The Adoption of Technology and Innovation Among Native Online News Media in Colombia

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This study analyzes how entrepreneurial native online newsrooms in Colombia are implementing digital technologies and innovation in their workspaces. The article uses technology studies and entrepreneurial journalism as frameworks to investigate eight relevant case studies. The method used in-depth interviews with the directors of these online media. Results show that native online outlets value people, quality of content, access to information, and journalistic standards more than digital technology and platforms. For them, innovation is not strictly related to implementing new technology, but it is somewhat linked to the type of journalistic innovation products they are creating. They believe they are an alternative voice to mainstream media content but use traditional outlets to distribute their stories and increase their relevance. The integration of users into their editorial process is a goal, but it is still limited.

Keywords: technological innovation, online news, entrepreneurs, online native media

Native online news media are taking advantage of the disarray of traditional media, using innovative technologies and platforms to reach new audiences and obtaining revenue. Online news entrepreneurs are defined as companies—small or medium-sized organizations with fewer than 250 employees (Powell & Ennis, 2007, p. 376)—that are born and grown entirely online (Wu, 2016, p. 131). Editorial innovations, technology, and market uncertainty play a key role in determining the development of online start-ups and the media industry (Yoo, Yang, Kim, & Heo, 2012, p. 256). These entrepreneurial digital media conform to a "universe" that "includes not only dozens of highly publicized national and international organizations but also hundreds of smaller digital news entities, mainly filling targeted news niches" (Pew Research Center, 2014, para. 4). They differ from traditional media companies in ways such as content, design, financing, and approach, which facilitate the implementation of digital features, culture, and technological innovations (Chyi, 2013; Chyi, Lewis, & Zheng, 2012; Picard, 2010). Native online news projects emerge as a response to discontent with existing mainstream journalism, but take advantage of

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their (often) lower cost of operation while aiming to compete with traditional media (Prasad, 2019; Wagemans, Witschge, & Deuze, 2016).

Based on previous literature and existing theory, we know that online media and journalists tend to believe that innovative technologies help them improve their work (Schmitz Weiss & Domingo, 2010). Studies have also shown that reporters can hinder or facilitate the implementation of digital technology because of their media work culture and journalistic values (Ekdale, Singer, Tully, & Harmsen, 2015; García-Perdomo, Salaverría, Kilgo, & Harlow, 2017). Most research in this area has focused on how traditional industries combine their offline and online operations (Boczkowski, 2004a; Domingo & Paterson, 2011). Reports indicate that traditional print and broadcast media tend to replicate their traditional journalistic norms and practices in online settings (Domingo et al., 2008; Singer, 2005). On the other hand, native online news media show a tendency to be more flexible in their values, incorporating new concepts and features of the Web, such as being more open to users' participation (Domingo, 2014; Kilgo, Harlow, García-Perdomo, & Salaverría, 2016).

In this article, we aim to contribute to that sociotechnological/entrepreneurial body of research that combines journalism studies and technology studies to understand how native online entrepreneurial news organizations in Colombia are adopting new technology and innovations in their newsrooms. The current study analyzes how these online native newsrooms confront the digital news ecosystem, creating innovative content and business models. In addition, this study examines the relationship between journalism and digital technology, and how native online newsroom directors implement technologies to engage their audience and generate innovation.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Organizational structures, work practices, and culture in newsrooms usually determine how online media appropriate technology (Boczkowski, 2004b; Domingo & Paterson, 2011). Traditionally, sociotechnological studies consider there to be a mutual shaping between society and technology in which tools acquire new dimensions because of practices and social uses (Bijker, Hughes, & Pinch, 2012). However, the impact of digital technology is such that recent evidence shows that technological structures and platforms may, at times, also impose their designs and agency on media (Ekström & Westlund, 2019; García-Perdomo, 2019). The current research proposes looking at the intersection of online entrepreneurial journalism and technology from a sociotechnological approach (a combination of news sociology, journalism, and technology studies) to shed light on challenges and opportunities for online news innovators (Lewis & Usher, 2013, 2014). This sociotechnological-focused approach to entrepreneurial journalism may help researchers rethink traditional frameworks and unpack disruptive arrangements in the digital news ecosystem (Lewis & Usher, 2014, p. 603). In the next section, the concept of entrepreneurial journalism is developed under the umbrella of the sociotechnological framework to understand what previous researchers have found about native online media organizations and their relationship with digital technology.

Journalism Entrepreneurship

With the digital disruption brought by the Internet, legacy media struggled to adapt to a new ecosystem in which traditional business models, news production and distribution, and the unidirectional relationship with the audiences had been dismantled (Achtenhagen, 2017). The digital shift has facilitated the entry of unexpected players to the media ecosystem, opening space for digital native, entrepreneurial media and other organizations (Picard, 2015). Research on entrepreneurial journalism has increased because of the proliferation of news start-ups and the fact that news production is happening beyond traditional newsrooms (Cottle, 2007; Picard, 2015; Singer, 2017).

Usher (2017) argues that start-ups and online digital native media challenge "underlying assumptions" about news selection and production in the digital realm, and that those innovations improve the position of a news organization in the field (p. 13). Prasad (2019) and Wagemans and associates (2016) state that the traditional media crisis has propelled the creation of entrepreneurial news outlets that aim to transform journalistic practices through new business models, original content, and unique relationships with their audiences. Therefore, journalists working for online start-ups adopt "new technologies and innovative practices" (Cohen, 2015, p. 518) to reinvent journalism and find new paths for profit. Entrepreneurial journalists often believe they are restoring the core elements of journalism that traditional media outlets have surrendered because of economic dependencies and job destruction (Wagemans et al., 2016).

Innovation and financial stability are essential to digital native media and start-ups given that they require a delicate combination of disruptive business models, technology, and "content packaging" to survive (Carlson & Usher, 2016). Most challenges faced by entrepreneurs have to do with their economic model given that the majority of digital journalism start-ups are in a risky financial situation (Prasad, 2019). It is true that traditional media business models are not working correctly in digital settings, but it is also true that newcomers have not fully developed a new model for financial stability (Naldi & Picard, 2012). That is why online ventures often boost their resources with income from consulting, design work, syndication, training, event hosting, and conferences, among others (Sembramedia, 2017; Wagemans et al., 2016).

Definitions of entrepreneurial journalism compose multiple approaches that describe a wide variety of practices (J. Kelly, 2009; S. Kelly, 2015; Rafter, 2016). Hoag (2008) defines media entrepreneurship as the "creation and ownership of an enterprise whose activity adds an independent voice to the media marketplace" (p. 74). In academia, the term has been used to describe "an emerging field, a set of skills, a spirit, a drive, and a serious act," and, in practice, the entrepreneurial journalist usually represents "a founder, an innovator, a trailblazer, a business creator, and a freelancer" (Vos & Singer, 2016, p. 151). Entrepreneurial journalism and, in general, online start-ups are associated with terms such as experimental, independent, and young (Finberg, 2013; Vos & Singer, 2016). There is a common emphasis on innovation and crafting new business strategies, including targeting niche audiences without ignoring the traditional news-making process. Entrepreneurial online journalism is defined in this article as the activity of crafting disruptive business and content strategies that focus on innovation, digital

technology, and targeting audiences' needs to tell compelling stories on topics often ignored by traditional media.

Entrepreneurship Innovation and Core Journalistic Values

Entrepreneurial journalism ventures can take advantage of digital technologies in ways that traditional media cannot, as there are few barriers to entry in place, which has fueled a proliferation of start-ups and independent projects that leverage digital technology to compete against corporate media (Compaine & Hoag, 2012; Sirkkunen & Cook, 2012).

News start-ups and other entrepreneurial journalism endeavors aim to produce technological and business innovations that transform the field or at least challenge traditional practices and models. Paradoxically, they usually look for fundamental elements of journalism to establish that difference, using digital technology as one fundamental resource. For instance, Carlson and Usher (2016) analyzed American and European start-up manifestos as a form of metajournalistic discourse, finding that newcomers create a vision that combines the traditional "social role of journalism" with "concrete innovations" (p. 568) to improve news. By presenting themselves as the best alternative to traditional media, start-ups argue in their manifestos that digital technologies facilitate news innovations and create "groundbreaking paths" for journalism, distinct from traditional routines of print and broadcast news, thereby avoiding the constraints of legacy media (Carlson & Usher, 2016). Wagemans and colleagues (2016) found, while investigating the case of the French news start-up Mediapart, that this disruptive online media start-up not only challenges and provides an alternative platform to the mainstream French press, but also aims to rescue genuine journalistic values. In this way, Mediapart provides an interesting dichotomy that distinguishes this venture from mainstream media by coming back to the foundations of journalism while adopting novel narratives and business models (Wagemans et al., 2016).

Similarly, while investigating the social identity of Indian start-up founders, Harlow and Chadha (2019) identified four types of these organizations: profit making, community service, missionary, and guardian. The last one—guardian—is a social identity centered around the reinvention of journalism that is focused on improving content quality and encouraging content innovations because of social dissatisfaction with mainstream media. Most of these types of start-ups perceive technological innovations as objects/features that add to their core values. Likewise, Prasad (2019) found that journalism start-ups in India critiqued corporate traditional business models, news coverage, and values, and offered different recipes for improving the quality of reporting through innovation. However, the intention of these Indian start-ups is not to replace existing media, but to operate and serve as a "valuable supplement" to elite English-language newspapers and even seek validation from newspaper journalism (Prasad, 2019, p. 14). What seems to be common is that news start-ups rely on core journalistic doxa (Carlson & Usher, 2016; Usher, 2017) to differentiate themselves from traditional media and provide news innovation drawing on digital technologies, new forms of storytelling, and diverse business models as resources.

Although news start-ups are incorporating many of the core orthodox journalistic values under which traditional media once operated, the fast-paced, changing media environment enables these small organizations to enter the market and challenge traditional outlets with new strategies. With lightweight

structures, entrepreneurs can integrate digital technologies and generate change at a fast pace, gaining an advantage over conventional competitors (Christensen, 1997). Innovation is a core value among these new businesses given that most of them are created to challenge the journalism status quo (Prasad, 2019; Wagemans et al., 2016). This transformation is not strictly related to the implementation of technology per se, but rather geared toward defining "what digital news should look like, reestablish the boundaries of journalism, and determine strategies for legitimating news content" (Carlson & Usher, 2016, p. 2). These ventures, however, recognize that their news products integrate the best possible technology into the journalism experience for their audiences (Carlson & Usher, 2016). As Prasad (2019) stated in the Indian case, entrepreneurial media's focus is on covering issues that mainstream media choose to ignore while understanding the link between those stories and the journalistic values that motivate their news work.

Latin American Online Native Media and Entrepreneurship

Most entrepreneurial journalism studies in Latin America come from private organizations rather than academia. One of the critical research studies on digital media and journalism in the region was published in 2016 by Factual, a Mexican organization that promotes journalism in Latin America. The study analyzed the publication systems and practices—as well as strategies for sustainability—of 34 digital media organizations in the region. It concluded that entrepreneurial media in the region are diverse and share three common challenges: financing strategies for profitable business models, implementing digital technologies correctly, and creating a community rather than capturing an audience (Meléndez, 2016). The most comprehensive report on native digital media was produced in 2017 by Sembramedia, an organization that provides ongoing support and training to digital media entrepreneurs in the region. The study analyzed 100 digital news start-ups, 25 each in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico.

The landscape of Latin American entrepreneurship has similarities and differences with what is happening with outlets in the United States and Europe. For instance, Singer (2017) argues that entrepreneurialism in developed countries is posing fundamental questions that challenge the very meaning of journalism. However, entrepreneurial journalism in these regions is not necessarily leading audiences toward democracy as it mainly aims to target niche markets with useful information. Sembramedia's (2017) most recent report reveals that "digital media entrepreneurs are [also] deeply transforming the way that journalism is conducted and consumed in Latin America" (p. 6). However, they are transforming journalism by playing an activist role, promoting better laws, defending human rights, exposing corruption, and fighting abuses of power in highly politically polarized countries. In other words, Latin American entrepreneurs are playing "an even more decisive role than their colleagues in the saturated media markets of developed countries" (Sembramedia, 2017, p. 13). This was evident in 2016, when, for the first time, journalist-entrepreneurs won all of the Gabriel García Márquez awards from the Gabo Foundation, a prestigious honor that was generally obtained by large-scale media journalists in Iberoamerica.

Latin American digital natives are also producing profitable initiatives based on quality journalism and creating close relationships with their audiences (Sembramedia, 2017). They are benefiting from social media and easy-to-use Web design tools, but are developing their business model almost entirely

on "sweat equity," that is, using their social capital, knowledge, and time as their primary resources. Income diversification is key to their success as more than 65% of the outlets have at least three different sources of income (Sembramedia, 2017).

The Spanish language is also an advantage for the region, making international collaborations easier for investigative reporting on topics such as corruption or drug trafficking. This cross-border collaboration among online native media allows them to counter national threats and censorship while creating transnational marketing strategies (Sembramedia, 2017). A silver lining of the news entrepreneurial media system in Latin America is that almost 40% of the founders of these online native organizations are women. Women also play an essential role in management at these entrepreneurial news outlets, a significant finding for a region in which traditional media are dominated by men (Sembramedia, 2017).

In Colombia, three media conglomerates control 55.5% of the radio, Internet, and print media news audience (Reporters Without Borders, 2018). This concentration has posed various challenges for digital native media and particularly demands related to sustainability and access to advertising money. Despite this unfair competition, online media have created alliances with traditional news outlets to get their content republished and generate greater resonance and impact among broader audiences.

Rey and Novoa's (2012) descriptive work on news start-ups at the beginning of the last decade concluded that an online native media "big bang" occurred in Colombia between 2010 and 2012, with the number of online news websites nearly doubling from 391 to 745. From the total number of these new projects, 489 (75%) produce original online content for their websites and online platforms, and 306 of them (47%) describe themselves as digital native media. More recently, Sembramedia's (2017) report shows that approximately 75% of the digital natives in Colombia launched their ventures with less than US$10,000, 76% have been operating for more than four years, 55% have won national or international awards, 64% have suffered from violence or censorship, and women founded 38% of them. All of these reports, however, provide little information about journalistic innovation, practices, or the adoption of technology in those newsrooms.

Research Questions

Given the context of these previous findings, we aim to understand how digital native news media are incorporating online technologies into their journalistic practices by asking the following questions:

RQ1:   *What factors do native online entrepreneurial sites in Colombia take into consideration when adopting new technologies and innovation in their newsrooms?*

RQ2:   *How do native online media in Colombia tailor digital technology to their audiences to produce innovations in these settings?*

RQ3:   *What are the business models that native online websites in Colombia are implementing?*

Method

This research used a series of case studies following Yin's (2003) methodology of multiple-case design to capture a comprehensive picture of the communication phenomena at hand and avoid problems or misrepresentations derived from a single case. We analyzed eight case studies by looking for common patterns in the adoption of technology among native online media entrepreneurs, regardless of their type of content, business model, or editorial purpose. Collecting information from only one organization, as Yin states, could lead researchers to overlook the relationship between a particular actor and other players.

As an instrument of data collection, semistructured, in-depth interviews were conducted with the directors of eight online digital natives' newsrooms in Colombia. The average length of the interviews was between 40 to 60 minutes. The methodology allowed the interviewees to explain their media in their own words, constructing their social reality. At the same time, it gave interviewers the flexibility to rearrange questions based on the flow of the conversation (Schutt, 2012).

Directors of these entrepreneurial online sites, and not the journalists, were chosen as the main focus of this research because the researchers wanted to capture a broad picture of the news outlets, beyond journalistic routines, as well as the way these entrepreneurs think about implementing new technologies and generating business strategies to compete in the news market and obtain sustainability. Also, over the course of conducting our research, we realized that these media consisted of small teams that rely on collaborators and volunteers to accomplish their goals (Sembramedia, 2017). The average number of employees per organization in these case studies is nine, but most of them are made up of three people. The larger teams—which are at *La Silla Vacía* and *Pulzo*—only grew recently after years of staff shortage, and they began their operations with tiny groups. Therefore, directors of these media have been both founders and part of the editorial process from the very beginning. Currently, they still have multiple roles: producing stories as journalists, editing and curating news stories, managing social networks, reinforcing public relations, and designing business strategies. It is an "all-hands-on-deck" kind of job. Take, for example, *Cuestión Pública*. Its staff consists of three people, all of whom were founders of this investigative media outlet. This year, *Cuestión Pública* was able to hire a couple of interns who help with basic journalistic work. However, the main news work relies on the team of founders, including reporting, social media, public relations, and fundraising. Therefore, interviewing directors who have vast knowledge about the whole editorial, technological, and business operation allowed us to obtain a holistic view of these entrepreneurial news media.

During the interviews, the interviewers asked the digital native news directors questions about their entrepreneurial processes, the implementation of digital technology in their small newsrooms, the structure of their networks, and how actors interact to produce innovations in the editorial process. Moreover, the interviewers aimed to understand whether or not directors believe the implementation of technology is fundamental for their success.

All interviews were conducted via Skype, online communication software that supports audio and video, with an asynchronous method in which the interviewee and the interviewer met at the same time via videoconference (Tracy, 2013). This platform was chosen for the convenience of both parties: First,

the primary researcher was out of the country when the research process began, and second, most of the participants chosen for the interviews were constantly out of town for work. The only conversation that occurred face-to-face was with *Pulzo* at the request of the interviewee. Conversations were recorded using audiotaping software that is compatible with Skype. Finally, the interviews were transcribed and analyzed after repeated readings until common themes and patterns emerged from the data. This work followed Glaser and Strauss's (1967) comparative method to identify issues based on their prominence, bridging them to existing theory and ensuring the validity of this kind of analysis.

The digital native media in this study were chosen based on their editorial relevance and their innovation processes. In a few years, *La Silla Vacía*, *Las2orillas*, and *Cuestión Pública* have become the most relevant sources of political discussion in Colombia. *Verdad Abierta* has been a pioneer in preserving the memory of the victims of the Colombian armed conflict and in revealing criminal activities of paramilitary and guerrilla groups. *Primera Página* was the first financial news website launched in Colombia, and based on entrepreneurial tactics, it has become an iconic model of success for native online businesses in Colombia. *Mutante* and *Agencia Periodismo de Investigación* are online leaders in investigative journalism and storytelling based on collaborative work with their audience. *Pulzo* is a native online media pioneer in aggregation. See Table 1 for more details on these media.

Table 1. Description of the Digital Media Outlets.

Media outlet	Full-time journalists (*n*)	Created	Type	Main objective	Business model
La Silla Vacía	18	2009	National and local politics	Investigates and accurately describes how political power is exercised in Colombia	Donations from Open Society; international collaboration with a wide range of foundations, subscriptions, training, workshops, and crowdsourcing (Super Amigos)
Las2orillas	12	2013	Alternative news and perspectives	Through storytelling, investigation, and analysis, Las2orillas offers a platform for unheard or underrepresented voices in Colombia	Donations and support from international nongovernmental organizations, international grants; produces tailored information for partners who have "philanthropic" visions around human rights and freedom of information

Verdad Abierta	5	2008	Armed conflict, paramilitary groups, and violence	Preserves the memory of the victims of the Colombian armed conflict and investigates the criminal activities of armed groups	International nongovernmental organization funding and grants
Primera Página	14	2000	Financial information, investigative reporting	Provides in-depth, accurate, and rapid information about the Colombian economy and stock market	Subscription model; sells financial information to companies and clients
Pulzo	20	2013	Current affairs, sports, politics, finances, entertainment, travel, and business	Produces aggregated information, which is collected from more established news media; rewrites stories in a more digital, practical language to inform young adults	A traditional business model based on advertising and customized reports for specific brands
Agencia Periodismo Investigación	1	2018	Investigative journalism on topics such as drug trafficking, politics, and justice	Creates in-depth investigative reporting that focuses on high profile politicians and businessmen	A traditional business model based on private investors and advertising
Cuestión Pública	3	2017	National and local politics	Produces in-depth reports that investigate politicians and public programs and funding	Donations, subscriptions, and support from international nongovernmental organizations through grants
Mutante	1	2018	Social issues	Produces long-form stories based on conversations with its community, usually shared via traditional news media and offline scenarios such as conferences	Crowdfunding; international nongovernmental organizations; and Camino, a multimedia studio that produces alternate content for Mutante and other clients

Findings

Directors of native online news companies in Colombia define their entrepreneurial organizations as "creative laboratories" that use digital technology to defend fundamental journalistic principles, produce editorial innovations, improve the quality of information, and ensure a better future for journalism.

Participants believe digital technology is a critical factor for the success of online natives, despite their limited investment in this area. As previous research has shown, online journalists believe digital technology helps them to improve their journalistic work and reach their organizational goals. Directors perceive technology as a series of software, hardware, and networks that are available to reporters to enhance their news work and establish a more direct relationship with audiences. Online leaders explained that, despite their scarce digital resources, technology is at the core of their operation as their news entrepreneurship would not have been possible without easy access and the proper implementation of tools and networks. As the online director of *Las2orillas* explained, digital technology enables her news project because it facilitates access to platforms and networks that help them distribute the information they produce, allows them to be more creative at their news work, and generates meaningful interactions with their audience.

Moreover, native online media in Colombia incorporate digital technologies based on their core journalistic values and mission. Directors explained that they thoughtfully analyze available platforms and networks to reckon how those tools can contribute to their journalistic values and editorial goals. They do not implement technology just because it is trending. Instead, they adopt tools that help them to tell better original stories and get closer to their target audiences. Also, if they conclude that a particular technology does not help them to reflect their core values, missions, and purpose, directors disregard its implementation.

Online directors agree that using technology in a meaningful way to ensure editorial innovation is as essential to their online media operations as implementing disruptive business models. Access to cutting-edge technology is particularly challenging for Colombian start-ups because of restricted budgets in the acquisition and development of customized tools and platforms. Therefore, directors recognize that they usually focus on editorial innovations that improve their ability to produce investigative reporting, multimedia, or data visualizations. Interviewees said they ensure their editorial innovation by "covering issues nobody is reporting on" and "filling a void in the Colombian information environment."

Information Gap: Pursuit of Technology Versus Investment in People

Digital native media's focus on editorial innovation is directly related to the role of traditional media in the Colombian news ecosystem. Online directors argue that traditional media—outlets connected to the political and economic establishment—do not offer in-depth coverage of some of the most relevant social issues. Therefore, mainstream media leave an information gap that needs to be filled by independent online native media and news start-ups. In this sense, online news entrepreneurs believe that their sites are providing audiences with high-quality, contextual, useful, exclusive, and valuable information that explores angles and perspectives that are not covered by traditional media.

Online entrepreneurs believe that, with their in-depth coverage, they are coming back to the fundamental elements of journalism, pursuing an independent agenda, providing context and investigative journalism that surveil the economic-political powers, and give voice to underrepresented communities. As one of the leaders from Agencia de Periodismo de Investigación recognized during the interview,

> The landscape of [traditional] media in Colombia spurs online native media initiatives to emerge. Legacy media face too many limitations [when producing news] due to political and economic interests. Traditional media are not offering quality in their content because they do not have time or interests anymore for investigative reporting. (NBQ, personal interview, February 25, 2019)

Although online news entrepreneurs aim to acquire open, cheap, and easy-to-use technology—given the austerity of their budgets—they believe that attracting and hiring skilled news workers who can take advantage of the intersection among technology, editorial innovation, and their journalistic principles are more important than investing heavily in digital platforms and artifacts. For example, *La Silla Vacía* hires professionals who are exclusively devoted to making sense of the intersection among innovation, art, and technology. That intersection represents one of *La Silla Vacía*'s core journalistic values, as founders of this media outlet argue that "nobody anticipates the future better than artists" (Lozano & León, 2013, p. 13). Therefore, they hire artists and use artistic visions as an opportunity to help audiences reflect on the Colombian political reality and present editorial innovations in the form of virtual exhibitions. *Verdad Abierta* also selects journalists who hold a clear vision of how to innovate under their mission rather than hiring tech-savvy reporters. *Primera Página* uses its clients' feedback to understand how editorial innovation can fulfill their needs. In summary, directors insisted that they go beyond the acquisition of cutting-edge technology, and instead look for journalists and other actors with the knowledge or social capital who can produce editorial innovations and reinforce fundamental journalistic values.

Technology: A Bridge to the Audience

In addition, native online media directors believe that the combination of digital technology and editorial innovation "bridges" good journalism with their audience. Interviewees said that this "bridge" improves the quality of information and contributes to the democratic process, which they said is a core objective for them. Participants believe that using technology to enhance the relationship with their core audience is more important than increasing their websites' metrics and analytics. Digital native media entrepreneurs are convinced that augmenting Web traffic does not bring revenue or improve their credibility among their online "communities," something they consider to be essential for their survival. Understanding audiences as communities that can be gathered around digital technology helps online natives produce editorial innovation and transform their storytelling beyond clicks. The director of La Silla Vacía explained the logic behind this assumption:

> We do not see our audience only as a number that one can sell to advertisers, but as faithful partners who help us to improve our work. In this sense, all the technologies we

have implemented are pointing towards connecting or serving our audience. We need to deepen our relationship with users rather than to generate traffic. We are thinking beyond clicks because we do not have a way to monetize those clicks. Providing quality content and being essential for our audience is crucial because our future depends on the fidelity and contribution of our users. (JAON, personal interview, November 10, 2015)

Despite the belief that digital technology is a bridge between the audience and high-quality content, user participation is still very limited in the editorial processes of these online native media. Four entrepreneurial projects allow their audience to produce content with restrictions*: Las2orillas*, with its section Nota Ciudadana, facilitates users in sending their outputs directly to their websites. In the same way, *Cuestión Pública* lets subscribers pitch stories and create content for their blogs, and *Mutante* builds stories based on the conversation around its community. However, online magazine *Las2orillas* places full legal liability on user collaborators for their posts. *La Silla Vacía* recognizes that its users suggest only 30% of published stories via a variety of channels. The site has hired audience curators who contrast users' reporting and polish all contributions before publication, which demands stringent reporting protocols from their users before their stories can be considered. Two *La Silla Vacía* users have obtained national journalism awards using this rigorous curating and editing process.

Conversely, *Verdad Abierta*, *Pulzo*, *Agencia de Periodismo de Investigación*, and *Primera Página* do not allow users to participate in the editorial process or share their opinions. In *Verdad Abierta*, *Primera Página*, *and Agencia de Periodismo de Investigación*, directors claimed that their organizations shoulder great public responsibility, given the sensitive content they produce. *Verdad Abierta* covers violence, armed conflict, and internal displacement, and *Primera Página* reports on financial information that "can shake Colombian markets." *Agencia de Periodismo de Investigación* produces in-depth investigative journalism that requires professional skills. However, directors such as those of *Verdad Abierta* are rethinking their website's structure to expand its audience and include it in the editorial process. *Primera Página* has a paywall business model that can hamper open participation. However, their subscription system, which was implemented before other successful economic news media, such as the *Financial Times*, has proven to be successful thanks to the fidelity of its subscribers.

Finally, online entrepreneurs said that transparency and free access to information are key elements of innovation, as well as an opportunity to build strong bonds with their audiences, based on trust. For instance, *Cuestión Pública* chooses to publish all of the documents that its journalists use to source their investigations so that the publication's audience can "understand the news, do their [own] research, and post new findings" (CABA, personal interview, February 1, 2019). In that way, they commit to transparency and build trust with their audiences by showing users all of the documents that support their findings. This strategy was especially relevant in November 2018, when a crucial witness in the Odebrecht,[2] a corruption scandal in the country, was found dead. His testimony was believed to implicate

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[2] Odebrecht is the name of one of Latin America's construction giants, which built some of the region's most crucial infrastructure projects. It was later revealed that the company bribed governments and

the attorney general, who allegedly was aware of and benefited financially from the corruption scheme. Once the death was confirmed, *Cuestión Pública* published 1,674 documents, reports, e-mails, and declarations the witness had saved before his death, and that contradicted what the attorney general had stated about the case. The documents were also shared and explained to the audience through posts, social media, and Facebook Live streaming. These revelations helped traditional news outlets because they were able to get new investigative resources to dive into the story.

Another interesting example comes from *Mutante*, in which news stories are crafted around conversations between citizens and experts to understand the multiple points of view around complex issues, such as violence, drug use, or climate change. After publishing a report, *Mutante* creates a series of "activation" spaces that allow citizens to take action. Afterward, they have a final conversation in which they gather and publish all they learned from exploring the topic, new stories that came to light, and essential aspects that should be taken into account in the future. By doing so, *Mutante* ensures that it is inclusive and transparent with its audiences and its sources while creating, as the name suggests, social stories that mutate and include different points of view in their reporting (JUMAL, personal interview, January 31, 2019).

In the same vein, *La Silla Vacía* uses transparency not only to provide users with all of the documents that support its investigative journalism, but also as a way to correct content when the editorial team makes a mistake. In fact, *La Silla Vacía* provides its audience with step-by-step explanation of the news-making process that led them to commit an error, including documents and sources consulted by journalists. An excellent example of this practice occurred when *La Silla Vacía* erroneously announced the death of a top leader of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, and later had to produce an extended correction explaining what led them to publish that inaccurate report.

Sustainability in Question

Native online media mix business models to ensure their economic viability, but their financial future is still not bright. Interviewees said entrepreneurial organizations rely on their credibility, funding partners, and audience's support to continue operating. Primera Página, Pulzo, and Agencia de Periodismo de Investigación are the only online media in this study that try to be sustainable using commercial business models. Primera Página sells financial information to clients interested in making business decisions. Unsubscribed users can read basic business news but do not have access to the high-quality economic information produced by the financial outlet. However, it continues to be a small operation that is in the process of finding a partner to expand its business model and finance future endeavors. Pulzo and Agencia de Periodismo de Investigación believe in an open information model, so they do not charge users for their content but rely on clicks, advertising, and investors. La Silla Vacía obtains 52% of its revenue from international nongovernmental organizations; 23% from advertising; 12% from workshops and media consulting; 7% from user support, or a crowdfunding program called Super Amigos; and 6% from subscriptions and events with universities. Recently, it has been working

politicians throughout the region to ensure construction contracts. Between 2001 and 2016, the company paid around US$788 million in bribes across Latin America.

on transforming itself into a specialized social network that can offer knowledge, data, and innovation to sponsors. Las2orillas produces information for partners who have "philanthropic visions on human rights and freedom of information." Cuestión Pública allows its community to become subscribers for a monthly or yearly fee, and Mutante receives most of its money through crowdfunding and international grants or donations from nongovernmental organizations. Most online native media and entrepreneurs rely on international agency support to run their news operations (e.g., Open Society, the Canadian Embassy, Pax Christy, FIP, USAID). All of the outlets apply for international grants to raise money and operate. Dependency on international donors makes some of these projects particularly vulnerable because of the changing nature of funding and its short-term commitment, which hinder the development of long-term strategies that can ensure their survival.

Finally, interviewees highlight that the small structures of their operations represent a strategic advantage over their traditional news counterparts, particularly when they have to implement digital technology and change newsrooms' work culture. The fact that these online native media are not large bureaucratic organizations gives them more flexibility to adopt innovations and test them compared with more institutionalized media structures. Online news entrepreneurs not only use these notions of strategic agility to distance themselves from large media corporation practices, but also to highlight that their small size is, in some cases, a valuable asset to serve audiences and adopt technologies at a faster pace. Even though online native newsrooms are small, they have groups of freelancers, collaborators, and users with social capital who expand their projects' influence and prestige in the network.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study shows that native online entrepreneurial news sites see digital technology as a vehicle to generate editorial innovation and build a bridge between themselves and their audiences. Instead of thinking about themselves as technology-driven media, online entrepreneurs believe their organizations are "creative laboratories." They use digital technology to produce editorial innovations, engage audiences, and rescue traditional journalistic values that are jeopardized by traditional news media's structures and practices. In line with traditional sociotechnological approaches, this study found that online natives adopt digital technologies according to their core journalistic values, principles, and practices (Carlson & Usher, 2016; Prasad, 2019; Singer, 2005; Usher, 2017). In this sense, digital technology seems to play a subordinate role in Colombian online native media operations, not only because directors recognize their budgetary restrictions for acquiring cutting-edge technology, but also because they value editorial innovations, faithful audiences, and skilled news workers more than digital tools. This study contributes to the existing entrepreneurial journalism literature in the context of Latin American by showing the logic behind technological adoption inside new online native media in Colombia.

Colombian native online media take additional considerations when adopting or making sense of digital technology because of their intense commitment to journalistic missions and values, which is similar to findings by Wagemans and colleagues (2016) in France. Even though directors of online media outlets are open to new technological developments, they carefully evaluate the appropriation of tools according to their editorial goals, principles, and target audiences. This process leads them to reject platforms and networks that do not reinforce their journalistic values and their relationship with users in

the online media ecosystem. Therefore, editorial innovation (e.g., the influence of artwork in the case of *La Silla Vacía*), the ability to connect and understand their audiences, and the vision of their journalists are more important than technology. This tendency to privilege innovative content, the relationship with users, and skilled news workers create some hopes regarding the value of journalism and information in Colombia as a way to build democracy and communities beyond mere technological processes or automation. Thus, the current research is in line with Usher's (2017) and Cohen's (2015) findings of journalism entrepreneurship because online digital native media in Colombia are challenging underlying assumptions about news production and innovations in the field and adopting disruptive editorial practices to revive journalism as a set of practices that builds community and plays a relevant social function.

Similarly, this study reinforces Harlow and Chadha's (2019) finding in the Indian context because Colombian entrepreneurs portray themselves as providers of valuable services to niche communities and as complements of the general social dissatisfaction with mainstream media. Findings show that native online news directors recognize that their journalistic role is fundamental to Colombian society because traditional media have created a vast information gap that online news entrepreneurs aim to fill. Native online news entrepreneurs use to their advantage the fact that traditional media outlets neither show interest nor have the structure to pursue specialized investigative news stories for specific communities. Therefore, they use digital technologies and editorial innovation to offer in-depth, specialized information to target audiences. By providing quality, innovation, and unique storytelling, native online sites have been able to serve online communities that seem displeased with conventional media content.

As Vos and Singer's (2016) study on entrepreneurial journalism shows, journalism start-ups are not only careful with their news-making and innovation processes, but they also emphasize the importance of their business strategies. In the case of Colombia, the sustainability of most of these projects relies on funding from international nongovernmental organizations. These organizations support entrepreneurial journalism because they want to contribute to freedom of expression, the flow of quality information, and the democratic exercise amid Colombia's peace process.

Native online sites also perceive their audiences as potential donors and financiers of their news operations. The fact that directors believe that part of their future sustainability depends on the audiences' ability to pay for or subsidize their content distances most of these organizations from advertising and clickbait business models. For this reason, Colombian online native directors aim to engage users with their ventures by providing high-quality, independent, accurate information that generates trustworthiness.

Findings, however, show that user participation continues to be restricted in the editorial process. Native online news projects want to channel their users' input through social networks, but the unique nature of their projects hinders that participation. Leaders of these sites believe that the intersection of technology and innovation could build a bridge between their content and their audience and could create a space for them to be an active part of the editorial process as partners rather than consumers. In this sense, metrics and Web analytics are not the main goal for the majority of these online native media (*Pulzo* is an exception here). In most cases, online traffic does not produce revenue or audience engagement. Using digital technology to provide high-quality journalism and editorial innovation seems to

be an essential element for these entrepreneurs in Colombia. Without such characteristics, they jeopardize the economic support of their audiences and their ability to obtain funding from international organizations, which aim to support relevant journalistic projects that contribute to build a better society.

In conclusion, this article explores the implementation of technology, innovation, and business models among native online entrepreneurs in Colombia by analyzing eight case studies. This research shows that native online newsrooms in Colombia adopt digital technologies that put editorial innovations and the relationship with their audiences at the core of their news operations. Moreover, one of the main goals of these news organizations is to use technology to produce editorial innovations and bridge their audiences. Online leaders have identified social dissatisfaction with mainstream media content among their audiences, and they have filled that information gap by providing niche audiences with in-depth, high-quality stories. Mainly, they depend on funding from international organizations and communities to operate. Credibility, innovation, transparency, quality, and building communities are some of the main objectives of most of these sites not only because they cannot monetize through advertising clicks and traffic, but also because they care about core journalistic values and the social function of journalism. This commitment to the fundamental principles of journalism and the construction of a better society is what motivates the creation of such endeavors and what keeps them going despite the economic difficulties they face. This conclusion highlights a difference between Colombian news start-ups and entrepreneurial outlets in developed countries: Whereas the latter have a tendency to challenge the very meaning of journalism and serve niche markets (Singer, 2017), most of the former aim to restore journalism and lead communities toward pluralism and democracy.

The intention of the current research is not to generalize these findings to other newsrooms, but rather to understand the dynamics of online native entrepreneurs in Colombia. Case studies are limited insofar that they cannot be extrapolated to other contexts. However, they are especially valuable for accumulating experiences and understanding specific settings. This research also aims to compare these local results with previous theory and literature by using a multiple-case design to find patterns among online newsrooms and shed light on their organizational arrangements. Future research should compare online news entrepreneurship in multiple nations in Latin America and the United States to understand how these newcomers are innovating and implementing new technologies in the region and what their motivations and financial strategies are.

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