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Digital-Native News in South America

Building Bridges with Diverse Audiences in Argentina, Brazil and Colombia

Vanessa de Macedo Higgins Joyce

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For my family Matt, Corina and Douglas
For my parents Maralice and Bernard (in Memorium)
For my mentors Rosental Alves and Maxwell McCombs

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Independence as a New Digital Proposition in Newsrooms in South America

In the past decades, South America has seen a propagation of digital-native news organizations bringing innovation in journalism, serving new audiences, and approaching new issues. I define these digital-native news organizations as news media emerging in the online environment without previous ties to legacy or traditional organizations. Many digital-native news organizations still struggle to set their reputation but, as they grow in numbers and strength, they are increasingly recognized for the quality of news produced. While the emergence of digital-native news is not an exclusive South American phenomenon, the newcomers in the region bring about new possibilities of diversity of voices so necessary in healthy democracies. In a news media landscape traditionally concentrated in the hands of a few, with close ties to the political elites, independence becomes a major innovation. Digital-native news in South America, subject of this book, vary in scope, tone, format, audiences, and quality of news. They are, however, an increasingly relied upon source of news, changing the journalism landscape in the region.

Globally, digital-native news ventures started in the 1990s, but grew in congruence with economic crisis that permeated the news media industry. In the United States, there was a surge of digital news organizations as legacy newspapers downsized, with massive layoffs between 2008–2010 (Deuze, 2017; Massey, 2018). Deuze (2017) studied the emergence of digital journalism startups globally, which, according to his definition, are

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news organization built primarily on a web presence without affiliation to legacy media. This definition largely overlaps with digital-native news, but with a focus on startup culture mirroring and encompassing the new tech business. Deuze (2017) identified some common motivations for journalists to start their own business as the advantages and cost-efficiency of publishing online, the added capital of working collaborative (as opposed to independently or as free-lance) and the business opportunity to fill a news gap with quality journalism (Deuze, 2017). Massey (2018) pointed out that both for-profit and non-profit digital news ventures alike have flourished in that environment and pursue a wide variety of funding sources. The author states that concentrating and adapting to the market unique conditions are paramount for the financial success of these ventures (Massey, 2018).

Digital-native news grew as the crisis in journalism accelerated, particularly in the newspaper business, in the early 2000s. Siles and Boczkowski (2012) analyzed the reasons and some potential solutions for the crisis in the newspaper industry globally and pointed to changes and decline in advertising revenue, along with declines in print consumption that led to closures of newsrooms. In many cases, downsizing by cutting journalist positions and shifting to more transitory employment, such as freelance work, were common strategies that, while alleviating the financial stress, have also led to decline in scope of coverage and added to the strains in production by those journalists left in the newsrooms while adapting to the digital frontier. In Spain, digital-native news organizations also faced an expansion with the recession of 2008–2014, but their numbers spiked between 2012–2013, when massive layoffs occurred in legacy media (Negredo et al., 2020). In the midst of the challenges faced by legacy media, digital-native news organizations emerge as opportunities for innovation, both for those journalists who were either dismissed or strained within this new working environment and for audiences who no longer saw their needs fully met, were not represented, or who were ready for new ideas. Freed from the constraints of legacy journalism, digital natives compete in setting the path of what journalism in a new platform should look like (Carlson & Usher, 2016).

While facing financial challenges within this period, journalists saw an opportunity to disrupt the industry. Those who decided to strike on their own, or joined the small groups being formed independently, saw a future in focusing less on advertisers and more on users (Picard, 2010). In a study of digital journalism in Europe and United States, Humprecht and

Esser (2018) found that independent digital news organizations were more focused on professional and social responsibility standards than their corporate counterparts and invested in audience-serving innovations and content. As digital news media evolves, distinct goals, platforms, ownership, audience, have all emerged, and typologies created to signal such differences.

This book focuses on digital-native news organizations, and therefore focuses on the origin of these news organizations. Digital-native news contrasts with digital news. I define digital news here as those that are digital extension of legacy news media and therefore follow similar organizational norms, structures and influences as the legacy media does (Nicholls et al., 2016; Salaverría et al., 2019). Deuze (2006) called journalism produced for the web a fourth type of journalism (in contrast with press, radio and television) and that the technology is a distinguishing factor. He categorized this type of journalism in two dimensions: focus (concentration on editorial content vs public connectivity) and public participation (moderated or non-moderated) (Deuze, 2006). The digital environment has allowed news organizations to redefine their scope, seek new audiences, sometimes niche audiences, such as those bound by interest, and others that been marginalized by legacy media, be it by its physical location, socio-economic status and others. Vara-Miguel (2020) emphasizes the differences between digital-native news and legacy media in terms of their nature, and finds that differences, materialized in editorial priorities, may result in distinct audiences as well. While those news organizations may have emerged in the digital format, they may have later expanded into other platforms, and are not necessarily digital-only. But they originate as new players, and are sometimes referred to as digital start-ups, with many, in South America, drawing a distinction of being independent from the legacy ties that news organizations had with the political and corporate elites.

This book addresses changes occurring in journalism in South America with the emergence of digital-native news organizations in the region and the potential consequences of these changes in emerging democracies. Specifically, the book contextualizes the arrival of digital native news organizations in Argentina, Brazil and Colombia, three of South America's most innovative and largest media markets, within a time of enhanced social and political polarization. It assesses how these news organizations attract diverse audiences and help overcome such socio-political divides, with their potential in bridging social differences in access to information

and creating a common ground for deliberation of important issues. The book brings the perspectives of digital native news organizations in Argentina, Brazil and Colombia, all with different structure, purpose and style.

In Latin and South America, digital-native news organizations have grown exponentially since the emergence of the first sites: in 1995 in Nicaragua, Notifax, and in 1998 in El Salvador, the award-winning El Faro (Harlow, 2017; Salaverría et al., 2019) and other early ventures in Mexico and growing in the following years. These early digital-native news organizations originated at the same time that legacy media were launching their online editions, around 1994 and 1996 (Trujillo & Montero, 2019). Some of those initial digital ventures had print aspirations, such as El Salvador's El Faro, finding in the digital environment a more affordable platform. But as their success grew, they found their space grounded in the innovations afforded by the platforms pursuing critical and in-depth journalism (Harlow & Salaverría, 2016; Trujillo & Montero, 2019). And, while at the beginning, most of online news were online versions of legacy, traditional media, such as print newspapers, magazines, radio and television, in the following decades the process changes, and it becomes much more common to see digital-natives (those that emerge online without having previously existed in the offline environment) emerging and, in the first few years of the 2010s, there's a boom in the development of digital native in the region (Meléndez, 2016; Salaverría et al., 2019; Trujillo & Montero, 2019).

The boom of digital-native news organizations in South America coincides, technologically, with the emergence and proliferation of the web 2.0, which fostered interactivity and tools for participation, such as blogs and social media, facilitating production and decentralization distribution (Irigaray et al., 2009). In the late 90s, the reach of digital media in general, and digital-native news organizations was limited by internet penetration, which was slow to reach critical mass in Latin America. While lagging other regions, the number of households connected to the internet in Latin America grew by 103% between 2010 and 2016 (22% to 46%) (ECLAC, 2018), and further investments have boosted broadband access, not to mention the relevance and impact that smartphones have had in Latin American's digital media consumption. Access is still not available to many in Latin America, but the region has made large strides in closing the digital divide, with smart phone technology being an important mean to accessing news and information on the web.