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EXPERIMENTING WITH USER- GENERATED CONTENT IN JOURNALISTIC PRACTICES:

adopting a user-centric storytelling
approach during the covid-19
pandemic coverage in Latin America



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ABSTRACT – Many scholars have recognized the benefits that user-generated content (UGC) can bring to news publications. In this context, the coverage of the pandemic has undoubtedly forced news outlets around the world to embrace such content to present relevant information during this time. To understand how Latin American outlets are exploring UGC in news reporting, we proposed an exploratory study that includes a devised observation of 80 news websites and their social network channels between April and August 2020. During this period, we conducted a systematic observation to analyze how these outlets open spaces for the public and experiment with integrating user content into their news processes. Our findings suggest that the majority of the observed portals have punctually adopted UGC with minimal engagement. However, the pandemic disrupted interesting experiments regarding the integration of UGC into news creation that generate innovative forms of storytelling.

Keywords: Journalism. User-Generated Content. Storytelling. Pandemic. Latin America.

EXPERIMENTANDO COM CONTEÚDO GERADO POR USUÁRIOS NA PRÁTICA JORNALÍSTICA: adotando um enfoque narrativo centrado no usuário durante a cobertura da pandemia de covid-19 na América Latina

RESUMO – Muitos acadêmicos têm reconhecido os benefícios que o conteúdo gerado pelo usuário (CGU) pode trazer para as notícias. Nesse contexto, a cobertura da pandemia, sem dúvida, forçou os meios de comunicação de todo o mundo a adotar esse tipo de conteúdo para apresentar informações relevantes durante esse período. Para entender como os veículos latino-americanos estão explorando o CGU em reportagens, propusemos um estudo exploratório que inclui uma observação planejada de 80 sites de notícias e seus canais de rede social entre abril e agosto de 2020. Durante esse período, conduzimos uma observação sistemática para analisar como esses veículos abrem espaços para o público e experimentam integrar o conteúdo do usuário em seus processos de notícias. Nossos resultados sugerem que a maioria dos portais observados adotou CGU pontualmente com envolvimento mínimo. No entanto, a pandemia promoveu experimentos interessantes sobre a integração de CGU na criação de notícias que resultaram em formas inovadoras de storytelling.

Palavras-chave: Jornalismo. Conteúdo Gerado por Usuários. Storytelling. Pandemia. América Latina.

EXPERIMENTANDO CON EL CONTENIDO GENERADO POR EL USUARIO EN LAS PRÁCTICAS PERIODÍSTICAS: adoptando un enfoque narrativo centrado en el usuario durante la cobertura de la pandemia de covid-19 en América Latina

RESUMEN – Los estudios académicos han reconocido los beneficios que el contenido generado por el usuario (CGU) puede aportar a las noticias. En este contexto, la cobertura de la pandemia sin duda ha obligado a los medios de todo el mundo a adoptar este tipo de contenido para brindar información relevante durante este tiempo. Para comprender cómo los medios latinoamericanos están explorando el CGU en la cobertura de noticias, proponemos un estudio exploratorio que incluye la observación de 80 sitios web de noticias y sus redes sociales entre abril y agosto de 2020. A lo largo de este período, hicimos una observación sistemática para analizar cómo estos medios abren espacios para el público y experimentan la integración del contenido del usuario en sus procesos de noticias. Nuestros hallazgos sugieren que la mayoría de los portales observados adoptan puntualmente el CGU con un compromiso mínimo. Por otro lado, la pandemia ha disrumpido algunos experimentos interesantes de integración del CGU en la creación de noticias que generaron formas innovadoras de storytelling.

Palabras clave: Periodismo. Contenido generado por el usuario. Storytelling. Pandemia. América Latina.

1 Introduction

The fear and confusion that have arisen amongst the population due to the panic over the spread of covid-19 and the lack of reliable information have highlighted the importance of the press in this era. Furthermore, the prevalence of fake news on social platforms

confused many audiences, created panic, and seriously affected public safety and health by ultimately leading people to mistrust governments and public health responses (Bruns et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2020).

The world press was called upon to fulfill what can be considered as its primary function: to inform the public; provide independent, accurate, comprehensive, and ultimately credible news; and provide the audience with the information that they need to make informed decisions about contemporary affairs (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014; Schudson, 2010). However, the increasing availability, uptake, and use of social media have empowered the public to create and become an alternative source of information. This trend has created several challenges for the news media.

In the context of digital society, where everyone has a voice, the audience has become an even more prominent source of news since they collect, curate, and disseminate their first-hand accounts. Conversely, disinformation about covid-19 and the pandemic seems to constitute an emblematic situation. Members of the audience and official members of governments, such as in Brazil and the United States, spread false and inaccurate news. This increased public confusion surrounding the pandemic. As a result, the neologism “infodemic” was put forward on February 2, 2020, by the World Health Organization (WHO) to define this situation and its dangers (WHO, 2020).

In response to the call to better understand the scope of high-quality information and the experiments carried out by Latin American media organizations that explored user-centric storytelling, we propose to answer the following research question: what are the experiments that Latin American news outlets used to adapt to a new landscape that considered user content as part of news production?

Although this phenomenon has been widely studied, a whole range of different approaches has been used to examine the user-content experiment during the pandemic, which is of interest to this study. To achieve this, we modeled this work on the literature about user engagement and user-generated content (UGC) and proposed exploratory research (Gil, 1999) that would summarize this crisis through the perspectives of different Latin American news sites. By using bibliographical research that oriented the theoretical framework and the documental research (e.g., websites, social networks posts, etc.) we found exemplary cases about the experimentation with UGC

for storytelling in the coverage of the spread of covid-19 in Latin America. Through these cases, we investigated the mechanisms used by Latin American news outlets to engage users during the pandemic and outlined news organizations' innovative uses of UGC able to go beyond the common forms of interactivity and public participation.

Our research choice required facing the challenges of a contemporary and changing object of study since the reporting about the coronavirus by news sites in Latin American varied just like the organizations themselves, whose practices have changed according to their origins, structures, and publishing platforms (Salaverria et al., 2019). In this context, these outlets have to continuously adapt and experiment with new forms of reporting in the face of demands from their audience and novel technological solutions while they also respond to changes in social contexts (i.e., economic, political, and cultural). Given this information, this work aims to outline examples that have fostered debate and understanding regarding the experiments and innovations that have been embraced by Latin American news outlets during the covid-19 pandemic in light of the UGC approach to news production.

2 Journalism and the user

Admittedly, the transaction between journalists and the public has never been entirely straightforward. Since technological developments have changed the relationship between journalism and the audience, information no longer circulates according to a single pathway; journalists no longer have the privileged position of exclusively dictating to the public sphere. Journalists' supposed monopoly on information has come to an end, and a paradigm shift has been created that calls for the reinvention of journalistic practice (Bell & Owen, 2017; Ramonet, 2012).

The internet has given users publishing power that only journalists once yielded, and these professionals must now adapt to this expanded avenue of information sharing. Consequently, the accelerated technology-driven process of change is transforming the way that journalism is produced, distributed, and consumed. This phenomenon has been caused by the emergence of new tools and practices in news workflows, which has created new ways of disseminating news (Bell & Owen, 2017; de Lima Santos et al., 2020).

This breakdown of paradigms has undermined the support of the classic business model that has been in place for more than a century in the journalism industry. According to this paradigm, information followed a top-down flow control: it moved from one producer to many recipients who had few ways to provide feedback to the system (Jenkins et al., 2016). These powerful, accessible, and ubiquitous production tools have changed communication from being one-to-many to being many-to-many, which has given citizens an unprecedented role in communication (Bell & Owen, 2017). Thus, digital technologies have created the material conditions for individuals to participate in the information production process, although the tools alone may not be sufficient to enable their participation.

However, critics have objected to the use of content generated by users in journalism since it diverges from traditional values and practices (Abbott, 2017). Indeed, ordinary people have captured and published content in many formats – texts, images, and videos – to form narratives that have global impacts, such as the consequences of terrorist attacks on commuters in London and Madrid, the mistreatment of prisoners at Iraq’s Abu Ghraib jail, the harmful chaos that pervaded the Iranian elections, and the destruction caused by environmental disasters like tsunamis, floods, and earthquakes. Users have also contributed by sharing in-depth and intimate observations of the smallest communities, which includes local and even personal information. In addition, millions of topical conversations that are held on discussion forums, comment threads, and blogs have also contributed to user participation (Singer et al., 2011).

Nonetheless, since the internet has made it possible for ordinary people to become content distributors and the media no longer has publication exclusivity, journalists have started to claim that they are the only credible sources of information. Since it has the authority to inform, journalism has become necessary since media organizations have become the providers of reliable and credible news, especially in the face of increased information access that is available through digital media (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). Although anyone can produce information using new technologies, only the journalist has a duty to the public since journalistic mediation legitimizes information (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014).

2.1 Engaging the public

A considerable body of literature suggests that the internet allows great freedom of production and massive circulation of content at an unprecedented level, as well as access to the most diverse discourses, which has increased the possibility to exercise critical thinking amongst producers and their audiences (Domingo et al., 2008; Domingo, 2008a, 2008b, 2011; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Nielsen, 2006; Rosenberry, 2005; Singer et al., 2011; Thurman, 2008).

In this respect, the traditional business models for print, radio, and television journalism are suffering from a crisis because the public has more power than ever to choose where to find information. Despite becoming producers, audiences are still consumers. When the link between them and journalism becomes unstable, these individuals can choose whether to renew their relationship with a media organization (Franciscato, 2005).

Consequently, this democratization of content in an online and digitally mediated space (Havey, 2020) has also resulted in the fragmentation of consumption since many companies must customize their content or programming to appeal to different niche audiences. The choices related to content engagement and form can range from free to paid and niche to mainstream, which gives the consumer the possibility to choose the most convenient news source. This often means that the content that is available through digital media can become less accessible as the willingness to pay for information declines and advertising is used to monitor users' online activities (Van Der Haak et al., 2012). Thus, the media, the pattern of discourse, and the reading of journalistic materials have changed.

This calls into question the business models based on the sale of traditional advertising space, which was the rule in the media industry before the advent of widespread online content. These changes, which have mostly been imposed by the disruption created by novel technologies and the ways that users consume news, have pushed these organizations to innovate to remain profitable (Van Der Haak et al., 2012). Audiences are not only these organizations' customers but also their key resources, and their increasing preferences for mobile and social content need to be followed closely by these outlets. In this context, the emerging concept of "engaged journalism" aims to reconnect journalists with the communities that they serve (Green-Barber & McKinley, 2019; Schmidt & Lawrence, 2020).

Engaged journalism is, therefore, a form of interactive, participatory, and collaborative journalistic practice that considers the public as an active audience and even co-creators of news, which contrasts their previous role as passive recipients. According to this practice, news organizations attempt to take the audience into earlier stages of news production and aim to build relationships with their communities (Lawrence et al., 2018; Schmidt & Lawrence 2020). “Understanding how to reach audiences, how to keep them, and how to thread each piece of journalism through a complex maze of different sites and applications has fundamentally changed the way newsrooms operate” (Bell & Owen, 2017, p.25). Today, news companies must experiment with novel formats to compete with the variety of information that is reaching readers, and one of these tools is user-generated content.

2.2 Putting user content at the center

The mediation process that takes place concerning user-generated content is a facet of the profession that has gained new outlines concerning digital media and the internet. Thus, the news industry has suffered from a “paradigm shift in the way media content is produced and circulated” (van Dijck, 2009, p.42). A considerable body of literature on this subject can be found online and through the digitally mediated public sphere that led to the democratization of content generation.

As a result, different terms and definitions have been used to describe and represent the same or similar concepts: “citizen journalism” indicates the participation of people who previously belonged to an audience (Gillmor, 2004; Rosen, 2006); “produsage” refers to the mixture of production and consumption of information (Bruns, 2007, 2008); and “participatory journalism” emphasizes the idea of collaborative action (Singer et al., 2011). The use of the expression “user-generated content” has gained traction with Web 2.0 and the advent of social platforms, which encompass different types of content and resources that are associated with the notion of collaborators who generate content outside routine and professional platforms (Livingstone, 2004; van Dijck, 2009).

Previous research has suggested that the public generally participates in three different stages of news production: the planning stage (what becomes a story), news production (story elaboration), and the concluding stage (Peters & Witschge, 2015). The

decisions concern the how, when, and why of relating to a definition concerning what an outlet wants from collaboration and what kind of relationship is established with the public. Newsrooms can embrace user-generated content on different channels. For instance, social media platforms or websites may have spaces reserved for the public to send contributions or materials that can be integrated into news reporting. In this context, data can be forwarded directly to practitioners or the contact channels for news organizations.

Although the public can develop a varied range of content (Lasica, 2003; Singer et al., 2011), the choices regarding its incorporation depend on the professionals who are working in newsrooms. However, the topics that are chosen to be addressed must be relevant not only to the journalists who cover them but also to the public (Alsina, 2009).

Knowledge of the facts is essential for decision-making, political processes, and social participation, and, in this sense, journalistic activity is also essential to democratic societies. The scenario caused by the pandemic, which has changed daily, has accentuated the identity crisis of classic journalism concerning its nature as discursive mediation and the specific functionality of a professional group (Sodré, 2009). Hence, the pandemic has intensified the demand for innovative editorial experiences that can be implemented in different areas, such as the engagement and integration of user content.

2.3 The entanglements between Latin American audiences and the media

In Latin America, researchers have found that user-generated content is limited in news stories (Bachmann & Harlow, 2012). However, the use of user-generated content has slightly increased across the world, even with the present concerns about the technological skills that are required to access this information and the quality of information (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). Historically, much of the evidence regarding the lack of user participation emerged from the fact that part of the Latin American population was automatically excluded from accessing the internet and using technology. Simultaneously, Latin American journalists have been more reticent about soliciting input from readers, which has limited readers' roles to simply sharing or commenting on news content (Bachmann & Harlow, 2012).

Consequently, news organizations understood that there was no need to develop interactivity or multimedia features on their websites since many of their readers would not be able to access those sites (Bachmann & Harlow, 2012). However, since the release of these initial studies more than a decade ago, technologies have become cheaper, and their lower costs have increased the public's access to information production and dissemination. In this sense, smartphones act as the main avenue for interaction with news media since they allow people who have not had access to the internet before now to engage with online communities. Thus, the democratic ideal of opening the public sphere to users' input is closer to reality.

Still, other researchers have found that interactivity features are illusory. For example, data journalism uses a high level of technological advancement that allows practitioners to include more interactive, personalized elements. Conversely, these features are often illusory and have a paternalistic nature, in which journalists make choices for their public (Appelgren, 2018).

Some Latin American newspapers have taken advantage of these interactive features in data journalism. *La Nación* exemplifies an exception to this trend since it uses the public to analyze investigative stories and produce unique datasets based on audiences for its stories. However, user content is generally restricted to special projects (Palomo et al., 2019). A recent study has indicated that digital-native media outlets use social media platforms like WhatsApp to receive user content instead of using their own websites. Furthermore, these organizations use UGC only for large data projects such as the data project *CocoZap* from the Brazilian news outlet *data_labe* (De Lima Santos & Mesquita, 2021).

In this respect, Latin American news sites currently offer some interactive features to their users, such as commenting, direct messaging, and story-sharing features. However, transforming the user's role in the value chain in the news industry is still limited. Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2013) found that there is a gap between the priorities of journalists and users concerning content. Their distinct interests, which respectively comprise hard news and soft news, generate conflicts that pose significant barriers to this relationship.

This study aims to update this information and expand upon past studies by revealing the experiments conducted by Latin American news media organizations to give space to users during the covid-19 outbreak.

3 Methodology

Users can participate in journalism in several ways from providing feedback in comment sections to sharing stories or becoming integrated into narratives. In times of crisis, people have taken to the internet to share their stories, which has helped some of them gain space in news outlets due to their popularity, while others have been embraced by journalists who needed to understand what was happening in places they could not reach. This has created several implications for newsrooms, including the practical necessity of verifying content in ethical debates (which concerns when something should be posted and why). These factors have influenced outlets' decisions to make UGC part of their news stories.

In this context, the covid-19 pandemic has made this a unique scenario since this is a singular moment in time that has restricted the movement of people across borders and normalized social distancing measures. This change has pushed news outlets to experiment with new ways to engage users. This period could represent what the news outlets will be doing in the future. The literature review demonstrates that innovation mainly happens during times of crisis (Belair-Gagnon & Steinke, 2020; Cavallo et al., 2020; Porcu et al., 2020).

We must recognize the exceptionality of the moment and the subject chosen for the exploratory study. The question that naturally arises from considering this issue concerns whether the results may represent a deviation from the incorporation of UGC in the news and the routines of the different outlets that were surveyed. However, it must be understood that at a time when so many perspectives are being rethought and alternatives for social experiences are being reinvented, we have been given a unique opportunity to promote changes in the journalistic field that will expand its commitment to its public function.

Considering the broad spectrum of integrating users and their content into news production and the debates that can arise from it, we narrowed our focus to outlets that have given the public space to tell their stories and have made their content part of the news. Motivated by this phenomenon, this research embraces a mixed-methods approach to collect and use quantitative (minor) and qualitative (major) data to analyze 80 websites in 20 Latin American countries and territories.

We followed a two-step process. First, we explored a diverse number of websites, from legacy news media to digital-native outlets. Since we did not locate a unified ranking that could point

us to relevant news outlets for each location based on the same criteria, our initial purposive sample was built on the knowledge of other researchers regarding the case studied and the examples in the literature. Furthermore, we mapped the news outlets from the different countries using Google searches and cross-referenced this with information from specialized directories, newspaper associations, media companies, and newspaper articles.

Second, we utilized the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas, Sembra Media's director of digital outlets and other sites that specialize in Latin American media, articles that refer to digital-native initiatives or that were highlighted by some innovation to complete our list. We considered outlets that were recurrently mentioned in these sources. Additionally, we made a preliminary visit to the publication's sites to confirm that they have adequate protocols for our systematic observation of the adoption of UGC in Latin America (i.e., we had to determine if we had access to their content). In total, we selected four news organizations from each country that ranged from legacy news media to digital-native media, which generated an exemplary set of 80 news organizations, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1 – News Sites from Latin America per Country

Country	News media	Site
Argentina	Clarín	www.clarin.com
	La Nación	www.lanacion.com.ar
	RED/ACCIÓN	www.redaccion.com.ar/
	MDZ	www.mdzol.com
Bolivia	El Mundo	www.elmundo.com.bo
	Los Tiempos	www.lostiempos.com
	La Prensa	www.laprensa.com.bo/
	Cabildeo Digital	www.cabildeodigital.com
Brazil	Folha de S.Paulo	www.folha.uol.com.br
	O Globo	www.oglobo.globo.com
	The Intercept	www.theintercept.com/brasil
	Agência Pública	www.apublica.org
Chile	El Mercurio	https://digital.elmercurio.com
	La Tercera	www.latercera.com/
	El Mostrador	www.elmostrador.cl
	Ciper	www.ciperchile.cl

Colombia	El Tiempo	www.eltiempo.com
	El Espectador	www.elespectador.com
	La Silla Vacía	www.lasillavacia.com
	Las2orillas	www.las2orillas.co
Costa Rica	Nación	www.nacion.com
	Diario Extra	www.diarioextra.com
	CRHoy	www.crhoy.com
	AMPrensa	www.amprensa.com
Cuba	Granma Internacional	www.granma.cu
	Diario de Cuba	www.diariodecuba.com
	14ymedio	www.14ymedio.com
	Periodismo de Barrio	www.periodismodebarrio.org
Dominican Republic	Listin Digital	www.listindiario.com
	Periódico Hoy	www.hoy.com.do
	Acento	www.acento.com.do
	La Verdad del Esta	www.laverdadedeleste.com
Ecuador	El Comercio	www.elcomercio.com
	El Universo	www.eluniverso.com
	Periodismo de Investigación	www.periodismodeinvestigacion.com
	GK	www.gk.city
El Salvador	La Prensa Gráfica	www.laprensagrafica.com
	El Diario de Hoy	www.elsalvador.com
	El Faro	www.elfaro.net
	Revista Factum	www.revistafactum.com
Guatemala	Prensa Libre	www.prensalibre.com
	Siglo XXI	www.elsiglo.com.gt
	Nomada	www.nomada.gt
	Soy502	www.soy502.com
Haiti	Le Nouvelliste	www.lenouvelliste.com
	Haiti Progress	www.haiti-progres.com/
	Loop	www.loophaiti.com
	AlterPresse	www.alterpresse.org
Honduras	La Prensa	www.laprensahn.com
	Tiempo Digital	www.tiempo.hn
	La Noticia	www.lanoticia.hn
	Libertad Digital	www.libertaddigitalhn.com

Mexico	Milenio	www.milenio.com
	El Universal	www.eluniversal.com.mx
	Animal Politico	www.animalpolitico.com
	Sin Embargo	www.sinembargo.mx
Nicaragua	La Prensa	www.laprensa.com.ni
	El Nuevo Diario	www.elnuevodiario.com.ni
	Nuevas Miradas	www.nuevasmiradas.com.ni
	Coyuntura	www.coyuntura.co
Panama	La Prensa	www.prensa.com
	El Siglo Digital	www.elsiglo.com
	La Gaceta	www.lagacetadepanama.com
	Nueva Nación	www.nuevanacion.com/nosotros
Paraguay	ABC Color	www.abc.com.py
	La Nación	www.lanacion.com.py
	Frontera Seca News	www.fronterasecanews.com
	El Surtidor	www.elsurti.com
Peru	El Comercio	www.elcomerciope.com.pe
	La República	www.larepublica.pe
	Ojo Publico	www.ojo-publico.com
	IDL-Reporteros	www.idl-reporteros.pe
Uruguay	El Pais	www.elpais.com.uy
	La Republica	www.republica.com.uy
	Sudestada	www.sudestada.com.uy
	Carmelo Portal	www.carmeloportal.com
Venezuela	El Universal	www.eluniversal.com
	El Nacional	www.elnacional.com
	Runrun.es	www.runrun.es
	Efecto Cocuyo	www.efectococuyol.com

Source: created by the authors.

To improve the internal validity and allow it to be generalized for the real world (external validity), we followed a study protocol to ensure the correct collection of data for our research design. Our protocol followed three steps that focused on platform analysis. First, we analyzed each website's homepage and elements of its design interface that were potentially intended for user participation or engagement, such as share buttons (Krumsvik, 2018) and comment sections (Singer & Ashman, 2009).

Second, we observed news sites' sessions and whether any were specifically intended for user participation. We clicked on, read, and interacted with three articles on each homepage to determine whether users are invited to engage. Therefore, our systematic observation consisted of collecting facts about the applicability and the experience of user-generated content on three levels: during the planning stages, during the production of news, and after the story is finished (Peters & Witschge, 2015).

These observations were conducted at two different points during the pandemic in Latin America, first in March 2020 and then in August 2020. These observations allowed us to analyze the coverage of the coronavirus outbreak across the continent and the globe at two different moments. The first period comprised the initial phase when the virus began to spread in Latin America while it was spreading rapidly through other continents, such as Europe and North America. The second period covered when the pandemic had become a part of daily life in the majority of Latin American countries and when some of these countries managed to reach a plateau in cases.

This difference is relevant because covering the pandemic from afar, which displaces media organizations from their traditional investigative contexts, is perceivably different from when the novel coronavirus spread began to directly affect local journalistic practices and even the lives of those present in the newsrooms. During this crisis, journalists are required to exercise innovation, creativity, and experimental thinking to fulfill their social function, and thus media organizations are obliged to adapt to the situations imposed by this pandemic, which includes maximizing and optimizing the use of its different platforms to produce, publish, and distribute content (Vazquez-Herrero et al., 2019). Due to the peculiarity of the context of social isolation, the common citizen has indeed assumed a privileged place in various outlets in Latin America, which have created space for novel forms of producing journalism (Newman et al., 2020).

Between March and August 2020, we also conducted a third step in our study: a systematic observation of social media channels that belong to these news outlets to detect if and how user-generated content was utilized. Our observation focused primarily on the most popular platforms in Brazil: Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. This analysis helped us to determine whether these organizations made consistent efforts to include the public in the storytelling process or whether these organizations only made perfunctory efforts to engage the audience.

We recognized the limitations of this selection, which were not cohesive according to parameters such as coverage (national vs. regional), audience (print vs. digital), editorial positioning, organizational profiles (mainstream vs. alternative), and others. We emphasize, however, that for this investigation, these factors were not decisive even though they deserve attention from future studies. We must point out that this difficulty has already been identified by previous researchers (e.g., Harlow & Salaverría, 2016). Therefore, the absence of an exhaustive and updated list of Latin American digital media outlets is an important issue in the literature. Thus, a more systematic and theoretical analysis was required to establish a study corpus suitable for this purpose; therefore, this study intends to fill this gap.

4 Not all user-generated content is created equal

During this crisis, the idea of news as a public service seems even more important since news organizations are called to inform their audiences about what is happening and help them understand complex situations. Although many news outlets were called to report on their countries' measures in the face of the novel coronavirus pandemic, one example drew our attention. Despite their different affiliations and traditions and their different social and economic contexts, the press has striven to appear united against the invisible threat of covid-19. Inspired by the action of Spanish newspapers that filled their front pages with the slogan “#EsteVirusLoParamosUnidos” (“United we will stop this virus”) on March 15, Latin American news organizations came together to spread a message of unity (Lubianco, 2020).

A group of Mexican, Argentinian, Peruvian, El Salvadorian, and Brazilian news outlets used their front pages to publish a slogan to motivate people to “fight” the virus (Figure 1). These campaigns gained prominent places on their websites and were also repeated on radio and TV broadcasts: “Stay home; we stand together against the virus”. This served as a particular call for public engagement during an unprecedented moment in recent history. However, when comparing our results to those of older studies, we must note that this exemplary collaborative process is not common in the news industry (Alfter, 2016; Carson & Farhall, 2018).

In Latin America, collaboration is still scarce, and previous studies have demonstrated that this practice happens because professionals want to improve the social conditions of their countries (Cueva Chacón & Saldaña, 2020), such as the case of the covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 1 – Campaigns carried out by Latin American newspapers



Source: montage of the authors from images published in Lubianco, 2020.

Beyond this unifying discourse, each outlet chooses how to fulfill this function by giving different spaces and relevance to user-generated content and determining what roles the public is allowed to have in their news processes. We chose to explore news outlets that opt to give the public a part in helping them deliver news, which extends beyond conducting a public service to the audience. In this respect, three outlets that provided a voice to public stories during this time stood out, namely GK (Ecuador), The Intercept (Brazil), and Red/Acción (Argentina). These efforts will be discussed in detail later.

While we explored the Latin American outlets' portals, we searched for integration experiments that focused on user involvement. We discovered that share buttons and comment sections are popular resources for news sites, as illustrated in Table 2. These tools are commonly deployed as interactive features to engage users, but they still provide a minimal form of engagement and limited participation in the news process. These findings are in line with those of an earlier study that found limited interactivity on Latin American news portals (Bachmann & Harlow, 2012).

Table 2 – The presence of interactive tools in the 80 news sites

Total news sites (out of 80)	Tool	Note	
75 (93.75%)	Share Buttons	Usually allows sharing on the most popular social networks (Facebook and Twitter, for example) and via email.	
53 (66.25%)	Comment Sections	None of them were completely open to users.	Thirty-eight (approx. 71.70% out of 53) demanded some form of login to the site to post.
			Fourteen (approx. 26.42% out of 53) asked for basic data (name and e-mail).
			One (approx. 1.89% out of 53) gave the option to login via social network or to just provide basic data.

Source: created by the authors.

Can user-generated content be considered innovative? Digital technologies have motivated popular interference in news production, and the context of the pandemic has encouraged the public to tell their stories. However, for most news sites in Latin America that we consistently observed, we found that the audience was generally invited to contribute only with feedback after the news has been published. This does not mean that media organizations in the region are not producing quality journalism (Salaverría et al. 2019), thorough trans-national investigations (Saldaña & Mourão, 2018), interdisciplinary collaborations (Cueva Chacón & Saldaña, 2020), and innovative storytelling projects (Borges-Rey, 2019). However, this trend demonstrates that these resources and tools that arose through novel technologies do not automatically correspond to an expansion of the uses of user-generated content or the willingness to make room for untethered public participation.

In this sense, previous researchers have found that limited engagement partly occurs due to the lack of and unequal access to technology. Since dedicated funds to support these investments in the Latin American news ecosystem are minimal, user content has not materially advanced across the region (Bachmann & Harlow, 2012; Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013). Moderation and mediation may always be an implied and necessary part of professional journalism, but the possibilities of using public engagement for storytelling are still largely unexplored by the majority of Latin American news media.

Despite these limitations, we were able to perceive that the potential of user contributions had evolved through multiple profiles, which we were able to determine by considering other examples that were present in the literature on this subject. The analyzed cases presented different types of user-generated content that were displayed in either a textual format or images (photos and videos). These contributions also originated from different platforms, such as social networks where journalists could be reached, newsrooms' submission forms, or online calls for contributions that were promoted by news organizations.

By exploring these 80 news sites, we observed that most organizations did not incorporate a substantial amount of UGC in news stories since they did not make a constant effort to actively include the audience in their storytelling processes. There are many cases where the spread of images through social networks for their funny or unusual content becomes part of news stories since user content can also motivate the telling of a story. Images that go viral on social media networks are often picked up by news sites to illustrate events or even become a story. When content goes viral (when a text, image, video, or link – which are often defined as memes – spreads rapidly on the internet), it is often picked up by news sites, and an article is made about it.

We found, for example, that a viral video of a family that was joined by a bear for their picnic in Maryland in the United States became featured content in the Argentinian *La Nación* and the Peruvian *La República*. The family filmed a video and posted it online, and it was used to create news stories on websites all over the world. During the covid-19 pandemic, this type of content, in addition to memes, was often used to share humor during a difficult time and gain traction on the internet.

News sites also often utilize content posted by celebrities like actors and singers and create articles around it. Celebrities are notably in the public eye, and with social media, the general public receives a sanctioned look into their lives, thoughts, and opinions. The Argentinian *La Nación* published one story showcasing a video of The Rock (Dwayne Johnson) teaching his daughter how to properly wash her hands, a routine that gained new importance in face of the coronavirus pandemic. The news site also published the singer Pink's Instagram post in which she talked about her and her son's experiences with being infected with covid-19. It is arguably interesting content to illustrate situations brought on by the coronavirus.

User-generated content has also been used in news stories to complement or illustrate what was written by journalists through pictures, videos, and text. In this context, we can question whether the use of UGC alters the impact of the story or changes how it is told. We noticed during our observation that this content comes heavily from social networks. This is in line with Bruns' (2008) findings that highlighted the potential of user content to influence the news agenda.

Another example we encountered concerned the explosions that rocked Beirut, the capital of Lebanon, on August 4, 2020. Several social networks were used to publish initial images captured by bystanders of the different angles of the explosions and their effects, which were later captured by news sites. The first images of what happened, which painted a developing story, came from those who were there when it all happened – the regular public – and was later used by Latin American news outlets to later share the story on news portals. As such, UGC can be used to illustrate a developing story and add information to cover the situation.

These are the most common uses of UGC. Nonetheless, we also discovered several news organizations in distinct Latin American countries that are making interesting strides in including users in the news production process. In the following section, we will outline three experiments with user-generated content that emerged from the initial list that we collected. We will highlight the experiences produced by *The Intercept*, *GK*, and *Red/Acción* during this period of the pandemic because the content originated from the public in these three cases and became an essential part of news reporting. In part, this is because the health crisis put everyone in isolation and disrupted new norms and practices that were not common in these newsrooms, which here are illustrated using the examples of the experimentation with UGC.

It is also important to note that social media became a part of the journalistic process, and our results were broadly in line with this (Almgren & Olsson, 2015; Canavilhas, 2011; Nielsen & Schrøder, 2014). These social media platforms created a space that allowed news outlets to deliver information and promote their content, find sources and ideas for stories, and connect with their audiences. As these networks grew in popularity and added new features, an array of possibilities for storytelling emerged for the media, such as being able to live-stream events or publish news reports using Instagram Stories (Vazques-Herrero et al., 2019).

Although these opportunities created a mediated space for publishers, they also created an attention-based economy that is defined by “a scarce and fluid commodity which carries monetary value; is based on individual user interaction which can be harvested, measured, and exchanged for revenue on a platform, on a news site, or an online site” (Myllylahti, 2020, p.568).

4.1 Experiments in storytelling: innovative cases

We chose to outline examples that showcased user-generated content such as testimonials and images that were incorporated into storytelling during the pandemic. These experiments revealed that news media can create a space for public debate and understand how content generated by the public can be explored innovatively to create news stories.

The first interesting experiment was found in GK, a digital news native from Ecuador that has created a section dedicated to the coverage of the novel coronavirus in the country. Ecuador was hit hard by the covid-19 pandemic, and social networks were used by the public to denounce the collapse of the country’s health system. When the novel coronavirus pandemic reached Latin America and the Caribbean region between March and April 2020, several strong images and videos were spread on Twitter; these images and videos showed bodies being left in the streets, in front of hospitals, since there was no way to transport them.

The heartbreaking situation presented an ethical decision to journalists: should the images become part of their news stories? It also brought up matters of concern related to technology: these matters concerned whether these images were real and how they could be verified. Additionally, the choice to include videos that showed people collapsing from the virus and bodies being tossed into the streets or burned captures the worst-case scenario that the pandemic could have presented to journalism. We argue here that making these images a part of the narratives changes the way that the story is told.

The powerful adoption of user-generated content like these videos shared by GK or those of tsunamis or war zones or any other moments of crisis goes beyond an illustrative capacity. Using this type of content adds the reality of human suffering to news stories that journalists can rarely capture using their own words.

GK chose not to use the videos; however, that does not mean that they did not humanely address the situation. GK's team spoke directly to the needs of the public, many of whom were taking to social networks to denounce how the government was dealing with the pandemic. The newsroom created a collaborative project called "Voces para la Memoria" ("Voices for the Memory" in English) to honor the identities of those who died during the pandemic to address the uncertainty about what was happening in Ecuador. GK said that they believed the memories of those who died during the crisis should be told by their families, so they invited their users to access a portal linked to their website to leave their own testimonies.

GK also created a list to help those who were looking for the bodies of family members that had been lost or were buried or disposed of in other manners during the worst part of the crisis in Ecuador. In this way, family members could provide information, such as the names and birthdates of the ones that they were looking for. Consequently, this created a collaborative list on GK's site, and anyone who had any information could reach out to these families.

This led to an initiative called "Los que no aparecen" ("The ones who don't show up" in English), which was designed to gather first-person reports from those who were looking for the bodies of missing relatives. Their testimonials were edited and corrected by journalists in the newsroom before being published, which is a recurrent practice of the organization. This is conveyed through the contact sheet that they provide to users; GK stated, "Aqui editamos" ("Here, we edit" in English), which clearly communicates that the content shared by users undergoes a mediation process.

Interestingly, we found that GK's portal does not use any of the two most basic tools (share buttons and comment sections) for interaction with the public. The Ecuadorian outlet opted not to use these tools because of its journalistic view and the relationship that the organization seeks to construct with the audience. Again, they stated on their website that the outlet wanted to build a connection with its members as part of GK's team, which sought to include them in reporting.

This continuous effort was highlighted by the needs that arose during the pandemic, which were also illustrated by one of the resources that they provided. A section called "Cartas desde la Redacción" ("letter to the newsroom" in English) is a communication channel that users can use to contact the organization to learn about the work that the writing team does week by week. It is, indeed, an

attempt to include the public in all stages of the news process and teach them about how a newsroom works.

The organization also has a presence on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. In this respect, the organization uses Instagram especially as a tool to connect with their audience by conducting Q&As with experts to answer questions about the situation in the country and the coronavirus outbreak. The Ecuadorian news media also publishes content exclusively on Instagram that uses the resources that the social network provides, such as videos and posts that feature the stories of people who are affected by the pandemic or have to continue working despite the danger presented by the virus.

Overall, these findings are in accordance with the findings reported by *The Digital News Report* of 2020 (Newman et al., 2020). In Latin America, social platforms have stimulated the consumption of images to the detriment of text, even though most people prefer a mixed approach. The report also suggests that audiences prefer to consume news in video and audio formats, which opens up new possibilities for news organizations. Together, the growth in access and the number of users on Instagram in recent years can be connected to the popularization of visual formats in journalism. Moreover, 30% of the Brazilian public uses the platform to consume information.

This is an important finding, especially as it relates to the case of The Intercept Brasil (TIB), a digital-native medium that went even further than GK by using its Instagram account to publish exclusive content rather than direct traffic to TIB's portal. This contradicted common findings in the literature (Myllylahti, 2020; da Silva et al., 2020), which describe these social media as platforms that can be used to call attention or distribute content.

In the context of the pandemic, these two organizations embraced social media platforms in their strategies to the extent that they changed the standard use of these tools by creating new ways to engage with their audiences. By using the platform's streaming service and recording and making content available on IGTV (the resource for long videos on Instagram), TIB reinforced the public's stories. Using this exemplary integration experiment, TIB created a movement of innovation and experimentation in Latin America, which was also accompanied by changes in consumer behavior in the digital environment. These findings directly align with previous studies, which have revealed that social media platforms are used to collect UGC in Latin America (de Lima Santos & Mesquita, 2021).

The TIB's coverage of the pandemic allowed us to perceive the difference between the narratives that recorded current events. While other countries were being heavily affected by the coronavirus outbreak, Brazil was in the early stage of the pandemic since it was registering its first cases at the time. As the situation in the country intensified, the need to tell stories about different people, communities, and initiatives in a time of quarantine and social isolation progressively intensified.

Readers used their smartphones to record audiovisual content, almost always forgetting about the aesthetic standardization of stories and other Instagram resources since the editing process was left to the media. Despite being narrated by people outside the newsroom, these videos obtained the TIB seal of quality by facilitating new interviews or testimonials that were published on their Instagram profile. These elements, along with the videos, endorsed credibility (Alsina, 2009; Sodr , 2009).

We found that TIB viewed people not only as sources – which is a recurring practice in traditional journalism – but also as narrators, which corroborates data found by Tejedor et al. (2020) that points to a trend toward using business models that are characterized by horizontality, participation and user engagement. In covering the pandemic, TIB has made a consistent and systematic effort to make room for testimonies from people who come from outside the newsroom and who are rarely heard in times of crisis. On its website, TIB features a section called “Vozes” (“voices” in English), which is dedicated to these reports; it has also migrated to other platforms. In a newsletter, Silvia Lisboa (2020), a section editor, stated the following:

During the coverage of the pandemic, we are working even harder to publish the testimonies of people who are not usually heard in times of crisis. Share our texts on your networks and make these voices heard even further. Do you know a story that we need to tell? (Lisboa, 2020, paragraph 5, our translation).

Our findings in TIB's case at least hint at how many news organizations exist and survive in an ecosystem in which elements simultaneously depend on and influence one another. With a business model that is based on fundraising (money received from the public), being present where the audience appears to be fundamental for the existence and work of the medium (da Silva & Sanseverino, 2020). TIB's experiments and presence on Instagram have allowed

the organization to increase its visibility by sharing stories, reaching new audiences, and potentially attracting supporters who help make their journalistic work viable. Certainly, this business model is only possible because it assures the public of its duty, which is achieved through transparent and collaborative postures of commitment to its social function.

The same held true for the third case, Red/Acción (Argentina), an outlet that has claimed that the newspaper industry has long depended on advertising for financial support but that it must seek new business strategies and other ways of engaging with readers and brands. However, Red/Acción has also argued on its portal that brands and companies need the courage to engage with their audiences in a new way. This belief exemplifies their relationship with their audience, whom Red/Acción calls members. This engagement with their users has been informed by the organization's journalistic mission, which comprises producing news content that prioritizes social issues and giving a leading place to user participation.

Thus, the outlet has placed user participation at the forefront of their journalistic model, and the website has demonstrated that the Argentinian news outlet has created a channel for exchange and collaboration on news stories between journalists and active members. We uncovered evidence that Red/Acción relied on a mix of personal testimonials from users and narratives from its journalists to create news stories during the pandemic, which positioned the outlet as an entity that goes beyond telling the public what is happening to listen to its members and invite them to act to create a community.

By proposing journalism that features more empathy by putting itself in the shoes of others and taking charge, Red/Acción's coverage of the pandemic followed the same pattern and continuously attempted to include the public in all stages of news production. We found several examples of this on their social media and news portal, such as asking members what they wanted to know, inviting the public to tell and post their stories on their page, or asking them what stories still needed to be reported.

In the space called "Red/Acción Abierta" members were invited to propose ideas and stories in collaboration with the journalists. Another section called "Pasa a la acción" ("pass to the action" in English) offered weekly opportunities to their readers to

commit to a cause, which relates to the idea that journalism cannot only report reality but also change it, especially when it establishes a connection with the community. Those two spaces, alongside their social network's profiles, which were also used as another platform to begin a conversation with members, formed the three pillars that the news organization established as a base for public participation. On Instagram, for example, the outlet interacts with readers by using resources such as polls and questions, although it is still used as a form to generate traffic to the website. Red/Acción has also used social media platforms as a channel of communication to answer questions and start conversations with users.

These tools were already implemented before the pandemic but were further explored during the pandemic. Founded in 2018, Red/Acción is an exemplary case because it was created especially for the web. Furthermore, since its foundation, Red/Acción has aimed to make the public a part of the journalism that they produce. One of the main obstacles for journalism is often the unwillingness to think about the relationship that it establishes with the public beyond its transactional nature.

These three experiments from the initial list of 80 news outlets reveal that the pandemic highlighted how important it is to create space for the audience in news reporting. Beyond that, Red/Acción demonstrated the power that these experiments have to transform journalism by constructing a community with their members during the pandemic. Thus, news organizations can be inspired by these three cases to organically make voices from outside the newsroom part of their coverage.

5 Conclusion and future directions

Our results cast a new light on the experiments that Latin American news outlets have performed to integrate UGC into news reporting. *The 2020 Digital News Report* (Newman et al., 2020) has already indicated that the coronavirus crisis has encouraged the public to consume news in the digital environment, which was exacerbated in the early days of the pandemic. Consequently, the pandemic may have long-term effects on journalism. Indeed, some changes were perceived before the pandemic, like young people consuming more news through online platforms such as Instagram,

Snapchat, and TikTok. However, videoconferences emerged as an alternative for personal and professional communication, even affecting government press conferences. Similarly, the media adopted these new tools for remote work and content production and distribution.

The fight against covid-19 has required that news outlets take a central role in production, circulation, and access to information, which they have assumed to raise awareness about the individual care necessary for common well-being, as well as the establishment of public policies and their implementation based on the measures concerning the number of cases of contagion and deaths. Almost a decade ago, Bachmann and Harlow (2012) described the lack of investment in user content and interactivity in Latin American media portals. It is possible that, even given the conditions regarding decreased socioeconomic inequality concerning the past, UGC continues to be minimally represented in these portals although news patterns have suffered small changes.

Social isolation shifted the production of news from the physical space of newsrooms to the home office (Lubianco, 2020; Jones, 2020). In the meantime, although the journalistic activity is recognized as essential, the displacement of reporters has often made coverage difficult, which has opened up more space for content produced by the public. Traditional media organizations, especially renowned ones, have seen a significant increase in traffic on their web pages as well as an increase in the number of their subscribers due to their coverage of the health crisis (Jerde, 2020; Nicholson, n.d.; Molla, 2020; Tameez, 2020; Tracy, 2020).

Even with distrust in the media, it is more difficult for the public to differentiate what is real from what is not in a world where fake news leads us to question the validity of the information found online. The importance of putting the audience at the center of journalistic work and how that has changed journalists' approach to news stories might help these experiments become more common in news media. In journalistic literature, other innovative experiments have been observed during different periods of crisis; news organizations eventually adopted these experiments into their workflows (Belair-Gagnon & Steinke, 2020; Cavallo et al., 2020; Porcu et al., 2020).

Digital natives are also gaining relevance for their ability to construct narratives and integrate them with social media platforms' resources. Through our analysis, we observed that in the end, each news organization dealt with user-generated content differently and their success in including the public in the news process depended on them. This might also have to do with the different levels of technological development and unequal income distribution in Latin America. Future studies could explore this comparative aspect regarding the development of UGC in the news ecosystem of the region.

It is important to note that without a defined business model that provides spaces for user participation, few experiments will arise. The three selected cases that applied UGC at a recognized level resorted to the continuous use of content that originated from the public, and all of them were digital natives. GK (Ecuador), The Intercept Brasil, and Red/Acción (Argentina) were studied for their exemplary uses of UGC, but at the same time, they depended on the public for financial viability and survival. However, this does not imply that an automatic journalism model allows all public participation in the production of its news.

These organizations chose to connect with their audiences in a way that goes beyond soliciting their feedback: they turned their readers into storytellers. These digital natives need to build a business model that differentiates from legacy news media, which aligns with the findings from previous studies that were conducted in Latin America (Harlow & Salaverría, 2016; Requejo-Alemán & Lugo-Ocando, 2014). By giving a voice to the public, these organizations are putting the user at the center of their work (de Lima Santos & Mesquita, 2021).

While these interesting cases utilized UGC for storytelling, most Latin American news organizations apply a discourse of participation but do not actually open their spaces to the public. We know that many are concerned about the use of user-generated content, especially as it relates to journalistic ethics and the obligatory trust in the relationship between the media and the public. These are factors that intervene in the decision to use content created by users. There is also the matter of the authority and credibility that are earned by journalists as professionals, which connects to their responsibility to research, produce, and promote news for the public, which aligns with the studies of Carlson and Lewis (2015), who raised questions

about the nature of journalism.

Ultimately, content produced by the public is handled on a case-by-case basis, although newsrooms and media companies have established best practices to manage it. UGC must be appropriate, adequate, and newsworthy, which requires verification and a debate regarding the reasons why individual content deserves to be published, which necessitates efforts to ensure that the truth is upheld. Future studies could more fruitfully explore this issue by conducting interviews with Latin American journalists to understand whether the lack of UGC integration stems from time constraints or individual decisions.

Nonetheless, we understand that opting to use UGC as a form of storytelling brought a human face to the pandemic, the loss, and the consequences of the coronavirus. Using the public to tell stories, using their viewpoints to bridge gaps between newsrooms and their audiences, and transforming news into more digestible content that people can easily relate to all benefits of using UGC in news coverage. Therefore, journalism as a public service can transcend its current role to continually play a fundamental role in contributing to the possibility of equal participation for all individuals in society. Thus, by connecting with the public and encouraging their participation, journalism creates open spaces for users to make their voices heard and opens its doors to the audience's contributions to create news that inspires empathy, especially during crises.

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