

# Research on digital native media: an emerging topic in the field of digital communication

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## Abstract

Digital native media have gone through different stages since their emergence in the last decade of the twentieth century under the shadow of the evolution of the 'network of networks' and digital transformation. Despite the influence that legacy media have exerted on the models of many digital media, the efforts they have made to find their own way in the digital communication ecosystem have resulted in the introduction of new practices and strategies that have fuelled renewed debates on journalistic frontiers. The aim of this paper is to review the birth, evolution and current landscape of digital native media with special attention given to research in this field. This is an object of study with its own and differential characteristics in relation to legacy media, which attracts the focus of more and more digital communication researchers every day. To offer a current assessment of such research, a systematized review of articles published in scientific journals included in the Web of Science and Scopus databases was carried out. The results show that the conceptualization of digital native media, their mapping in media ecosystems and comparison with legacy media, the study of their typology and characteristics, research on their economic and organizational models, the analysis of their content, and their relationship with audiences are among the main objects of research. These media constitute a fundamental sector in the current media ecosystem, which will require multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives in their research to face the challenges of digital media, digital native media and digital journalism.

## Keywords

Digital native media; Digital journalism; Cyberjournalism; Legacy media; Literature review; Research; Media model; Media ecosystem; Digital communication.

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## 1. Introduction

Almost three decades ago, in 1994, the first digital media were launched in several countries (**Salaverría**, 2019). The experiences of electronic journalism's precursors in web journalism (**Díaz-Noci**, 2013), such as the Bulletin Board System (BBS) offered through personal computers in the not-quite-Internet times of the online services of *CompuServe*, *Prodigy* and *America OnLine*, among others, contributed to many people becoming familiar with activities in a connected environment.

The rise of the Internet in the mid-1990s (**Scott**, 2005) encouraged many print media to migrate to the Internet –without much thought as to how– as an experience that allowed them to place their brand in a new communication space. It was the beginning of the journey into an unknown world, but one that promised adventure and engaged those who entered it.

The first generation of media on the World Wide Web (1993-2001), a stage in which digital native initiatives –news projects on the network that were not on any other medium– began to appear, showing the potential of online journalism (**Deuze**, 2001). Since the emergence in 1994 of unique experiences such as *Nando.net* –launched in Raleigh, North Carolina, as an internet service provider and beginning to offer news services based on *Gopher* and *Telnet* (**Carlson**, 2009)– the Internet scenario would host media initiatives that migrated to the web as well as digital native media. The first wave of native media arrived with websites such as *Salon* (1995), *Slate* (1996) and *Estrella Digital* (1998), and portals such as *T-online* (1995), *Yahoo News* (1995) and *MSN* (1999), which aggregated content from a variety of sources and were linked to other services such as email or search engines (**Nicholls; Shabbir; Nielsen**, 2016).

As the years went on, by the start of the new millennium and despite the impact of the dotcom crisis, the media map welcomed titles such as *Netzeitung* (2000), *El Confidencial Digital* (2000), *OhMyNews* (2000), *El Confidencial* (2001), *Huffington Post* (2005), *El Plural* (2005), *BuzzFeed* (2006), *Rue89* (2007), *Mediapart* (2008) and *PlayGround* (2009), and a new stage opened up these digital native media, with different models and news projects, some of them unique. Although not all of them survived and several had to overcome difficulties, their wake was followed by multiple initiatives in this third decade of the millennium. Their presence has become widespread in the communication ecosystem, and, in this phase, the sustained creation of digital native media emerges as a flourishing phenomenon that is expanding worldwide, with different maps depending on the country (**Salaverría**, 2020).

Today, the number of digital native media almost equals the number of legacy media in some countries. One of the case studies that confirms this trend is that of Spain, where, in 2021, there were 2,875 active cybermedia, of which almost half were digital natives (**Salaverría; Martínez-Costa**, 2021).

Apart from the difficulties and the scarce financial muscle of many of these digital native initiatives, the fact is that these media are here to stay and their relevant role in the future of communication is confirmed by the most recent studies on digital journalism.

“*America OnLine's* first newspaper service was launched by the *Chicago Tribune* in 1992”

In the following section we will analyse the first studies that addressed digital native media and some publications and projects focused on them. Subsequently, we elaborate the systematized review on this object of study and address aspects that allow us to take steps forward in the research: its uniqueness, its location, and some trends.

## 2. The early days and scientific interest

Digital journalism is undergoing a process of constant change due to various factors, including the evolution of technology, platforms and the concept of audiences (**Steensen et al.**, 2019). The advent of the internet directly affected journalism, its standards and the profession as a whole (**Fortunati et al.**, 2009). The relationship that began with difficulty between new media and journalism became, over time, a symbiosis that makes it difficult for us to imagine today an exclusively *offline* journalism (**Siapera; Veglis**, 2012).

When novelty breaks through, labels emerge quickly, but it takes some time for definitive titles to consolidate. The debate around the terms used remains open, although some denominations have achieved greater acceptance, with nuances of meaning. For example, digital journalism understood as that which is developed with digital technologies versus cyberjournalism understood as that which is practiced in digital networks (**Salaverría**, 2019). Regarding the nature of the media, digital native media or native cybermedia are those designed and born for the internet, as opposed to legacy media (**Cebrián-Herreros**, 2009) or non-digital-native media, which derive from pre-internet brands that migrated to that space. Digital native media were also called online-native, digital-born, pure players or journalistic start-ups. Recently, **Steensen** and colleagues (2019) found in a meta-research study that the discursive shift towards the concept of digital journalism –rather than online, web or multimedia– marks a non-deterministic shift with a progressive abandonment of the focus on technology to focus on a journalism that shapes and is shaped by digital society, along with other social institutions.

In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, **López** and colleagues (2005, p. 44) were already including in their study “national newspapers published exclusively online”, citing the work of **Edo** (2002) and **Díaz-Noci** (2001). The path of native cyber-

media began with some unfulfilled promises of online news (Quandt, 2008), whose adaptation to the digital medium was not complete. The so-called journalistic start-ups had the opportunity to facilitate access to the sector and the use of digital tools, but faced significant challenges such as a news market dominated by legacy media and a concentrated advertising market with poor performance (Bruno; Nielsen, 2012). Digital native media brought renewed approaches that eventually tended to formulate quality journalism and incorporate productive and organizational features of legacy media (Wu, 2016).

“ In Spain almost half of all active cyber-media are digital natives ”

Scientific interest has grown around native cybermedia since the first publications analysed them, with a focus on the sustainability of the so-called *pure players* (Sirkkunen; Cook, 2012), in cases such as *Soitu* (González, 2010) or *El Español* (Del-Arco-Bravo; Yunquera-Nieto; Pérez-Bahón, 2015). This is evident in the design of competitive research projects focused on this object of study. For example, projects by *SembraMedia* or *DigiNativeMedia* at the *University of Navarra* and the *University of Santiago de Compostela* (2019-2021 and 2022-2025), which resulted in initiatives such as the *Inflexion Point* report (SembraMedia, 2017; 2021), the publication of a monograph in the journal *Media and Communication* under the title *Digital Native News Media: Trends and Challenges*, edited by Ramón Salaverría in 2020, or the book *Medios nativos digitales en España: caracterización y tendencias* (Salaverría; Martínez-Costa, 2021).

### 3. Digital native media mapping and exploratory study

The growing interest in the study of digital native media encouraged the research of media ecosystems and the mapping of these initiatives in different countries and contexts. In recent years, digital media mappings have been developed with different objectives and methodologies, and many of them have been published openly on the web. Although their validity is temporary, they are a relevant tool to discover the scope of the growth of digital native media, study their characteristics or identify initiatives and innovation trends.

In Latin America in 2012, the *International Centre of Advanced Communication Studies for Latin America (Ciespal)* promoted the mapping of digital media in Ecuador (Rivera-Costales, 2012), where up to 254 media outlets were located, of which 34 were digital natives. More recent projects include the mapping of independent journalism in Brazil, an initiative of *Agência Pública* (2020), which offers a directory of digital native media that are not linked to large media groups, politicians or companies. In Peru, the *University of Piura* launched the *MediaMap Peru* initiative (2020) to identify all media, including digital natives, in the regions of Lambayeque, Piura and Tumbes. With an international dimension, *SembraMedia* (2022a) keeps its directory of Spanish-speaking digital native media updated, mapping up to 1,103 media in 24 countries. *Fundación Gabo* (2022) published research on digital native media in Latin America, mapping 1,521 media in 12 countries.

In the United States, media maps have also been developed with different objectives, allowing the presence of digital natives to be explored. An example is the research on Latino digital native media (Wallace, 2021), which identified up to 103 journalistic initiatives, or the project for media mapping and recognition of news deserts led by Abernathy (2020), which identified more than 500 local or national digital natives.

In the European context, it is worth noting the project that has mapped and studied the characteristics of up to 1,361 active digital native media in Spain (Salaverría; Martínez-Costa, 2021), which updates previous maps of digital media in the country (Salaverría-Aliaga; Martínez-Costa-Pérez; Breiner, 2018; Salaverría, 2005). With the focus on media of proximity, we find the map of local and hyperlocal digital media in Spain (Negreira-Rey; López-García; Vázquez-Herrero, 2020), the map of hyperlocals in the United Kingdom (*Independent Community News Network*, 2022), mostly digital natives, or the map of local media in France, which also identifies natives (*Ouest Médialab*, 2020).

With an international scope, the publication of the results of the *Oasis Project* (SembraMedia, 2022b) has been announced for 2023. Driven by *SembraMedia*, the *European Journalism Centre*, the *Google News Initiative*, *International Media Support*, and the *Global Forum for Media Development*, it aims to map and study digital native media organizations in 43 European countries. The data is expected to be published openly through an interactive map.

## 4. Systematized literature review

### 4.1. Material and review methods

To elaborate a complete and current state of the art on digital native media research, we opted to first conduct a systematized literature review (Grant; Booth, 2009; Codina, 2018) in the main scientific databases, *Web of Science* and *Scopus*, following the phases of search, evaluation, synthesis, and analysis. We designed a unique search equation that, adapting to the parameters of each database, provides the results we need, taking into consideration that this object of study relates to different, similar terms. Thus, we formulated the following query:

“medios nativos digitales” OR “medio nativo digital” OR “cibermedio nativo” OR “digital native media” OR “digital-native media” OR “digital native news media” OR “digital-native news media” OR “digital-born media” OR “digital-born news media” OR “media start-up” OR “media start-up” OR “periodismo nativo digital” OR “digital native journalism” OR “digital-native journalism”

For *Web of Science*, the results were limited to the categories Communication, Information Science & Library Science and Social Sciences Interdisciplinary; for *Scopus*, Social Sciences. The results obtained (in April 2022) in this first step included 44 documents in *Web of Science* and 253 in *Scopus*.

Media maps allow the exploration of initiatives in different parts of the world

Duplicate results were discarded and books, book chapters and proceedings were also excluded. In addition, a review of the topic was carried out through title and abstract as a first filter and full content in case of doubts for classification, ensuring that digital native media are part of the object of study, either as the main object or considering cases of this nature in the research. In total, 129 documents were discarded from the results that were initially obtained. Thus, the final sample considered valid was made up of 99 documents across *WoS* (7), *Scopus* (61) and in both databases (31). The selection of the *Web of Science* and *Scopus* databases limits the analysis of this literature review to scientific production with impact, but we tried to overcome this limitation in other sections of the article, where we include additional relevant publications on the subject.

#### 4.2. Temporal evolution

The analysis of the selected papers according to the year of publication shows a general trend of a progressive increase in interest in digital native media in impact scientific research. The first papers were published in 2010 and 2012: a case study of the Spanish media *Soitu* (González, 2010) and an analysis of the mobile applications of digital news media (Costa-Sánchez, 2012), respectively. In 2015, two studies were published on entrepreneurial journalism (Manfredi-Sánchez; Rojas-Torrijos; Herranz-De-La-Casa, 2015) and a comparison of deontology in traditional and digital native media (Suárez-Villegas, 2015). It is clear that, from the very beginning, there has been a relevant interest in academia around digital natives –especially in Spain– although some pioneering works such as the definition of pure players (Sirkkunen; Cook, 2012), in this case published as a report, were left out of this review.

It was not until 2016 that we located articles by authors from other countries, such as studies on sustainability and business models (Cook, 2016; Sakr, 2016) or on hyperlocal media (Chadha, 2016a; 2016b). From 2018 onwards, the number of publications increased to 27 articles identified in 2020 and 2021.

The development over time also leaves evidence of the entry of certain perspectives in scientific research on digital native media. During the first years, special attention was paid to the characteristics and models of these media. The audience appears as an object of study from 2018 (Mukerjee; Majó-Vázquez; González-Bailón, 2018). From 2020, platforms (Méndez; Palomo; Rivera, 2020; Vázquez-Herrero; Negreira-Rey; López-García, 2022) and the profession (Pereira, 2020) were analysed.

#### 4.3. Geographic scope

Another issue addressed in this review is the representativeness of the different geographical areas that have received attention in scientific articles on digital native media. Firstly, the international perspective of the studies is evident (34.3%): studying cases from several countries in different regions (21), Latin America (7), Europe (4) or Ibero-America (2). The remaining articles analyse a single country –among 18 from Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Oceania– with Spain (31) and the United States (10) standing out.

#### 4.4. Object of study

We note that scientific research on digital native media has addressed multiple perspectives to achieve a comprehensive view, from the concept itself to its relationship with the platforms, the audience or issues about content and professional profile.

The first group of studies addresses the concept of digital native media (9.0%) and their characteristics (18.2%). The definition of digital native media has given rise to some debates in recent years, as Salaverría (2020) states in the editorial of the first monograph dedicated to this type of media, in the journal *Media and communication*, since different terms have been applied: born on the internet or digital-born, online-native, or pure (digital) players, even start-ups. Their ‘recent’ arrival in the media ecosystem posed a challenge to establish and legitimize themselves in digital journalism together with legacy media (Stringer, 2018). They have been considered alternative, in terms of financial and editorial independence, community service and other features, but they cannot be considered alternative or mainstream media in an absolute way, as Harlow (2021) points out in his article on digital natives in Latin America. On the other hand, the characteristics of these media have been explored from the perspective of formats (Rojas-Torrijos; Caro-González; González-Alba, 2020; Romero-Rodríguez; Tejedor; Castillo-Abdul, 2021; Trillo-Domínguez; Alberich-Pascual, 2020), positioning (Lopezosa *et al.*, 2020), innovation (Valero-Pastor; García-Avilés; Carvajal, 2021) or modalities such as data journalism (Rivera, 2021) and fact-checking (Ufarte-Ruiz; Anzera; Murcia-Verdú, 2020).

A second group of articles, regarding the object of study, compiles those that address different models: business model (14.1% of the total number of documents retrieved), entrepreneurship (11.1%) and proximity (4.0%). In search of sustainability, the research addresses their funding models (Cook, 2016; Tejedor *et al.*, 2020), including venture capital (Kosterich; Weber, 2018), foundations (Ferrucci; Nelson, 2019), branded content (Carvajal; Barinagarrementeria, 2021; Zomeño; Blay-Arráez, 2022) and the threat of failure (Buschow, 2020). They apply the idea of journalistic start-up (Prasad, 2021; Valero-Pastor; González-Alba, 2018), which expands the boundaries of journalism (Chew; Tandoc, 2022).

They also focus on entrepreneurship as a professional career opportunity (**Peinado-y-Miguel; Rodríguez-Barba**, 2020), on sports journalism (**Manfredi-Sánchez; Rojas-Torrijos; Herranz-De-La-Casa**, 2015) and as an experimental space for new approaches in journalism (**Ruotsalainen; Villi**, 2018). Regarding proximity media, the reviewed articles analyse local and hyperlocal media (**Chadha**, 2016a; **Lindén; Hujanen; Lehtisaari**, 2019; **Rivas-de-Roca; García-Gordillo; Caro-González**, 2020) in various regions.

The third group includes studies on content (17.2%), such as media coverage in digital native media of specific topics like climate change (**Painter; Kristiansen; Schäfer**, 2018) or elections (**Dennis; Sampaio-Dias**, 2021; **Thomas; Cushion**, 2019); similarly, studies appear that analyse both traditional media and digital native media (**Olveira-Araujo; Argiñano**, 2021), or that propose comparisons (**Coddington; Molyneux**, 2021; **Famulari; Hatley-Major**, 2022; **Quintana-Pujalte**, 2020).

Among other issues, digital native media have been addressed from the perspective of audience, platforms and profession. Audience research (12.1%) has dealt with consumption, comparing legacy and digital native media (**Majó-Vázquez; Nielsen; González-Bailón**, 2018; **Vara-Miguel**, 2020), engagement and participation (**Pröll**, 2017; **Sixto-García; Rodríguez-Vázquez; Soengas-Pérez**, 2020; **Stringer**, 2020) and the use of metrics (**Lamot; Paulussen**, 2020). The influence of social networks in the media ecosystem has also aroused interest in their relationship with digital native media, analysing how it affects management (**Méndez; Palomo; Rivera**, 2020), content production and distribution (**Hurcombe; Burgess; Harrington**, 2021; **Vázquez-Herrero; Negreira-Rey; López-García**, 2020) and their analysis (**Sixto-García; Rodríguez-Vázquez; Soengas-Pérez**, 2021). On the profession, the renewal of journalists from traditional media (**Pereira**, 2020), leadership in times of Covid-19 (**Appelgren**, 2021), diversity in the newsroom (**Khan; Haneef**, 2022) and digital identity (**Pérez-Díaz; Pedreño-Planes**, 2021), among other topics, have been analysed.

#### 4.5. Methods and cases

Most frequently, articles apply multiple methods to approach the object of study, for example, combining content analysis with interviews, document analysis or participant observation. Of the 99 articles, 38 used interviews, 33 presented content and formal analysis, ten used observation and another ten used surveys. Among the studies employing only one method, those based on content analysis prevailed, followed by the case study and the interview. Table 1 details the methods used in the articles reviewed. Among the digital native media analysed, the following stand out: *El Confidencial*, *elDiario.es*, *El Español*, *HuffPost*, *BuzzFeed/BuzzFeed News*, *Vice/Vice News*, *De Correspondent* and *Mediapart*.

### 5. Comparative analysis: similarities and differences in the study of digital natives and legacy media

It is evident that traditional or legacy media and digital native media have numerous points in common, such as their purpose and core business. **Nicholls, Shabbir** and **Nielsen** (2016) note that both face similar challenges, especially in terms of financing and distribution.

The research developed so far points out differences that arouse interest in the uniqueness of digital native media, in structural aspects such as their principles or in more specific characteristics such as formats or content (**Salaverría**, 2020). On this last point, **Painter, Kristiansen** and **Schäfer** (2018) warn that a small number of studies comparatively analyse news coverage in digital native media and traditional media; among them **Thomas** and **Cushion** (2019), who point out the changes that originated among natives during election campaigns in the United Kingdom, although the norms and routines do not necessarily show a turn in the institutional logic of the media.

When digital native media began, they were unique due to the affordances of the technology they used and their business model. They emerged to provide answers to the market, to society and to journalism models, being created by experienced journalists with a trajectory in legacy media (**García-Orosa; López-García; Vázquez-Herrero**, 2020). **Harlow** (2021) points out that several digital native media in Latin America and their journalists are identified as alternative—in a renewed sense of the concept—for being different from the mainstream: they have financial and editorial independence, focus on other issues and audiences, and have an emphasis on community. This research opens a line of future research by focusing on the possible transformation of traditional media coverage under the influence of digital native media. Consequently, it shows the need to address the role of journalists, their professional profile, and the competencies at stake.

Digital native media are called on to take a step forward and embrace new products, new sources of income and alternative forms of organization; however, they face significant difficulties in sustaining themselves over time (**Buschow**, 2020). The recognized differences in business models, distribution strategies or editorial priorities are reflected, in turn, in the divergence of the types of users of traditional and digital native media (**Vara-Miguel**, 2020). Previous studies warn of the need to address relevant issues such as sustainability and audience.

Table 1. Methods or approaches identified in the review of articles about digital native media

Method or approach	Articles
Content analysis	22
Data analysis	8
Documentary analysis	1
Theoretical discussion	2
Survey	5
Interview	17
Case study	17
Exploratory study	1
Focus group	1
Multiple methods	20
Not available	2
Observation	1
Other	1
Review	1

The intense influence of technologies and platforms inevitably affects the digital media ecosystem. The article by **García-Avilés** and colleagues (2018) indicates that most of the initiatives that are part of their innovation index in Spanish media are organizations based on the internet or that consider it an essential source of support. Considering that journalistic innovation in that country appears on the margins of the traditional industry, they point out that it largely expands in digital natives, niche initiatives and start-ups.

## 6. Renewal of media models in digital natives

In addition to how digital native media adapt to and exploit the possibilities of the internet and platforms, and how this determines the quality or innovation of their content and formats, there are some particularities or challenges that have been identified as unique to them. Digital natives are often associated with a renewal of the traditional media model that affects the organization, financing and business model, the news mission or the way of understanding and managing the relationship with the audience. Some of the trends in research on digital natives are highlighted below, based on the results of the literature review and complemented by other relevant references in the field of study.

### 6.1. Local and hyperlocal

In recent decades, media of proximity have been renewed at an international level. After the crisis suffered by the traditional local press, digital native media with local and hyperlocal reach have experienced remarkable growth in many media contexts (**Harte**, 2013; **Kerkhoven**; **Bakker**, 2014; **Jangdal**, 2019; **Hujanen et al.**, 2019; **Dovbysh**, 2021; **Halvorsen**; **Bjerke**, 2019; **Downman**; **Murray**, 2017) and have been the subject of study in academia (**Negreira-Rey**; **López-García**, 2021). The intense growth of hyperlocal media has been linked to low barriers to create new media on the Internet (**Radcliffe**, 2012) and to entrepreneurial initiatives by local journalists (**Harte**; **Turner**; **Williams**, 2016). Although the condition of digital natives is not generally assumed to be necessary to categorize hyperlocal media, many of them are and there are authors who have defined them as such (**Metzgar**; **Kurpius**; **Rowley**, 2011).

Hyperlocal media have been the subject of specific maps and their characteristics and development trends have been studied and formed the central theme of some special issues (**Lindén**; **Hujanen**; **Lehtisaari**, 2019). Its often-blurred border with citizen journalism and the importance of the relationship with the community (**Jerónimo**; **Correia**; **Gradim**, 2020) has motivated research on the construction of the journalistic role of its promoters (**Chadha**, 2016a), the characteristics of their informative activity, the teams of hyperlocals or their management of user-generated content (**Chadha**, 2016b). Although studies often focus on the media ecosystem of a country or region, we also find international case studies (**Rivas-de-Roca**; **García-Gordillo**; **Caro-González**, 2020) or those that compare the situation of hyperlocals in several countries (**Cook**; **Bakker**, 2019).

### 6.2. Organization and business model

Regarding their organization, digital native media have experimented with productive structures or financing models that are not very common in traditional media. It has been observed that they are often more flexible organizations with multidisciplinary teams (**Valero-Pastor**; **González-Alba**, 2018), a characteristic that is related to the entrepreneurial nature of many projects.

At the financial level, digital natives present business models based on the principles of horizontality, participation, and user engagement (**Tejedor**; **Pla-Pablos**, 2020; **Tejedor et al.**, 2020), which seek diversification of revenue streams based on a value proposition and their own customer segment (**Sanders**, 2018). However, achieving economic sustainability is a challenge for many digital natives, either by developing their activity in an adverse context (**Cook**, 2016), lack of revenue diversification or insufficient resources (**Buschow**, 2020), the limited entrepreneurial experience of their promoters or the lack of economic support networks (**O'Brien**; **Wellbrock**, 2021).

### 6.3. Relationship with the audience

The foundational principles of digital natives tend to place value on journalistic ethics and commitment to the audience (**Ruotsalainen**; **Villi**, 2018), accountability, responsibility, and transparency of their operations (**Pérez-Díaz**; **Zamora-Medina**; **Arroyas-Langa**, 2020). These media face the challenge of gaining the trust of their users, who still tend to prefer traditional media brands (**Vara-Miguel**, 2018).

Understanding audience behaviour in the digital environment is another challenge for digital native media and researchers in this field. From academia, different methodologies have been defined to standardize the study of user behaviour and its metrics (**Majó-Vázquez**; **Nielsen**; **González-Bailón**, 2019) or to analyse phenomena such as virality (**Stringer**, 2020). The editorial management of audience measurement has also been analysed, noting that digital natives tend to prioritize editorial criteria over metrics (**Greene**; **Lecaros**; **Cerda-Diez**, 2022), although their managers recognize that these support journalistic work and allow better planning of content production and distribution (**Lamot**; **Paulussen**, 2020).

## 7. Challenges for digital native media and their study

The evolution of the digital communication ecosystem and the logical reconfiguration of media models have led to an international phenomenon of growing digital native media. While digital native media were almost experimental news initiatives in the 1990s, in the third decade of the new millennium they have become an essential sector in the media

maps of many countries. This transformation of the media reality is reflected in the field of research, with the study of digital native media being a growing area.

Most digital native media are still very similar to and inspired by legacy media, which have served as a model and whose heritage they try to give continuity to (Nicholls; Shabbir; Nielsen, 2016). However, their digital nature has forced them to introduce new dimensions and to experience renewed territories. Their production structures are often more flexible and adaptive, which favours innovation in content, in dissemination on different platforms and in the relationship with the audience (Harlow; Salaverría, 2016; García-Orosa; López-García; Vázquez-Herrero, 2020; Sixto-García; Rodríguez-Vázquez; Soengas-Pérez, 2020).

The profound transformations of the communicative ecosystem confront digital natives with important challenges, such as adaptation to large platforms and social networks (Bell *et al.*, 2017), the loss of credibility and trust of the citizenry in the media (Fisher, 2016; Vázquez-Herrero *et al.*, 2022), misinformation (Billard; Moran, 2022), news avoidance and rejection (Edgerly, 2021) or the preservation of journalistic quality (Rodríguez-Hidalgo; Rivera-Rogel; Romero-Rodríguez, 2020). In this context, digital native media continue the search, already started by legacy media corporations, to find sustainable models. Sustainability is a challenge at the economic and management levels (Vara-Miguel *et al.*, 2021) –to develop profitable, transparent models that favour news independence (Riordan, 2014)– but also at the social level, to build projects that involve communities and manage to position themselves as reliable news media at the service of citizens (Arrese; Kaufmann, 2016; Kalogeropoulos *et al.*, 2019; Sixto-García; Rodríguez-Vázquez; Soengas-Pérez, 2020; Ferrucci, 2017).

It can be noted that there is no single path to success for digital native media, although some initiatives mark innovative paths to follow. The study and research of native cybermedia requires a dual dimension: the study of their types and characteristics –since in many fields new actors from the field of communication are incorporated and the boundaries of journalism are questioned (Carlson; Lewis, 2015)– and their comparison with legacy media. Likewise, metajournalistic and multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches should contribute to tackling the challenges of digital media, digital native media and digital journalism.

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