Reconceptualizing journalistic media: Defining boundaries and identity in the digital era

Sara Pérez-Seijo
Universidade de Santiago de Compostela ✉ ⓘ
Alba Silva-Rodríguez
Universidade de Santiago de Compostela ✉ ⓘ
Ángel Vizoso
Universidade de Santiago de Compostela ✉ ⓘ

Abstract. In a context where the boundaries between journalism and its professional practices have blurred in relation to other media content, this research article explores the discursive contest over the definition of journalistic media and the influence of emerging actors who challenge the profession with external norms and practices. Specifically, this study analyses how journalistic media are defined in the current landscape and examines whether academia should continue emphasising the conceptual distinction between traditional and digital native media. To offer a conceptual framework, this research applies a qualitative methodology based on a focus group discussion, subsequently subjected to thematic analysis and open coding. The findings indicate that a legitimate journalistic media outlet is a legally constituted entity composed of professionals who adhere to the basic principles of the profession and ethical standards, providing factual, relevant, and timely information. The distinction between traditional and digital native media is deemed functionally irrelevant today, since both media types share the same social roles and ethical principles. However, nuances persist due to their origins and levels of digital adaptation. The study underscores the need to maintain a flexible definition of journalistic media, open to technological changes and social transformations that influence and reshape the journalism industry and the broader communication ecosystem, to preserve their relevance and legitimacy.
Keywords. Digital media, news media, legacy media, interloper media, journalism practice.

ᴱˢ Reconceptualizando los medios periodísticos: definición de fronteras e identidad en la era digital

Resumen. En un contexto en el que se han difuminado las fronteras del periodismo y sus prácticas profesionales frente a otros contenidos mediáticos, este artículo de investigación explora la disputa discursiva en torno a la definición de medio periodístico y la influencia de actores emergentes que desafían la profesión con normas y prácticas externas. En concreto, el estudio analiza cómo se definen hoy los medios periodísticos y examina si la academia debe mantener la distinción conceptual entre medios tradicionales y nativos digitales. Para ofrecer un marco conceptual, esta investigación aplica una metodología cualitativa basada en un grupo de discusión, posteriormente sometido a análisis temático y codificación abierta. Los resultados indican que un medio periodístico legítimo es una entidad legalmente constituida, compuesta por profesionales que se adhieren a los principios básicos de la profesión y a estándares éticos y que, además, ofrece información veraz, relevante y oportuna. La distinción entre medios tradicionales y nativos digitales se considera actualmente irrelevante desde un punto de vista funcional, ya que ambos tipos de medios comparten los mismos roles sociales y principios éticos. No obstante, persisten matices relacionados con sus orígenes y niveles de adaptación digital. El estudio subraya la necesidad de mantener una definición flexible de medio periodístico, abierta a los cambios tecnológicos y a las transformaciones sociales que influyen y reconfiguran tanto la industria periodística como el ecosistema comunicativo en su conjunto, con el fin de preservar su relevancia y legitimidad.
Palabras clave. Medios digitales, medios de comunicación, medios matriciales, medios intrusos, práctica periodística.

1. Introduction

The reconfiguration of the communicative ecosystem has led to a continuous rise of media intermediaries, such as search engines and social networks, which have radically transformed the media landscape and introduced new tensions among certain actors —particularly between news outlets and platforms— (Kleis Nielsen & Ganter, 2017). Technological disruptions and increasing competition within digital media have altered market conditions for publishing companies, sparking renewed concerns about the future of journalism (Westlund *et al.*, 2020).

Technological and digital convergence has positioned journalism, which has historically held well-defined norms and values and is subject to constant revision (Deuze, 2005), at the core of the information and knowledge society (Castilhos Karam, 2009). However, in this new landscape, professional routines, journalistic dimensions, and the spaces where journalistic information competes with messages produced by other social organisations and numerous citizens have all been transformed, creating a blend of old and new blurred boundaries (Darbo & Skjerdal, 2019).

In a short time, social media managed to integrate into media routines as channels for accessing, verifying, and disseminating information (Vázquez-Herrero *et al.*, 2019), thereby expanding journalism's areas of presence. The digital sphere has become crowded with new actors, particularly those from the tech sector, who influence journalism and introduce ideological biases into the field through their journalistic activities (Gutsche, 2022). Among the new media entities, countermedia stand out —often labelled as fake news outlets of the post-truth era (Toivanen *et al.*, 2022)— along with the so-called interloper media, which are challenging journalism's boundaries by offering new perspectives on what journalism could be (Kim & Shin, 2021). These transformations fuel ongoing debates over what does or does not constitute a journalistic media outlet today.

As these debates emerge, the media industry —a sector profoundly impacted by technology and the rapid pace of change in the digital landscape— has been compelled to explore new business models that allow it to generate revenue, survive, and compete within the communicative ecosystem (De Lima-Santos *et al.*, 2022). The innovation of media business models, whose success depends on customer acceptance and the outcomes they deliver (Evens *et al.*, 2018), has become one of the main challenges for the media sector. Faced with declining advertising revenue and payment for content, news publishers are striving to balance revenue streams in their business models with new approaches, including subscriptions, memberships, grants, e-commerce, events, consulting, and crowdfunding (Vara-Miguel *et al.*, 2021). In this shift towards new models, donations and audience participation are also essential (Costera Meijer, 2021). These models are diverse; from their results, those with the most excellent applicability will emerge in the coming years.

1.1. The ongoing transformations of journalism and news media

Journalism, which is grounded in a set of norms that have been updated over time —such as what qualifies as news (Harcup & O'Neill, 2016)— and a set of values cultivated throughout history, has been strengthened to, for example, enhance message credibility (Peifer & Meisinger, 2021). There are ongoing tensions between procedures and values (Anderson, 2018), and journalism has significantly changed the digital landscape. However, it maintains a core principle of verifying information and constructing factual stories relevant to citizens (Deuze, 2019). In an unstable and complex world, where citizens need and demand information, analysis, and interpretation, we know that the future of journalism is digital and networked (Van der Haak *et al.*, 2012). However, this path is not easy, and journalism must confront numerous challenges in a communicative ecosystem where many-to-many communication fuels an overabundance of messages, with which it must coexist and compete, and digital society faces information overload. This excess of information, which sometimes leads to user anxiety and distress, hampers —or can hamper— the communicative efficiency of the relevant messages that quality journalism channels —or should channel.

The years ahead of digital journalism, driven by initiatives and professionals with renewed profiles who employ hardware and software enabling innovative narrative formats, combining platforms and channels, and adding interactivity to the news experience, appear promising (Deuze, 2017). Nevertheless, it is not without threats and complexities that we must analyse to anticipate future challenges and propose alternatives. Indeed, digital journalism, as an established and evolving discipline (Salaverría, 2019), has benefited from extensive research that, in recent years, has helped to analyse these changes and contextualise the challenges it will face in the coming years. The ability of this discipline to offer insights for the future will be crucial for the new era of digital journalism, in a context dominated by artificial intelligence and emerging scenarios that hint at significant social, professional, and technological developments. However, journalism will continue to provide meaning—setting objectives—, shape, perspective, and significance because digital journalism is more than just digital technology (Zelizer, 2019).

The future of journalism practice, which must be achieved by proving its continued relevance to the effective functioning of democratic and pluralistic societies —such as through its scrutinising and monitoring role— requires updated alliances and a reinforcement of traditional values (Esser & Neuberger, 2018), along with sustainable media models. Now that advertising has shifted mainly to technology platforms, which coexist and compete with journalistic media, some promising models have demonstrated their viability (Medina-Laverón *et al.*, 2021) and need to be consolidated to tackle challenges in the new communicative landscape. Media today need new sustainability models to complement advertising revenue (Castells-Fos *et al.*, 2022). To address this challenge in a landscape where many boundaries have blurred and where confusion abounds —particularly in content perception (Amazeen, 2020), in cross-border journalism (Hellmueller & Berglez, 2022), in innovations within storytelling forms (Kulkarni *et al.*, 2022), and in the very concept of media itself (Miconi & Serra,

2019)— it is crucial to define as precisely as possible what constitutes a journalistic media outlet in this new context. The emergence of active audiences (Masip *et al.*, 2019) and platforms, along with the trend toward the platformization of society (Van Dijck *et al.*, 2018), has reshaped the communicative ecosystem and the role of media.

In this complex ecosystem, defining what constitutes a journalistic media outlet has become increasingly challenging. Platforms such as Google and Facebook engage in activities traditionally associated with journalistic organisations, ranging from content curation to monetisation, blurring the boundaries between professional media and other actors. In this context, establishing clear criteria for journalistic media —grounded in basic professional norms, ethical standards, and providing verified information to the public (Bogdanić, 2020)— is essential to preserve their legitimacy and distinguish them from peripheral or interloper actors.

To address the notion of journalistic media in the current digital context, it is helpful to consider Reese's (2021) definition of institutions. He understands institutions as complex social structures formed by interlocking networks of rules, activities, roles, technologies, norms, and collective frames of meaning that sustain their coherence, endurance, and value. Applied to journalism, this allows for the identification of different levels of analysis: on one hand, traditional news organisations; on the other, hybrid media systems that include emerging actors, digital platforms, and innovative practices interacting with established media. This perspective recognises the dynamic nature of the journalistic institution and helps conceptualise how new actors and technologies integrate into and transform the media ecosystem, without losing sight of the core values that sustain journalistic legitimacy. According to Bogdanić (2020), journalistic media can be understood as institutions or platforms that produce and communicate information guided by shared principles and norms, focused on meeting citizens' information needs and oriented by values such as truthfulness, responsibility, and relevance. This perspective complements the notion of legacy and digital media, helping define their boundaries and legitimacy in today's media ecosystem.

Since their origins, journalistic media have been defined as instruments for disseminating information, and various scholars have also highlighted their capacity to shape reality and exert influence. Most conceptual approaches have viewed media as public or private enterprises tasked with delivering current information through the physical and technical platforms that modern technology has made possible. By broadcasting these messages, they gave society a view of what was happening worldwide (Del Rey Morató, 1991).

It is evident that media continue to serve as communication instruments, yet it is also clear that the messages they channel have the power to shape reality. However, a deeper inquiry is needed to fully understand how the digital revolution brings about transformations in media and reorients their function (Miconi & Serra, 2019). This highlights the importance of situating media within their digital context —a longstanding debate to which McLuhan's

proposals introduced disruptive elements in their time, advancing media understanding (McLuhan, 1964). Today, this involves rethinking the contributions of conceptual approaches, from their emergence and consolidation in industrial society, with their contribution to modernity (Thompson, 1995), to the perspectives introduced by various schools of thought and researchers into the third millennium (Miconi & Serra, 2019). Such re-evaluation seeks to inform current approaches to what we should understand as journalistic media within a horizon of sustainable journalism in today's digital age (Berglez *et al.*, 2017). This issue has consistently been central to journalism studies, regardless of shifting research emphases on its complexity, and remains at the core of journalism studies today, particularly within the framework of new centre-periphery dynamics in current research (Hess *et al.*, 2022).

Contemporary news media mediate and influence the shaping of public opinion (Santos *et al.*, 2022) and remain central to providing citizens with information, serving as democratic forums, agenda setters, and strategic tools in governance (Opperhuizen *et al.*, 2020). Despite the fascination with innovative forms in journalism, such as multimedia narratives, automation, or audience involvement, we must not lose sight of journalism's democratic functions (Esser & Neuberger, 2018), which, in a new context, remain as crucial as ever.

In light of the technological transformations brought about by the digital age and the emergence of new media intermediaries, which complicate the distinction between journalism and other media content (Hujanen *et al.*, 2023), as well as the lack of consensus on what constitutes legitimate journalism (Meyers *et al.*, 2012), it becomes necessary to reflect on the boundaries of journalistic practice in the current communicative landscape. In addressing this ambiguous context, this paper presents an exploratory investigation to shed light on the discursive contest over the notion of journalistic media and emerging actors who, positioned as new media, introduce external norms and practices that challenge the profession. Two research questions are formulated in this study:

- RQ1. How is journalistic media defined in the current digital, convergent, ubiquitous, and intelligent landscape?
- RQ2. Should academia continue to influence the conceptual distinction between legacy media and digital-native media, considering the new dynamics and practices introduced by interloper media that foster blurred boundaries?

This study contributes to journalism in at least three important ways. First, conceptually, it offers an updated framework for understanding the definition of journalistic media after more than three decades in the digital landscape. The presence of non-traditional actors adds complexity, requiring the establishment of clear identity boundaries to distinguish the professional field of journalism. Applying essential norms and practices, these boundaries help affirm the legitimacy and authority of journalistic practice, setting it apart from interloper media and emerging actors

on the periphery of journalism. Second, by considering a dynamic characterisation of journalistic media, prospectively, aligned with the changing nature of a rapidly evolving digital environment. And third, functionally, by emphasising the need to move beyond the discursive contest over legacy media and digital-native media, as, despite their structural differences or responses to the digital environment, they share the same mission: to explain and narrate current reality from different perspectives, in accordance with journalistic standards and by applying the professional ethics of journalism.

2. Methodology

To provide a conceptual approach to journalistic media and answer the research questions, this study applies an entirely qualitative methodology based on a focus group discussion. This is a data collection technique that involves gathering a limited number of participants who share homogeneous characteristics to "induce the production of spontaneous discourse" from those involved "in response to a set of defined concepts" (De Miguel, 2005, p. 265) established by the researchers behind the study. This method is particularly well-suited to exploring emerging phenomena and contested concepts, where multiple perspectives and bodies of knowledge contribute to a richer and more dynamic understanding of the subject under study.

The focus group was conducted in person in November 2022 at the University of Santiago de Compostela (USC), with 11 participants from Spain with extensive experience in Communication and Journalism. Specifically, we aimed to combine the representation of two profiles: active media practitioners in positions of responsibility at journalistic companies, and experts from universities specialising in journalism research, with professional experience (Table 1). Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

It was structured around three main thematic blocks to stimulate reflection on journalistic practice and news organisations in the digital society. To begin, the moderator provided participants with four definitions of the concept of "media"—collective communication media, journalistic communication media, digital-native collective communication media, and digital-native journalistic communication media—, developed from a literature review on this subject of study. Participants were invited to engage in a process of conceptual clarification, specifying the scope and implications of each category while delineating journalistic media from other types of digital initiatives. Subsequently, the experts discussed the ontological boundaries of native digital journalistic media, addressing what should and should not be considered as such. Finally, drawing on their professional expertise, participants sought to articulate a definition of the contemporary news media in contemporary contexts.

The focus group lasted approximately three hours, with two authors participating in the session as moderator and observer, respectively. The session transcript was analysed through thematic and open coding using ATLAS.ti software.

3. Results

3.1. Understanding journalistic media

When asked about the definition of the journalistic media in today's context —a digital, mobile, ubiquitous environment where high technology is gaining prominence— the focus group participants mostly showed consensus on a series of aspects that help to shape its contemporary conceptualisation, distinguishing these media from the so-called interlopers. Some even argue that, before defining strategies or conducting any analysis, "the first step is to clarify what a media outlet is" (P10).

Among the aspects highlighted are the application of professional ethics, adherence to the principles of journalism, the role of the information professional as an interpreter and analyst of reality —whether present, past, or future—, the existence of an editorial line, the journalist's role as a mediator, the exercise of their communicative function regardless of the medium used, the production of their messages aimed at a specific audience, and the legal structure.

Table 1. Composition of the focus group.

ID	Position	Field	Gender
P1	Director of innovation	Public service media	Male
P2	Head of digital projects	Digital communication agency	Male
P3	Editor-in-Chief	Digital-native media	Male
P4	Editor-in-Chief	Digital-native media	Male
P5	Delegate	Legacy media	Male
P6	Journalism professor / Board Member	University / Journalist association	Male
P7	Journalism professor	University	Female
P8	Journalism professor	University	Male
P9	Journalism professor	University	Male
P10	Journalism professor	University	Female
P11	Journalism professor	University	Male

Source: elaborated by the author.

Thus, based on the responses from scholars and media practitioners, a journalistic media outlet could be defined in the present as follows:

(1) The one that applies professional ethics to journalistic practice. The normative boundaries regarding ethics must be clearly defined. Experts show consensus when highlighting the media's and its professionals' responsibility regarding the events they report on, as well as the importance of respecting the truth and ensuring transparency in their work and operations. In other words, there is unanimous agreement that adherence to ethical standards and the fundamental principles that govern the profession is essential to ensure good journalistic practice:

> Now, with a mobile phone, any citizen can inform, share something, and transmit information. However, contextualising, prioritising the information, and doing so from an ethical standpoint is a responsibility that journalists must always work with (P6).

> In Spain, there is a constitutional provision that mandates the provision of truthful information. Therefore, when that information is not confirmed as true... perhaps we need to ask ourselves other questions: Is that a journalistic media outlet, or is it something else entirely? (P9).

(2) The one that channels messages produced by information professionals. The sender and the receiver of the media outlet must be clearly defined. When a journalist does not produce the content, but rather by a group outside the profession or even by a citizen — aligned with what is known as "citizen journalism"— all experts agree on the need to draw a clear distinction concerning journalistic media outlets.

> The professional production of content is a clear distinction between what constitutes journalistic production, its characteristics, the application of professional ethics, and the usual methodologies [of journalism] compared to other types of processes. A few years ago, there were debates, even in universities, about the involvement of the audience in news production. Today, it is no longer the same. Years ago, there was discussion about how to integrate the public, but the presence of social media as a forum for discussion has clarified the role of newspapers in this regard (P3).

> If the main actors are people who are not journalists, we should be talking about means of expression rather than media outlets (P4).

> When talking about citizen participation, the role of content curation is essential, because if we don't transform what seems like journalism into a platform where everyone just says the first thing that comes to mind without verifying any sources, then it's not journalism. This is why the role of the journalist is strictly necessary to confirm and verify that the information is true. And this is what distinguishes a journalistic media outlet from a collective media outlet that simply transmits information to large and heterogeneous audiences but is not journalistic (P9).

Most experts associate the agents behind the media outlet with the trust in the content produced and transmitted. This confidence must be placed by the audience, and it can sometimes be affected by a lack of transparency regarding its internal structure:

> It is becoming increasingly common to see only mentions of the mission and philosophy in the "Who We Are" section, but it's not really clear who is behind it. And this is a media outlet that may appear to be a journalistic product, which may seem very interesting, but is it trustworthy? Who is producing it? Who is writing it? (P10).

> In local media, and in media that are often precarious, it is common not to know exactly who is behind it: whether there is a team, whether it's just one person, whether this person has a degree in Communication or Journalism, or whether it's a group of citizens, such as a neighbourhood association, creating their own media outlet that may visually resemble a journalistic outlet. The uncertainty about who is behind it often raises the question of whether the content is trustworthy or not (P7).

On the other hand, from a labour perspective, professionals point out a fundamental difference between journalistic media and interloper media: a journalistic media outlet must have or employ professionals who are compensated for the work they do, whereas what some refer to as a "means of expression" (P4) does not necessarily guarantee or require payment or compensation for those who participate. This would be the case for platforms born from citizen participation, such as a neighbourhood association.

Furthermore, in a journalistic media outlet, the mediation of the information professional is crucial. The journalist's responsibility in a news media outlet is to act as a bridge between the events and the audience, so carrying out this role with honesty, rigour, and impartiality is essential.

> Credibility and trust in the media are the lifeline or the means of repositioning journalism, and in that sense, it is indeed crucial to properly position the journalist's role as a mediator. The role of the citizen who comments and shares opinions must be acknowledged, and we must consider this type of participation to better identify their interests, but without allowing the media to be solely and exclusively influenced by them, of course (...). There are already examples of audience integration work, but always under the guidance of the journalist. In other words, the journalist is the one who plays the mediating role to then construct the journalistic offering (P10).

> A few years ago, we witnessed the rise of citizen journalism, but it quickly settled into the logic that there must be journalistic mediation in the production of content (...). If there is a significant presence of journalist teams in a media outlet, we would be talking about something else (P5).

(3) The one that does not condition its communicative function by the medium it uses. Experts point out that precisely because of this, the challenge of

the definition is to be able to encompass those platforms that are continuously evolving:

> We can talk about a digital-native news media when the outlet operates on a social network through just a profile (P7).

> Can a media outlet that only disseminates news through Instagram or Facebook be considered a journalistic outlet? If it has a clear, transparent structure behind it, and the outlet employs journalists who, for whatever reason, decide they only want to disseminate through that channel: yes, it is (P10).

> The fact that the outlet has a website, or a certain technological structure is less relevant than the role it plays in the communicative space. The brand can be carried to different places. Currently, if we consider the existing technological system, it must play its role in terms of function, while from the legal structure perspective, it must be stable (...). We cannot base the definition of a media outlet solely on a platform that, in four or five years, may no longer exist in the same form. We need to evolve towards an idea that integrates technology into the definition, making it broader to face this new world (P3).

The hybridisation dominating the current communicative landscape makes it difficult, according to some participants, to draw clear boundaries between different types of media. Others also point out that the existing definitions of the concept of journalistic media always involve a construction between structuralism and fundamentalism:

> There is a tension that is not easy to resolve. A tension between what is practical in an economic and social system, where the media must have a certain form and a stable, defined technological structure, and the role that mediation plays in any medium, space, or network (P3).

(4) The one that covers information of general interest and explains the reality of the present, but also of the past and, of course, the future, offering forecasts based on rigorous analysis and supported by reliable sources. These predictions can help the public to be prepared and alert, as well as to make informed decisions in the face of upcoming situations and scenarios:

> They don't necessarily report on the current reality. That's a limitation. There are multiple realities (P11).

Moreover, its messages are directed at a specific audience, which can access the produced and disseminated content through various platforms and/or devices:

> What matters is the origin and the purpose: today, the media is accountable to the audience. That's why it is essential to define which audiences you are targeting, regardless of the platform or medium (P8).

(5) The one that presents a specific editorial line, meaning its professionals must take these values

and principles as a guide when reporting and presenting reality:

> In the case of a collective media outlet, it may or may not have an explicit editorial line (P5).

(6) But, fundamentally, a journalistic media outlet —whether digital-native or not— is established as a journalistic enterprise with a legal structure that allows it to be recognised. The media is recognised as a journalistic institution and, therefore, allows itself to be acknowledged in this way:

> A media outlet, first and foremost, is an institution. It is a formal intention to be present in that space and to be legally recognized as such in society, before readers, political entities, advertisers, etc. But being institutionalized does not mean that you necessarily have appropriate ethical behaviour, but it is a first step because it implies legal responsibilities and guarantees for the reader (P3).

While there is some consensus around a set of fundamental particularities that distinguish journalistic media outlets from interloper media, some experts emphasise that "by narrowing it down, we are restricting and limiting" (P8). However, most agree that in the current landscape, it has become necessary to clarify specific nuances to make a clear distinction and avoid confusing the audience.

3.2. Unpacking the concept of digital-native journalistic media

When it comes to finding a convincing definition of what a digital-native journalistic media outlet is, the discussion becomes more intense. Nonetheless, after presenting the various arguments, the positions largely converge around a central idea: it is, in fact, a fictional debate today, in which the label "digital-native" does not provide any distinguishing value, from the standpoint of the essence and principles of journalistic practice, compared to legacy journalistic outlets.

Most participants are firm in their belief that the debate over the distinction between digital-native journalistic media outlets and those known as legacy or traditional media, which have gradually migrated to the web, creating their online versions and adapting to the characteristics of the new digital environment, should be overcome and concluded:

> What is a digital-native media outlet compared to a non-native media outlet that embraced the challenge of digitalization and behaves like any digital-native media outlet, or even better from a digital standpoint, in terms of audience satisfaction? (P5).

> Society doesn't differentiate at all between whether a media outlet is legacy or online native. The audience only distinguishes it as a digital media outlet, but they're not thinking about its history or origin (P9).

> A digital-native media outlet, like any other, is one that facilitates debate and public discussion. It's not just about engagement numbers (P8).

In this regard, some experts emphasise that, although the debate may now be reduced to mere academic theory, it remains essential that both types be identifiable and recognisable as journalistic media outlets, which requires transparency regarding their configuration and legal structure:

> It's not the same idea we had of digital-natives ten or twenty years ago as it is when we talk about it today. The crossroads and the evolution many traditional media outlets have undergone, that strategic shift to digital-first, has made those distinctions obsolete. They are all digital media competing on the web. But the audience needs to be able to identify them to know whom they can trust, and journalists need to be clear about that responsibility and move forward in fulfilling the role that audiences must play (P10).

Despite rejecting the label of "digital-native" to mark a distinction between journalistic media, understood as a broad and inclusive umbrella, simply based on the platform on which the media is born, the participants do highlight some distinguishing aspects in relation to traditional media:

(1) A digital-native journalistic media outlet should be understood in the same way as a traditional media outlet in terms of its function to inform, but it differs in the platform on which it originates: the Internet.

> Only the platform changes. Therefore, it is a platform (primarily web-based, although it could also be a social network, blog, or any other platform) through which journalistic messages, produced by information professionals, are transmitted to large, heterogeneous, and anonymous audiences (...). This type of media is born in and for the Internet (P9).

> One that presents a legal, professional, and journalistic deontological structure supported on digital channels (P3).

> A brand that engages in activities related to journalism, with its codes and values, in the digital environment (P2).

(2) Digital-native media outlets take full advantage of the potential of the digital environment in terms of content and service production, distribution, and commercialisation:

> They are born on the internet and use all the digital techniques and resources at their disposal (...). They are promoted by companies born in a digital environment, independent of traditional media groups (P5).

(3) They are receptive to audience participation in the communication process, taking advantage of the multiple channels available today to interact with them:

> A digital-native media outlet leverages the procedures and structure that technology provides to respond to audience demands, while ensuring transparency (P11).

> Managed by communication professionals who disseminate (exchange) information with the audience through different platforms or channels, characterized by a commitment to new formats, transparency, different and alternative business models, new professional structures, and new services, with a strategy focused on the audience (P6).

> They are the ones who, aspirationally, target new audiences (P8).

On the other hand, the evolution of media and journalistic practice on the internet reveals that, inevitably, the present and future of journalism is digital, "with all that this implies: work dynamics, changes in required schedules, structural alterations, etc." (P5). Although most experts consider that, within journalism, there is no room for distinguishing between media based on their traditional or online roots, they point out some advantages and disadvantages that digital-native and legacy media face due to their inherent nature.

From the perspective of traditional media, one of the main challenges lies in adapting to digital narratives. Experts note that a learning process has been necessary to adjust to new ways of telling and representing reality. However, the difference boils down to just that: understanding, assimilating, and adapting to the new dynamics and formulas required for producing journalistic content in the online sphere.

> We must take advantage of all the digital resources available to us today to tell good stories and tell them well. Working within these dynamics is the most challenging part because it takes time, and that's a disadvantage for legacy media compared to digital ones. In any case, these new ways of working are learned (P5).

In the current context, adapting to audiences and their consumption habits also represents a challenge: "The change in the relationship with the audience is perhaps a difference that traditional media have had to migrate to, but one that digital-native media have started with" (P6). Some participants argue that, to adapt, media outlets must think in terms of multi-platform:

> The challenge is to use distribution channels that are not on the same platform but that audiences are accustomed to, such as all the social media. Many times, users consume more information through these channels than from the website itself (P9).

> A journalistic media today is not the same as a journalistic media as it was understood before: it is a media that produces content and distributes it across multiple channels. Without forgetting that we produce information (P5).

The role of the audience in this new communicative scenario must also be rethought to adapt to their demands for informational content and regain the trust that has been eroded in recent years:

> What role will audiences play? How will we interact with them, and how, even, will we integrate them into the processes to create products that can connect more effectively? In many newsrooms —those considered diverse— small audience groups are already being incorporated to identify what they want to be discussed in the media, without needing to be in control (P10).

4. Discussion and conclusions

The lack of agreement on what constitutes journalistic news organisations in digital societies (Carlson, 2017; Meyers *et al.*, 2012) complicates the ability to draw lines in a scenario where the boundaries are increasingly blurry and porous. The answer to this question is more complex than it may initially appear. The changes introduced by the digital revolution in the technologically mediated communication field have displaced many definitions and conceptual approaches to the role of journalistic media. At the same time, the emergence of interlopers from the periphery of the field, whose provocative practices have explicitly challenged the limits of journalism (Eldridge II, 2019), fuels a discursive contest about what is or is not a journalistic news outlet.

Through this exploratory study, an attempt has been made to provide a pragmatic understanding of this concept, drawing boundaries between actors and identifying essential criteria that characterise and shape the identity of legitimate journalism in the contemporary context, beyond its traditional or digital origins. The findings illustrate that a journalistic media is conceived as a legally constituted entity, made up of information professionals who, adhering to the basic principles of journalism and meeting the ethical standards of the profession, constitute, as previously noted by other scholars, "truth mediators in the public sphere" (Michailidou & Trenz, 2021, p. 1341), and provide the public with "fact-based, relevant and current information" (Görke & Scholl, 2006, p. 651), regardless of the medium or channel used. The rigorous analysis of reality and the use of reliable sources by qualified journalists, independent of the media's manifest editorial line, affirm its legitimacy and authority in shaping public opinion, free and plural, and as foundational elements of democracies.

The findings also highlight the need to avoid an overly restrictive characterisation of what constitutes a journalistic media outlet, as this could limit the adaptability and evolution of media to technological and social changes that may emerge in the future. Therefore, the definition of a journalistic news organisation remains under construction, open to transformations that impact and redefine both the journalism industry and the broader communication ecosystem. This rationale is grounded precisely in the metamorphosis (Vázquez-Herrero *et al.*, 2020) that journalistic practice has undergone since its immersion in the digital landscape. This is also aligned with the perspective defended by Deuze and Witschge (2017, p. 177), who, theorising about the transformations experienced, consider journalism "as a moving object and as a dynamic set of practices and expectations — a profession in a permanent process of becoming".

The evolution of media and journalistic practice thirty years after the emergence of the first online media outlet —the weekly *Palo Alto Weekly* (Carlson, 2003)— reveals that, inevitably, the present and future of journalism is digital. In this scenario, from an editorial perspective, two models of online media coexist: legacy news brands and native online outlets (Salaverría, 2019), a typology established in the past during a time of digital transition. This study shows that the distinction between both is perceived today as irrelevant, since both media types share the same ethical principles and social roles in their essence and informative functions. Nevertheless, specific nuances persist due to their origin and adaptability to the digital environment. In fact, legacy media have been the slowest to understand the importance of digital transformation in response to technological disruption (Ashuri, 2013; García-Avilés *et al.*, 2016). Still, differences and similarities intertwine and contribute to shaping the identity of what today is journalistic practice.

In a digitally evolving scenario (Pérez-Seijo & Silva-Rodríguez, 2024), journalistic media must respond to the changing dynamics of technology and information consumption to remain relevant and connected to their audiences. Regardless of their origins, media must base their legitimacy on audience trust, which is essential to ensure the quality of information and the professionalism that validates them in society. After all, as journalistic media, their mission remains unchanged: to protect the public interest and keep societies well-informed.

Building on Holton and Belair-Gagnon (2018), it is important to recognise that journalistic strangers (including explicit interlopers, implicit interlopers, and intralopers) play a key role in shaping contemporary news production. These actors introduce innovations, challenge traditional journalistic norms, and contribute to new epistemologies of journalism. By participating in the creation and distribution of news, whether from the periphery or within news organisations, they blur the boundaries between insiders and outsiders, helping to redefine criteria for legitimacy. Understanding their roles allows for a more nuanced view of journalism as a collective, dynamic practice, where legitimacy emerges from institutional affiliation and ethical, professional, and participatory contributions.

Consequently, future research should explicitly incorporate the perspective of interloper media and other emerging actors at the periphery of journalism, understood as a professional field. Doing so is essential to achieve a comprehensive definition and understanding of the boundaries of legitimate journalistic practice in the contemporary context, thereby connecting these peripheral dynamics directly with the broader discourse on the evolution and identity of journalism.

Given that this is an exploratory study, the findings presented provide only an initial approach to the object of study and cannot be generalised to all realities of digital journalism. Among the main limitations are the reliance on secondary sources, a circumscribed conceptual framework, and the absence of longitudinal empirical data that would allow observation of the evolution of peripheral actors in journalistic practice.

5. Funding and Support

6. Authors' contribution

Conceptualization	Ideas; formulation or evolution of overarching research goals and aims.	Author 1
Data curation	Management activities to annotate (produce metadata), scrub data and maintain research data (including software code, where it is necessary for interpreting the data itself) for initial use and later re-use.	Authors 1, 2, 3
Formal analysis	Application of statistical, mathematical, computational, or other formal techniques to analyze or synthesize study data.	Authors 1, 2
Funding acquisition	Acquisition of the financial support for the project leading to this publication.	Authors 1, 2, 3
Investigation	Conducting a research and investigation process, specifically performing the experiments, or data/evidence collection.	Authors 1, 2, 3
Methodology	Development or design of methodology; creation of models.	Authors 1, 2, 3
Project administration	Management and coordination responsibility for the research activity planning and execution.	Author 1
Resources	Provision of study materials, reagents, materials, patients, laboratory samples, animals, instrumentation, computing resources, or other analysis tools.	Author 3
Software	Programming, software development; designing computer programs; implementation of the computer code and supporting algorithms; testing of existing code components.	Author 1
Supervision	Oversight and leadership responsibility for the research activity planning and execution, including mentorship external to the core team.	Author 1
Validation	Verification, whether as a part of the activity or separate, of the overall replication/reproducibility of results/experiments and other research outputs.	Authors 1, 2
Visualization	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically visualization/data presentation.	Author 3
Writing / original draft	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically writing the initial draft (including substantive translation).	Author 1
Writing / review & editing	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work by those from the original research group, specifically critical review, commentary or revision —including pre- or post-publication stages.	Author 2

7. Statement on the use of artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence (AI) has not been used in the conduct of the research or in the preparation of this article.

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Sara Pérez Seijo. She has a PhD in Communication, is Assistant Professor at the Universidade de Santiago de Compostela (USC) and a member of Novos Medios research group. She was a visiting scholar at Universidade Nova de Lisboa. EUniWell's Communications Manager at USC. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5674-1444

Alba Silva Rodríguez. Professor of Journalism at the Department of Communication Sciences at Universidade de Santiago de Compostela. PhD in Journalism and member of Novos Medios research group. As researcher, she focuses on the assessment of digital communication, especially the study of mediated conversation in social media and the evolution of media contents in mobile devices. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1221-5178

Ángel Vizoso. He has a PhD in Communication, is Assistant Professor at the Department of Communication Sciences and researcher at Novos Medios research group of the Universidade de Santiago de Compostela. He is editor at RAE-IC. His main lines of research are focused on the study of the visualisation and verification of information and changes in professional profiles. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7898-9267