

Evolution, trends and future of native media: From avant-garde to the epicenter of the communications ecosystem

Xosé López-García; Alba Silva-Rodríguez; Jorge Vázquez-Herrero

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Xosé López-García ✉
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1873-8260>

Universidade de Santiago de Compostela
Facultade de Ciencias da Comunicación
Avenida de Castelao, s/n
15782 Santiago de Compostela, Spain
xose.lopez.garcia@usc.es



Alba Silva-Rodríguez
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1221-5178>

Universidade de Santiago de Compostela
Facultade de Ciencias da Comunicación
Avenida de Castelao, s/n
15782 Santiago de Compostela, Spain
alba.silva@usc.es



Jorge Vázquez-Herrero
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9081-3018>

Universidade de Santiago de Compostela
Facultade de Ciencias da Comunicación
Avenida de Castelao, s/n
15782 Santiago de Compostela, Spain
jorge.vazquez@usc.es

Abstract

Over recent decades, digital native media have flourished as one of the most important communicative tools in the world, despite certain geographical disparities. Not only is this kind of media here to stay, but they have transitioned from being a feature of the avant-garde to occupying a central space in the digital ecosystem. Despite the diversity of models, difficulties in articulating business models that ensure sustainability, and their lack of financial muscle, native media have opened up renewed options for digital journalism in both the present and the future. By analyzing the current media landscape and a study of the main trends, carried out using a review of the published scientific literature and an analysis of cases from the last five years, this paper explores the horizons of the "new wave" of digital native media that will face the challenges of the second half of this third decade of the millennium. Of course, the future has not yet been written: digital media will have to build from the native space, observing emerging trends, modern technologies, and without giving up on providing quality digital journalism that is based in truthfulness, transparency, the involvement of users and the set of actions that serve the public interest.

Keywords

Digital native media; Cybermedia; Online media; Digital media; Evolution; Trends; Future; Challenges; Digital journalism; Digital-born; Mobile communication; Communication; High technologies; News; Journalism; News ecosystem; Ubiquity.

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1. Introduction

Born and developed online, digital native media are not only present in the media landscape, but also make up a sector of products that, despite their diversity, have common features. Although they have always looked towards traditional media and digital migrants (legacy media) for guidance and inspiration, they have also carved out their own identities in real time based on the characteristics of the modern context. Unlike traditional media, very few have had to rely on an industrial plant as, traditionally, most needed a site within an industrial estate. Rather, their organizational model has been much more functional and less bureaucratic than that of the companies born out of the industrialization of the last century. Digital newsrooms are smaller in size and have more open organizational models. Strategy has always focused on the Internet, often exclusively, and initiatives of varying degrees of innovation were implemented.

Since the start of the third millennium, after the “dot com” crisis, digital native media entered a new, irreversible phase in which each progression constituted a leap forward. Eventually, it became the new flourishing phenomenon of the digital communicative ecosystem. Many of these avant-garde initiatives, which broke down barriers and introduced new formats and rejuvenated the ways that daily events were reported on, fueled changes in media as a whole. This landscape was dominated by experimentation and rapid responses to challenges, sometimes without much reflection and without firm studies. A strong knowledge of the intricacies of the network society, and the ability to identify trends, served digital outlets as an asset in achieving success. With that being said, many times these results were only achieved thanks to sectoral strategies. Furthermore, they fueled imbalances and fostered weak points that led to problems in the medium term. There were successes, but there were also much talked-about failures.

The truth is that, regardless of these successes and errors, as the number of initiatives increased between 2010 and 2020, the internet became a hotbed of digital native media. The explosion of hyperlocals expanded the native media landscape and their presence in the digital communication ecosystem went from peripheral to significant, until it formed a network that is at the epicenter of the current setting. Despite difficulties in finding business models that ensure their sustainability, the limitations of their informative projects and the difficulties in retaining and managing their communities, hyperlocals are no longer only attractive to professionals, investors, political scientists and a long list of social actors, but it is a basic link for the structuring of models of current plural, democratic and participatory societies. Their role, as digital media, encourages debates on the ways to build more prosperous contemporary societies, and on the state of digital journalism and how it should evolve going forward.

2. The state of attitudes towards reinvention

The rise of digital native media outlets and their journalistic output must be understood as, for study and research, a phenomenon occurring within the field of digital journalism. Digital journalism studies go beyond journalism produced, distributed and consumed with the help of digital technologies (Steensen; Westlund, 2020). Certain questions about the reinvention of journalism within a platformed scenario must be raised about. Also, in relation to the new role of users in the production and distribution of news and about all the changes that have occurred. These include how news is searched for, the technologies used in the elaboration of informative pieces, their dissemination, their extended and “transmediated” discourse and their uses and consumption, in the shadow of a turbine that drives communicative ebbs and flows.

The formation of the current communicative ecosystem, emerging after the appearance of the internet and hand in hand with the evolution of the digital society in the third millennium, has a multitude of actors of various kinds. Among them, the media, old and new, stand out, as do the technological platforms and their social networks. It is precisely those, as a new power within the ecosystem (Hanna; Rohm; Crittenden, 2011), that are transforming both the digital media landscape and the practices of users (Alaimo; Kallinikos; Valderrama, 2020). This forces practically all companies—especially digital media outlets, created in and inhabiting this ecosystem—to redesign their strategies for future action, prioritizing social network strategies (Li; Larimo; Leonidou, 2020).

The interaction between the media and social networks has been very intense in the last ten years. There has been both friction and collaboration. The evolution of the communicative ecosystem of the network society showed how social networking sites have become essential to the way people receive and experience news (Bergström; Belfrage, 2018). Consequently, the media and journalists sought out their own space and, in parallel, informative initiatives have appeared exclusively on these platforms. In these years, the trends and fads of online platforms “come and go.” Nonetheless, the truth is that news users interact on social networks and the media have had to search for users within them (Larsson, 2018), in their efforts to ensure a better-informed society, even if the results aren’t guaranteed.

Social networks and media show certain similarities in relation to journalism. For example, both are communication channels. However, there are also disparities that are just as relevant. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that there is mutual interaction and that they influence each other. In a communicative and social context of today, characterized by disintermediation and reintermediation, the complexity of the relationships between social networks and the media reveals many questions to which answers must be sought via greater scientific research in the field (Moreno; Sepúlveda, 2021).

“ Social networks and media interact and influence each other ”

In this complex scenario, with a renewed communicative ecosystem after almost thirty years, digital journalism is a consolidated reality, not only professionally, but also academically (**Salaverría**, 2019). There are many challenges for both media institutions and media professionals, as well as for those who investigate the field. The journalists themselves, having to deal directly with technological and social changes, take on these challenges. They are aware of the fact that technology has entered the field via a continuous and sustained process, marked by disruptive elements, to the extent where it is now assumed that all modern-day journalism is digital (**Perreault; Ferrucci**, 2020).

Digital technology is of great relevance in the evolution of this field, especially since the emergence of “high technology.” However, the study of digital native media and the journalism that they produce must include an analysis of the steps taken that led to reinvention. This was achieved through a process of conceptualization based on new opportunities to work with large amounts of data, the elaboration of comprehensive information, new options to investigate power, the ability to interact with users and to tell the different sides of complex, polyhedral stories (**Waisbord**, 2019).

Digital native media outlets and their journalistic product borrow from traditional journalistic practices established in the midst of industrialization. Nonetheless, their products and practices directly confront the modern, unprecedented challenges related to the search for, production of and circulation of news content in today’s network society. These native media have attained greater prominence and consolidated their relevance just as digital journalism faces the challenge of redefining its field based on perspectives and approaches that have emerged in the last two decades (**Eldridge et al.**, 2019) and within the contemporary landscape marked by liquidity and ubiquity (**Aguado**, 2020).

The journalistic field has expanded in the last twenty years, against the backdrop of the introduction of renewed journalistic practices, uncovering the need to overcome the limits and expand on the referential frameworks that defined the discipline in the past (**Witschge; Deuze**, 2020). In this process, it is necessary to incorporate all emerging phenomena and their output into the field of study in order to better understand how to secure a better future for digital journalism in this third decade, in which digital native media provide a reference point.

For years, many journalists have been practicing their profession and earning a living based on work they do for institutions outside of those that traditionally dominated the journalistic industry (**Deuze**, 2019). Despite the changes, journalism continues to uphold its basic principles. This is true of just the traditional institutions, but also for peripheral actors (**Holton; Belair-Gagnon**, 2018), many of whom are progressively becoming a fundamental and essential part of modern journalism (**Hermida; Young**, 2019). Within this evolution, some of the most important actors have been the digital native media outlets.

The pandemic has accelerated the transformation of the media (**García-Avilés**, 2021), both digital native media and old-guard media, which is likely to fuel further transformative processes within digital journalism. This “leap forward” by the media in regards to digital transformation, the results of the hybridization of journalistic culture in different places (**Mellado et al.**, 2017), new journalistic practices, and the role of new actors on the periphery of the field, must be the subject of academic future research regarding journalism’s great expansion. Many of the changes experienced in recent years spurred on by technology cannot be reversed. In fact, they are set to be permanent features within digital journalism that are here to stay. Today, these innovations are core elements of journalistic work and of the journalistic profession.

The object of study, in short, “shifts” as the ecosystem undergoes an accelerated transformation, with digital native media as central actors, and many of the answers from the past require, at the very least, the addition of certain nuances. The phase of adaptations and transformations for the media and for journalism has not come to an end, but has only entered a new stage, now driven by virtual reality, artificial intelligence, 5G and a long list of communication technologies that entail new challenges. From the announcements and promises we will soon know what remains and the direction that, depending on the outcome, digital journalism follows. The only thing that is certain is that digital native media and the journalism that they provide new generation citizens will occur within that setting.

3. Mobility and ubiquity as axes

Facing the fourth digital wave –the age of the Internet of Things– (**Salaverría; De-Lima-Santos**, 2020), many digital native media that have emerged from this constantly changing ecosystem already accept that they may not be able to survive without the ability to adapt to new settings. To participate in technological innovation means becoming familiar with mobile journalism, artificial intelligence and big data (**Aguado; Silva**, 2022). Going over and redesigning pre-existing business models doesn’t suffice. Rather, it is essential to adopt innovation in formats and user experiences. Furthermore, all of this must take place regardless of loss of media leadership in favor of third-party platforms (**Wheatley; Ferrer-Conil**, 2020).

It is true that two of the axes of the current transformation –mobility and communicative ubiquity– are already familiar to certain digital native media outlets, since a significant number of them were born in this context. However, the effects of disruptive technologies and changes in information uses and consumption require the facing of complicated challenges that may call into question certain business models, as well as certain strategies applied, both in production and in the relationship with users.

“The ecosystem is undergoing an accelerated transformation, with digital native media as central players”

Those strategies include exploiting multi-sensory, narrative immersion, automating certain content and professional routines, and improving interaction models with the audience.

“It is not enough to rethink business models; innovation in formats and experiences is essential”

The data on the evolution of the native media landscape indicates that those who rest on the “laurels of success” enter, when they least expect it, into a series of scares. Often, this leads them towards the depths of the digital market and marks the end of activity. The impact of mobile technology –the smartphone, wearable technologies, Big Data, Internet of things, artificial intelligence, etc.– fuels ubiquitous mediations and drives the redefinition of the media ecosystem through new forms of intermediation, the consolidation of new consumption scenarios, the congruence between hypervigilance and self-surveillance, the new centrality of social interactions, the “emotionalization” of public discourses and the transformation of privacy or affective work into merchandise (Aguado, 2020). It also creates new stages, with renewed dynamics in which intervention is only possible with updated strategies.

The mobile era has brought communicative convergence into a new era (López-García *et al.*, 2019) and technological innovation has permeated the domains of politics, culture and society (Fussey; Roth, 2020). This world is characterized by features such as the application of ultra-fast communication technologies, ultra-intelligent devices and challenges on cyber security, digital media training, social control and individual well-being. It is a setting in which the excessive use of the digital brings social problems and shows the need to hone our skills and abilities. What is needed is more empirical research on how people can maintain a high level of well-being in a digital society despite (also thanks to) the omnipresence of digital ICTs in practically all areas of life (Büchi; Festic; Latzer, 2019).

As digitization has far-reaching implications for people, organizations and society, efforts to explore both the dark and unpredictable nature of digitization (Trittin-Ubrich *et al.*, 2021) and the positive effects of technological innovation. This process often takes place outside the journalistic field (Wu; Tandoc; Salomon, 2019) and is then “constructed”, internalized and negotiated by agents from the journalistic field (Lindblom; Lindell; Gidlund, 2022) which are likely to be scarce. Nonetheless, with a plethora of relevant information and accurate strategies relating to mobility and ubiquity, the challenges can be met, especially in the field of technologically mediated communication.

4. The territories of metacommunication

State-of-the-art technology has opened doors for experimentation, exploration, and speculation. Virtual reality and augmented reality are already part of the current transformation of digital native media. When the metaverse is announced as the next turning point in the field of communication –especially in business–, we become conscious that, sooner or later, it will become a reality. Within the expansion of the physical world, digital native media will act and intervene, which will bring to the fore new challenges for digital journalism.

However, the technological race to confront and overcome obstacles is not limited to those goals related to the expansion of the physical world. Now Web3 is knocking loudly at the door, encouraging some digital native initiatives to redefine their priorities in order to take advantage of new ways to monetize files and intellectual property, to explore forms of sponsorship or reward users offered by this new phase of the web, –which incorporates decentralization based on blockchain– something that the journalism of the digital native media could use. This path is not without danger, and is littered with questions and doubts. Nonetheless, it is one that, according to the defenders of the potential of the blockchain, will grant users more control over the network, in their initiatives, and allow for the opening of renewed business channels.

In the journey toward metacommunication, in which digital native media stand out as a central actor in the construction of a promised future, there is a great challenge: how to turn high technology into an engine for better digital journalism, representing verified information and truth, and with a commitment to serving the public interest. The challenge for digital journalists, regardless of their experiences in a platformized society, lies in taking advantage of all the tools available to them to produce pieces that promote quality information on the modern stage where liquid and ubiquitous communication reigns.

As in the past, the authority and democratic role of news journalism, draws upon a set of updated values and has adapted to the digital scenario of today’s network society (Hacup; O’Neill, 2017), is based on accurate and verified information (Ekström; Westlund, 2019). It is one of the essential elements of journalism and, if one day it disappears, the result will be another communication technique that, with Web3 the metaverse outlined above or any other dimension of the field of metacommunication, even if it shows great communicative efficiency, will not be fit to be called digital journalism. The discipline of verification remains essential and one of the fundamental elements of journalism in digital native media.

In the third decade of the third millennium, when all journalism is digital, the new journalistic ecosystem rests on two emerging media models: digital natives and non-natives (Salaverría; Martínez-Costa, 2021). The former model, with structures and techniques born and nurtured in the digital environment, not only shows a great diversity of typologies, but also contains the essence of the structures that, overshadowed by the metacommunication territories, are sure to nurture the best digital journalism of the future.

5. On the threshold of a new cycle

Somewhat luckily, digital journalism has entered a new cycle that powers artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things. The processes of adaptation to the new reality, driven by disruptive technologies and actors, have led to a metamorphosis and a reinvention. Without compromising the basics, new dimensions have been incorporated that enrich the “total journalism” of the third decade of the twentieth century of the current millennium. This digital journalism has made progress, hand in hand with innovation, in diversity of movements and ways of understanding the profession. It has also incorporated renewed profiles in accordance with the skills and abilities required in the current digital setting. It is neither better nor worse than the journalism of the 20th century, but it is different, with more dimensions, models, formats and relationship with users. Ultimately, it contains more informative potential.

Current digital journalism, which has in native media a potential ally in the promotion of change and innovation, given that it was designed specifically for the world of the network society and to integrate some of its essential elements, has its progress limited by the effects of many of the gaps that have characterized the construction of the so-called information society and the pending challenges (sustainable business models, updating of the regulatory framework, tensions with technological platforms, surveillance supervision, accountability/transparency, media training...). The future, as all the actors in the sector share, must be worked towards day by day. However, digital journalism, which functions within society and belongs to society, has to achieve that future through alliances with the most dynamic sectors involved in the construction of a setting that ensures services of general interest (journalism as a service to people and with people) within today’s complex societies. This is, without a doubt, one of the great challenges of digital journalism in relation to the pursuit of quality and excellence.

Technological developments and their transformed potential have affected ideology, self-perception and the way that the limits of the profession are understood (Kyriakidou; García-Blanco, 2021). This process of change isn’t over, though. Experts, technologists or otherwise, predict continuous evolution, which implies constant adaptation to the technological revolution within every changing social, political and economic contexts. The digital journalism of today, which is more than just digital technology (Zelizer, 2019), takes on the challenges of continuous evolution that will surely give rise to renewed professional practices influenced by the context of current and future hybrid media. Academic journalism needs to investigate these transformations in order to strengthen journalistic thought, which is in great need of disciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary visions that enrich its solid foundations, using modern observations to foster future prospects.

From our experiences in the field of digital journalism, those promoted by traditional media and by digital natives, we have reasons to be dissatisfied. Furthermore, it is normal that taking risks can lead to fear and unease. However, renovated digital native media that cultivate quality, modern, proactive, dynamic, participatory and sustainable journalism must be included in the quest for a better future. Digital native media, now at the epicenter of the communications ecosystem, are posed with the challenge of making this a common goal amongst the most dynamic sectors of today’s societies a reality.

The experiences of the past and the present in the field of digital journalism are the prologue, the prelude of what is to come, in terms of modern digital journalism.

“High-tech poses a new challenge for digital journalism”

The stories of people, events, social dynamics will still

exist in the year 2025, 2050 and 2075, and digital journalism, hand in hand with digital native media, will have to tell these stories through quality pieces, with truthful information, in formats, channels, and expressive modalities that are specifically adapted to do so. This will be done in alliance with the most committed and innovative sectors of these societies, so as to be a force in the present and in the future, in a media ecosystem where everyone will already be native or neo-native.

Judging by the current panorama and that which is on the horizon, there is little doubt here that the future of digital journalism relies on the ‘N’ of natives and neo-natives. Time will tell if our predictions are correct.

6. Conclusion

Digital native media, as part of a flourishing process in the present, will have a central role in the future of technologically mediated communication and, above all, in digital journalism. Digitization, that irreversible, difficult to control and innovative process in the field of communication, has placed digital native media in a pre-eminent position. Though neither better nor worse than legacy media or digital migrants, they contain some clearly differentiated characteristics. Most importantly, digital native media were born in and for the digital world. Its DNA is made up solely of information relating to the different steps and stages of the network society and the liquidity that characterizes it.

Although the originality of their models differs from legacy media –some have built unique structures, while others have limited themselves to imitation and the reproduction of models–, there is no doubt that digital native media as a whole have breathed new life into the journalistic fabric (in relation to narrative experiences, formats, use of tools, etc.). At the same time, they have revived old and new debates on borders, on central and peripheral actors in the field of information, on depth and real time, on ethical issues and, ultimately, on the quality of journalism and its role in today’s

societies, notably marked by trends that feed into disintermediation processes established in the recent past.

“The future of digital journalism relies on the ‘N’ of natives and neo-natives”

In a scenario marked by the appearance and disappearance of digital native media, with very fragile business and sustainability models, the data indicate an array of important challenges on the immediate horizon. As we find ourselves in the midst of the fourth wave of digitization –the one that characterizes the Internet of Things– digital native media are looking for ways to ensure their future and to create frameworks that make today’s digital journalism possible.

If native media outlets are able to secure the always necessary citizen support, they can build memorable pieces of a digital journalism that seeks, hand in hand with “total journalism”, to add value (not only through verified information, but through work that evidences the style and talent of professionals with different profiles in various countries) towards better-informed societies.

Digital native media, which in many cases have been at the forefront of the communication processes of the digital world, have reached the epicenter of the media ecosystem with several lessons learned and many challenges ahead. Their challenge is to build the future “day by day”, in society and with society. Citizens, within small or large communities, will have the last word.

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