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News production routines in Ecuador’s most important online newspapers: *El Universo*, *El Mercurio*, *El Diario* and *Crónica de la Tarde*

Diana Rivera Rogel [[CV](#)] [[ID](#)] [[G](#)] Professor at the Department of Communication Sciences. Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja / Technical University of Loja (Ecuador) / derivera@utpl.edu.ec

Xosé Pereira-Fariña [[CV](#)] [[ID](#)] [[G](#)] Professor at the School of Communication Sciences. Universidad de Santiago de Compostela / University of Santiago de Compostela (Spain) / xose.pereira@usc.es

Jenny Yaguache Quichimbo [[CV](#)] [[ID](#)] [[G](#)] Professor at the Department of Communication Sciences. Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja / Technical University of Loja (Ecuador) / jjyaguache@utpl.edu.ec

Abstract

Introduction. This article presents the results of an analysis of the newsrooms of four Ecuadorian digital newspapers (*El Universo*, *El Mercurio*, *El Diario* and *Crónica de la Tarde*) in order to identify their news-production dynamics and professional practices. **Method.** The study is based on non-participatory observation and interviews with journalists, carried out inside the newsrooms of each newspaper. The observation sessions took place in 2011 on the following dates: at *El Mercurio* on 1 and 2 June; at *El Universo* on 7 June; at *El Diario* on 9 and 10 June; and at *Crónica de la Tarde* on 13 and 14 June. **Results:** The digital versions of the aforementioned newspapers do follow routine work methods. **Discussion:** The work structure of these newspapers has been inherited from their traditional print counterparts. Journalists do not participate in the decision-making processes or in the redefinition and evaluation of the digital product. **Conclusions:** The transition of journalists’ work from the traditional to the digital platform presents a major concern. In the online newsrooms, work organization is consistent with the work dynamics, and human resources are limited and poorly-trained.

Keywords

Production routines; digital newspapers; journalists; newsroom.

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Translation by **CA Martínez Arcos**, Ph.D. (Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas)

1. Introduction

Digital newspapers are going through a time of transition, are defining their own language and to some extent are becoming independent from their traditional counterparts. They constitute a new form of communication whose objective, just as their traditional print version, is to inform. They constitute a new form of journalism because they fully exploit the resources offered by the Internet, such as multimedia, hypertextuality and interactivity, which allow the contextualisation, expansion and availability of information (Gil, 1999).

News-production models for the Internet-based press differ from those of the traditional press. Already in the 1980s, Armand Mattelart and Yves Stourdzé (1984: 152) pointed out that the nature generated by the new communication technologies was transforming the news-production process and was modifying the dissemination and transmission networks.

The opposite happens in a native digital news media. Since they do not have a traditional medium as a reference or guide, their reporters work to the rhythm established by the occurrence of news events, i.e., they establish their own work routines. Mar Iglesias (2012: 2) points out that a digital news medium created only for the Internet, not having an analogue reference, works in a more agile manner, does not depend on the contents of the traditional medium, and is not pressured to delay publication of certain news until the print edition is published.

While it is true that digital newspapers feed on the information generated by their traditional versions, the same practices and routines impact on the production of contents. Paulo Ramírez (1995) says that these professional production modes started to develop since the media became constituted as the majority of modern democratic societies knows them: as, almost-always for profit, companies, whose business consists in the transmission of general-interest news and advertising.

The subject of news production routines has been systematically researched since the 1970s until the current day. This line of research has been consolidated in the United States and the United Kingdom, but it is still poorly developed in Ibero-America, although this is changing for good. Meanwhile, some research proposals are being developed in Latin America (Hernández Soto, López García and Pereira Farina, 2007).

Berta García Orosa conceives the production routines as “behavioural patterns that are established in the profession, are assimilated as habits, are usually carried out mechanically, and are present in the entire news production process” (2009: 32). The main purpose of a routine is to save time in the production of news.

In this regard, Pablo Boczkowski (2006: 209) argues that “the change that motivates the abandonment of the traditional process of information selection and the implementation of routines in the newsroom focuses on the facilitation and circulation of the information produced by a large heterogeneous network of users who have become content producers”.

David Domingo’s study on the professional routines and values of the Catalan media’s newsrooms found out that journalists were completely independent in the management of the medium, due to the lack of supervision. “A news piece on these websites is hardly reread by another person in the newsroom prior to its publication, while news items in print newspapers are reviewed at least by the section head editor and another person” (2004: 7). Digital newspapers’ newsrooms do not have an editor-in-chief to monitor the daily work.

The author argues that the main factors that influence the definition of the product and the production routines in the digital newsrooms seem to be of an organisational, economic, cultural and material nature (Domingo, 2004: 14). It is important for all actors involved to participate in the decision-making process, and to redefine and constantly evaluate the digital product.

The production routines of the printed media are organised in the following way: on a daily basis the medium receives press releases from companies, public and private institutions, letters to the editor, complaints, etc., which are organised and analysed by the editor and distributed to reporters. For authors such as Shoemaker and Reese (1991), this reality involves practices that are widespread, shared and implemented by journalists. According to these authors, these practices respond to two situations: 1) the limited sources of organisation and the existence of an infinite supply of potential raw material, and 2) to the needs of the organisations, the media and workers.

Newspapers with nationwide coverage have the figure of the section head editor, who acts as a link between the editor-in-chief, writers/journalist, and graphic reporters. With the agenda set on the previous day, the different sections organise the information in hierarchies, the next day the information is analysed once again, including new unscheduled themes or events: “this way the newspaper builds each day the reality it wants to convey to its readers” (Vásquez, 2006: 146-147).

This type of organisation has been a model for the traditional media’s newsrooms, and has also altered the digital media’s newsrooms. The news production process follows a predetermined order; journalists expand the press releases that arrive to the medium’s official mailbox. Pere Masip exemplifies this in the following way: “in general terms, in the production of a daily news story, journalists take the information obtained as starting point... If additional information is required they tend to use the phone to contact trusted sources” (2005: 569).

News production routines are organised according to the needs of each medium. As Mauro Wolf (2005) points out, the main phases of the news production routine, which takes place in the different platforms, are basically three: collection, selection and presentation of news/information. In other words, the production routines determine what the medium is and what it might be. In this regard,

researcher Irene Agudelo Builes (1996: 84) points out that “it is in the productive routines, and not elsewhere, where the factors that determine the representation of the events are established”.

One of the practices carried out by journalists is to collect information from known sources that provide informational materials with regulated quality parameters. For Mauro Wolf: “the most common example is the practice of choosing from agency news releases and to publish them as news, with superficial stylistic modifications, and supported by graphic elements” (2005: 133). Three elements are part of this first phase: sources, agencies, and the agenda.

1) Sources are all those transmitters of data that are used by journalists to write the news. Information sources are many and varied. For Manuel López, an information source can be defined as “a channel -person or institution- that provides substantial or complementary data –as they are direct or indirect witnesses of an event- that will be used to produce news, stories, columns and reports” (Lopez, 1995: 31).

2) News agencies are a valuable source of information. For Miguel Angel Vásquez (2006: 112-113), they “guarantee a continuous flow of information, of high level of quality and an absolute trust for the mass media, since they rely on a consolidated industrial system for the production and distribution of news, perfectly suited to the journalistic activity”.

In his analysis of four digital newsroom teams, David Domingo’s (2004: 8) argues that reporters trust news agencies. At present, the news provided by the agencies are digital so journalists can access them online and print them out, copy them and paste them to work on them to develop their news. The less people in the newsroom, the greater the dependence on news agencies.

3) The agenda contains the list of topics the medium will investigate. For Stella Martini, Professor and researcher on issues of mass media, communication and sociocultural at the School of Social Sciences of the University of Buenos Aires:

The new trends or new issues in the public agenda constitute topics that resist the traditional pigeonholing. Some of them begin to constitute fixed areas in the agenda of newspapers (main body or supplements) and television (theme channels), and society (as it happens with the set formed by the city, security, traffic, quality of life, ecology, and also with gender, feminism, sexual harassment, abortion, family planning). This corresponds to the new needs of the public opinion (2000: 38-39).

And, finally, we have the preparation and presentation of the events. For Wolf (2005: 147), in this last production phase, an inverse operation of re-contextualisation is carried out but in a different context, in the format of the newspaper.

2. Materials and methods

The concept of journalistic routines proposed by Gaye Tuchman (1983) refers to the way this production process legitimates the information sources and determines the news. This author points

out that by “sharing and accumulating work together on the field of stories, reading each other, and socialising is together, informants produce modes of professionally understand how the work should be done” (1983: 226).

Journalists’ work dynamics and professional practices in the collection of information vary depending on the organisational structure of the digital newspapers. Journalistic work routines determine the production of the news that finally impacts the quality and position of the digital newspaper in the market.

To identify the news production routines followed in the four Ecuadorian newspapers (*El Universo*, *El Mercurio*, *El Diario* and *Crónica de la Tarde*) we used non-participant observation and in-depth interviews, which are qualitative techniques that can generate descriptive data of the news-production routines followed in the media.

Observation is one of the main tools to describe and systematise the processes that occur in digital newspapers’ newsroom, which is our object of study. Van Dalen and Meyer (1981) consider that “observation plays a very important role in all types of research because it provides one of its fundamental elements: the facts”. Data collection was carried out through a field journal, which recorded the work of journalists as the basis for the reflection and analysis of the information.

Observation in the newsrooms was carried out in June 2011, in the following days: *El Mercurio* on 1 and 2; *El Universo* on 7 [1]; *El Diario* on 9 and 10; and *Crónica de la Tarde* on 13 and 14.

The interview is the second qualitative technique used to know in depth the specific experiences and processes of the protagonists of this study: journalists and editors. Taylor and Bogdan (1994) define the qualitative in-depth interview as repeated face-to-face meetings between the researcher and the informants; meetings directed at understanding informants’ perspectives about their lives, experiences or situations, based on their own accounts.

The interviewed editors were: Rosa Falconí, from *El Universo*; José García, from *El Diario*; Nancy Negrete, from *El Mercurio*; and Paola Betancourt, from *Crónica de la Tarde*. The interviews were carried out on the same days as the non-participant observation sessions.

2.1. Sample

Diana Rivera’s doctoral thesis (2011) points out that in Ecuador there are 30 print daily newspapers with a digital version, i.e., they maintain a double version, on paper and on the Internet. For the purposes of this research, a sample of four newspapers was selected from that universe of newspapers according to the following criteria:

- a) Coverage: A representative digital newspaper was selected from each territorial model: national, regional, provincial and local. National newspapers are those distributed throughout the country or in almost all provinces. Regional newspapers, on the other hand, are those with coverage in a whole region or area. Provincial newspapers are distributed in the province

where they are edited, and local newspapers are only distributed in the city in which they are printed.

- b) History and prestige: the print versions of the selected digital newspapers have the longest history in the cities where they are edited and, therefore, have the greatest prestige. Based on this criterion, we selected digital newspapers with seven to ten years of history on the Internet.

In this sense, the study focused on the following digital newspapers: *El Universo* from Guayaquil, *El Diario* from Portoviejo, *El Mercurio* from Cuenca and *Crónica de la Tarde* from Loja.

2.2. Units of analysis

The units of analysis in this study are part of the work dynamics that take place in the digital newspapers' newsrooms: work organisation and news production.

- a) Work organisation: in accordance with all organisational processes, the study aims to identify, first, the hierarchical order of the actors involved, as well as their functions, activities, schedules and processes followed in the journalistic routine.
- b) News production: to complement the evaluation of the journalistic routine we identified the working methods used in the news production process: collection, selection and publication.

The analysis of these variables is the basis to establish whether the organisation of the newsroom responds to a relevant news production, taking into account the particularities of each digital newspaper included in the sample.

2.3. Analysis and results

According to the data obtained by non-participant observation in the sample of newsrooms, it is the reporters from the print editions who go out to the streets and provide the necessary information so that their digital colleagues can produce news and publish them instantly. At the same time, the digital journalists review international agencies, local media and social networks, where the last-minute data that are published in the digital newspapers are leaked.

Eluniverso.com

a) Work routines

The work dynamics of this digital newspaper starts at 7 in the morning, when the editor and journalists responsible for the contents of *eluniverso.com* and the social networks. Two journalists

are in charge of updating Facebook and Twitter, one working from 9:30 am to 7:00 pm, and the other until 11:00 pm. They update the networks with information from the printed version. These people also play the role of gatekeeper, which consists in eliminating regionalist comments and insults.

Three journalists work in the morning shift, from 7:00 am to 3:30 pm and other three in the afternoon shift, from 3:30 pm to 8:00 pm. The morning-shift journalists review the news agencies Efe, Reuters, AFP and AP, listen to radio City (owned by the same group) and monitor television channels. Then they write the news and upload them to the Internet. They monitor the different media every single day. The cyber-participation tool, named *Testigo móvil* (“Mobile witness”), is also used as a reference to write news. The elements of the inverted pyramid are taken into account in the production of news.

Every day, from 10:00 to 11:00 am, the editor-in-chief, along with editor and the people responsible for social networks, gather to plan the daily work, based on the agenda of the print medium [2]. Journalists have the option to propose and publish news. In news about crucial issues it is the editor who authorises their publication.

Journalists of the online edition, according to what was observed, are supported by their fellow reporters from the print edition, who work with mobile phones, to obtain information instantly.

The editor and the deputy-chief-editor are responsible for reviewing the e-mail and respond to users. Spelling errors and agreement errors are not corrected, and they are published as they arrive. In the online edition, the error report can be accessed by all journalists, but they do not know the comments section.

In the digital edition news are published in the early hours based with the information at hand, and they are gradually complemented with videos, photographs, etc.

In the afternoon the process is similar: journalists update the digital newspaper with news published by the printed version and the news provided by the news agencies or other media.

In terms of human resources, the number of people working in the digital newspaper has changed. At first, there were only two people responsible for updating the website. The number grew to four, and it now stands at 21: six journalists who write news and updated the website; three developers; four designers; one marketing manager; a deputy-chief-editor; a director; a webmaster; two videographers; and two journalists who feed the social networks. It is important to emphasise that there is a technical department (composed of five engineers and two designers) that gives support to all products of *El Universo*.

b) News production

News writing is still a rudimentary process. To publish a news story the following criteria are taken into account: topicality, novelty and relevance to the audience. Local issues occupy a privileged place in the agenda of the newspaper. There is a section called “Guayaquil” where users can find the

information that interests them. This section contains the interaction tool known as “mobile witness”, which has a great reception, especially its “social complaints” section.

After midnight the digital newspaper shows the news that will be published in the print version in the morning hours. Exclusive news stories are handled with the utmost care. If they are about events that happen in the day and have a short duration they are published in the digital version, but if they involve wide investigation and interest, the exclusive is given to the traditional newspaper, which adds value to the sale of advertising space (Armentia and Caminos, 2003).

Elmercurio.com.ec

a) Work routines

The routine in *elmercurio.com.ec* starts at 8:00 am. This digital newspaper carries out joint work with the traditional version despite they do not work physically in the same space.

One of the first actions of the editor is to make sure the news from the previous day have been loaded onto the website, which is the responsibility of eleven journalists and one correspondent. Subsequently, the website is updated with information from the Efe agency and news reports created by the street journalists of the print version.

Work is planned every day from 8 to 9 in the morning in a meeting between the journalists and editors of the traditional newspaper [3]. The online editor does not attend the meeting. The digital newspaper is adjusted to the agenda of the printed version.

At 12:00, the editor-in-chief, together with the director –who arrives at 9:30 am- review, answer and filter the different comments made by users. While journalists publish the news, it is these two people the ones in charge of responding to readers.

From 12:30 pm to 1:30 pm, Nancy Negrete, the editor-in-chief, reviews the newspaper’s e-mail [4] and the notes sent in by users and public and private institutions, selects those she believes are of interest to the audience and publishes them, giving credit to the sources. These news stories are forwarded, according to the subject, to those responsible for the different sections so they can be analysed and investigated. At 3:00 pm the webmaster arrives to give maintenance to the server and make sure the platform is operating normally.

At 5:30 pm the editor is ready to continue working until 8:30 pm, a time during which the activities are the same: review of the news agencies and the reports of journalists; all this with the aim of updating the website and the social networks. In addition, some interviews on subjects of social denounce. From time to time famous people and authorities are invited to discuss current affairs and these discussions are broadcast streamed live on the website.

With regards to the staff, the online newsroom is composed of a team of three people: the director, the editor and the webmaster. Newsrooms do not operate physically in the same place, but since two years ago the work of journalists and editors of the different sections of the print version is used by the digital newspaper. In total the digital newspaper is run by 12 journalists, two systems engineers, one technology specialist and six editors. Regarding the process of convergence, the editor said that: “there were people very reluctant to jump in the technology train and chose to leave the medium and work in other activity and there are those who put a lot of effort to adapt”.

b) News production

Information in the digital newspaper differs, in some measure, from that in the traditional version; every-day news are written by the editor with data from reporters and all the print news are published after midnight. The hierarchy is respected, i.e., the most important news stories in the traditional newspaper maintain their hierarchy in the digital version. The difference is that the digital newspaper publishes news that its print counterpart does not.

With the aim of supporting the professionals who took the challenge of making digital journalism, this newspaper equipped five journalists with mobile phones with Internet access to enable them to publish live to Twitter and Facebook.

The selection of the news stories that are published on the website takes into account the following parameters: Topicality, novelty and local, regional and national impact.

According to Editor Nancy Negrete, from 1995 to this day, this newspaper has given a great leap in terms of news presentation and writing. Initially, the presentation was flat, and was just a copy of the information of the print newspaper. The current work processes are still not the best, but they differ greatly from the one carried out during the first years. The editor updates website on a daily basis with information from the EFE news agency and news reports from out-on-the-streets journalists of the print version. In addition to sending or emailing the news reports at the time the events take place, reporters should also make videos, record audios and take photos.

Eldiario.com.ec

a) Work routines

Activities in this digital newspaper start at 8:30 am, with the arrival of journalist Margarita Pérez. Her job is to monitor Radio Sucre, the national newspapers and the Efe news agency. She also requests information to her colleagues from the print version to write news stories for *eldiario.com.ec*.

The editors of the different sections meet at 9:30 am. This meeting is not attended by the online editor-in-chief José García [5], because his shift starts at 10:00 am. His job is to review the published

news and to fix typos, to analyse the information of the EF agency and the national news websites, and to update the newspaper with this information. At the same time, he checks the email. Subsequently, he access Google Statistics to observe the number of visits attracted the newspaper.

At 1:30 pm the editor continues the monitoring, drafting and updating work. At 3:30 pm, journalist Fabián Menéndez arrives to update the website until 8:30 pm. The correspondent from Manta city also helps in this task. The closing meeting takes place at 6:00 pm and is attended by all editors in which the cover and secondary news stories are chosen. At 6:30 pm the online editor reviews the print sections under his responsibility: Ecuador and International.

Usually, there updates are made every day: at 09:00 am, 2:00 pm and 7:00 pm. When the print edition is closed the design team uploads the news to the website and programs them to go public at midnight. Depending on the situation of the news there may be updates in the morning.

In terms of human resources, this is the first newspaper in the province of Manabí to have an editorial team of about 60 people, including the journalists from the print and digital versions of the newspaper and the *Manavision* television channel, owned by the same company. This whole team contributes news to the online edition. Journalists, editors, designers, graphic artists and the editor-in-chief work in the same physical space, but the activities are well defined. The newspaper is planning to unify the newsrooms in the future. The digital edition is currently run by one editor, two journalists and two webmasters.

b) News production

The editorial work has gone from craft work, i.e. a full transfer of the contents in the print version, to the production of news on a daily basis by reporters and their modification (taking into account to a certain extent the language of the Internet) by the editor [6] and two journalists from the online version. The news stories consist of a title, a subtitle, summary lead, and a body. In addition, news stories are extracted from the Efe news agency, with which the paper has an agreement, and other local and national media. News are written taking into account the topicality, relevance, and, being an provincial medium, the impact they might have on the interests of the people.

The editor is the only person who reviews and responds to users' comments (approving between 60 and 100 comments per day). Journalists are free to publish the news they consider to be convenient, provided they comply with the above-mentioned journalistic criteria.

Exclusive news are first published in the print version because it is the platform that produces more advertising revenue. All the news stories published in the newspaper are also posted on Twitter and Facebook. There is no live coverage of news events.

Cronica.com.ec

a) Work routines

The editorial team meets every day from 7:00 to 7:30 am to plan the news of that day. The online editor does not intervene but contributes news mostly extracted from the emails sent by users.

The work dynamics of the digital newsroom are set by the staff of the traditional newsroom, which is composed of a chief editor and four journalists. The job of the online editor is to update and maintain the news website. Fabricio Benavides, an IT student, is responsible for updating the social networks with news from the Internet. It is important to mention that these social networks are not continually updated (e.g. they are not updated on Sunday).

In terms of staff, this digital newspaper is currently run by an editor, who updates and maintains the website, and an intern who is in charge of updating the social networks with information posted on the Internet.

b) News production

At noon, once the print newspaper has been distributed, the editor updates the news website with the same news included in the traditional newspaper. The treatment of the information has not changed across the years. It presents the same news stories included in the traditional medium, and some news stories that are only uploaded on the website. The structure of the news includes a title and a body, and in some cases small pictures. News in this online newspaper are not open for comments, cannot be shared on the social networks and have no or audio and or video elements.

3. Discussion and conclusions

The observation and interviews carried out in the sample of four daily newspapers have allowed us to identify their news organisation and production routines. The testimonies from editors helped us to clearly reconstruct the importance of the different factors influencing the production of news.

What Mattelart and Stourdzé pointed out in the 1980s, about the change in the redistribution of functions in digital media, came true to some extent in the Ecuadorian media because they have a webmaster that is responsible for creating, editing and publishing content, taking as a reference the print newspaper. The opposite happens with the native digital media which, not having an analogue reference, organise their work according to their needs.

The Ecuadorian digital media have assimilated as a custom their journalistic routines and carry out news-production processes in a mechanical manner. There is a lack of participation from journalists in the decision-making processes, and in the redefinition and evaluation of the digital product.

The journalistic routines summarised by Shoemaker and Reese (1991) are evident in the routines of the Ecuadorian media. The work structure has been inherited by the traditional media. Journalists'

work is not final in the sample of digital newspapers under study as it happens in the traditional newspapers. Their production is delivered to an editor-in-chief and the latter delivers it to the webmaster of the news website.

The analysis of the selected sample indicates that the journalistic routines are similar among the national, regional and provincial digital newspapers, but are different in the local digital newspaper, given the different contexts in which it exists.

The organisation of newsrooms is consistent with the work dynamics of the media. Human resources are limited and poorly trained; however, they have succeeded in establishing organisational models with acceptable and important results in relation to the environment in which they exist.

The transition of the work of journalists from the traditional media to the digital platform presents a significant concern. The use of sources is still a worrying issue. Digital newspapers do not fact check the information frequently. This is mainly due to the media competition they face.

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4. Notes

[1] In this newspaper the observation was carried out during a single day, because its director did not allow us to observe the newsroom during 24 hours, as it had been planned.

[2] Results of the non-participant observation carried out in the newsroom of eluniverso.com on 6 June, 2011.

[3] Results of the non-participant observation carried out in the newsroom of eluniverso.com on 6 June, 2011.

[4] About 800 emails were answered per day.

[5] José García, the online editor, is also responsible for the national and international news sections of the print newspaper and the D 7 magazine.

[6] The profile of the editor is perhaps not appropriate; it is a person who has acquired knowledge and skills through training, but lacks professional education. The person has worked in this medium for 21 years and since July 2010 is in charge of the digital version and the Ecuador and International news sections of the traditional newspaper.

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