examine their respective accountability practices. The fifth study on Spain, by Mendez, Palomo, and Rivera (2020), shows the particular adaptation of journalists working in native media to the use of social networks both as an information source and as an editorial tool.

This thematic issue is completed by a couple of highly recommended studies that warn about the weaknesses and problems that affect many digital native news media. Avoiding the blindly enthusiastic vision about the possibilities of this type of media that is found in some discourses, these studies remind that these media still have a long way to go until they reach consolidation. Based on a study of 15 digital native news media in Germany, Buschow (2020) identifies various patterns in the failure of these publications, during their initial stage as start-ups. In his study he offers very revealing conclusions that, beyond their academic interest, can serve as a guide for mistakes to avoid for digital media entrepreneurs. Finally, by analyzing the evolution of media audiences in the United States, Nelson (2020) presents evidence that legacy media are more resilient than some authors have announced.

Digital native news media are here to stay, but their path to consolidation may be harder than some believe. This thematic issue brings valuable data and evidence-based insights about the initial steps of this process.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities of Spain for the financial support to this thematic issue through the DIGINATIVE-MEDIA (RTI2018–093346-B-C31) research project.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

References

Appelgren, E., & Lindén, C.-G. (2020). Data journalism as a service: Digital native data journalism expertise


Thomas, R., & Cushion, S. (2019). Towards an institutional news logic of digital native news media? A case study of BuzzFeed’s reporting during the 2015...


**About the Author**

Ramón Salaverría (PhD) is Associate Professor of Journalism at the University of Navarra, where he serves as Associate Dean of Research at the School of Communication. Counting over 200 scholarly publications, his research focuses on digital journalism, mostly on digital news media production. He was chair of the Journalism Studies Section of ECREA in the term 2010–2012.