Article

Innovation in Digital Media beyond Technology: The Audience-Centered Approach and Pending Challenges

Sara Pérez-Seijo *<sup> and Alba Silva-Rodríguez

Department of Communication Sciences, Universidade de Santiago de Compostela,
15782 Santiago de Compostela, Spain; alba.silva@usc.es
* Correspondence: s.perez.seijo@usc.es

Abstract: In the digital scenario, where news media organizations face technological disruption, innovation has been identified as key to the survival of journalism. While legacy media, rooted in a traditional mindset, have reacted more slowly to the changes that have occurred, digital native media have been better able to engage with audiences and adapt to new distribution platforms. Given this scenario, this article examined the perception of experts in the field of communication and journalism—both journalists and scholars—regarding the approach to journalistic innovation in digital media (N = 11). Specifically, this research sought to identify areas where the need for innovation is perceived to be greater and to determine the pending challenges in this process of digital innovation. To address these purposes, a descriptive qualitative methodology was applied, using the focus group technique. The findings revealed that an audience-centered approach to innovation is proposed to escape technological determinism and respond effectively to the needs and demands of audiences. This perspective requires embracing diversity in content, advocating for new formats and narratives, and adapting to consumption patterns on new platforms. There is a perception of incremental innovation in digital media, focusing on the introduction of small improvements and calling for a slowdown in processes for greater effectiveness. However, the experts noted a lack of pedagogy within organizations, of collaboration with key sectors of the industry, of investment in human capital, of qualitative audience measurement methods, and even of innovation in business models.

Keywords: innovation; media innovation; journalism innovation; news innovation; digital media; audience; technology; content production; news content; social media

1. An Introduction to Innovation in Journalism and Digital Media

Journalism—undergoing structural changes that redefine its role as a profession, practice, and product (Spyridou et al. 2013)—has always been vulnerable to technological evolution (Pavlik 2001). In the digital scenario, technology has been a driving force behind many of the transformations, setting the pace of change and shaping a convergent, multi-platform, mobile, and ubiquitous environment. However, most of the changes and innovations in the media industry result from both internal and external pressures to media organizations (Prenger and Deuze 2017).

In the digital era, innovation has been highlighted as a key factor for the survival of journalistic media (García-Avilés et al. 2018b; Hermida and Young 2021), constituting a core element in many initiatives aimed at saving journalism. It is attributed a fundamental role in digital newsrooms (Paulussen 2016). Specifically, the loss of audience; the increased competition from platforms, with the Big Five standing out: Google, Amazon, Facebook, Microsoft, and Apple; the crisis of traditional business models; and the constant evolution of technology compel media outlets to be more creative, diverse (regarding formats), and innovative than before to ensure their viability (Koivula et al. 2023) in terms of revenue generation and audience building (Pavlik 2013a).

In the media ecosystem, traditional media outlets have been the slowest to grasp the importance of digital transformation in responding to technological disruption (Ashuri 2013; García-Avilés et al. 2016), as well as in recognizing that innovation can contribute to the organization's sustainability (Santos-Silva 2021). Several studies have indicated that legacy media newsrooms, grounded in a more conservative mindset compared to digital media (Boczkowski 2005), are more resistant to adopting innovation, slower to react to changes, and even less creative than their digital-native competitors (Ryfe 2013; Larrondo et al. 2016; Usher 2014).

The lack of innovation in traditional media is attributed to organizational isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). In particular, their newsrooms tend towards homogeneity and mimicry, launching small projects or establishing units for experimentation and digital innovation to stay competitive in the market, but without a clear and research-informed organizational strategy to address innovation (Lowrey 2011; Villi et al. 2020). As a consequence, media outlets tend to succumb to technological hype or the "shiny things syndrome" (Posetti 2018), sometimes due to external industry pressure, adopting new technologies without a purposeful strategy and critical reflective practice beforehand regarding the meaning of innovation within the media firm (Evans 2018).

On the contrary, some scholars point out that digital-native media outlets have been better able to adapt to the disruptive environment due to their inherent digital nature. Many of these journalistic initiatives born on the internet managed to connect with the interests of new audiences, adapt to new platforms (novel ways of distribution), and promote more flexible workflows (Sádaba-Chalezquer et al. 2016), while also demonstrating a greater willingness for experimentation and innovation from an early stage (García-Avilés 2017).

Accordingly, this study aimed to explore the perception of innovation in digital media among journalists and communication and journalism scholars, delving into the areas where changes are considered to be most necessary and into the remaining challenges to face the innovation processes in the digital scenario. We present the findings from a qualitative analysis based on the focus group technique. At the empirical level, our purpose is to contribute to a clearer articulation between innovation theories and journalism studies, as well as to delve into the study of journalistic innovation from a more holistic perspective. Journalism studies persist as a discipline intrinsically centered on production (Swart et al. 2022). Therefore, this research aspires to expand that perspective, encompassing broader aspects that enable a more comprehensive understanding of innovation in digital media, specifically within the Spanish context.

1.1. Definition of Innovation in News Media

In its simplest definition, innovation refers to a practice, an idea, or an object perceived as new (Rogers 2003). Transposed to the field of news media, the concept of media innovation has been the subject of disparate interpretations and approaches in academic literature—organizational, content-related, technological, social, etc. However, far from contributing to its concretization, the breadth of conceptualizations has resulted in a lack of consensus and precision regarding its definition (Bleyen et al. 2014). Even within the media industry, different actors hold diverse opinions about what innovation is (Donders et al. 2011).

Within the framework of media business, innovation has been linked to responding to changes in the environment and adapting to a new strategic environment (Küng 2017). From the perspective of transformative value and improvement in company performance, García-Avilés et al. (2019) conceptualize media innovation as "the capacity to react to changes in products, processes and services through the use of creative skills that allow a problem or need to be identified and resolved in a way that results in the introduction of something new that adds value to customers and thereby fosters the viability of the media organization" (pp. 3-4)

In digital newsrooms specifically, Schmitz Weiss and Domingo (2010) perceive innovation as the development of new practices, products, or technological tools aimed at

improving or facilitating diverse processes such as distribution, processing, acquisition, display, or storage of journalistic content. Nevertheless, it does not necessarily entail a completely new invention; it can also refer to the combination of existing resources, processes, or ideas (Storsul and Krumsvik 2013). Beyond this, for Briggs (2013), innovation in journalism can be summarized as "trying new ways to create a better journalism experience for the reader using digital technology".

Understanding that innovation in journalism represents a process that incorporates new approaches and practices, Pavlik (2013b) emphasizes the importance of maintaining both a commitment to high ethical standards and to the quality of services and products. In this vein, Posetti (2018) also underscores the need to combine new ways of doing things with foundational practices and core principles of journalism to develop sustainable models of innovation.

The definitions surrounding the concept of innovation share common points despite the diversity of approaches. In this regard, Dogruel (2013) identifies four constitutive attributes of media innovation: its newness (to the market, the consumer, the organization, etc.), its economic or societal exploitation (related to product or process innovation), its communicative implications (performance of communication processes), and its character as a complex social process (inserted within a broader context of societal actors and institutions). Adopting a more theoretical perspective, Steensen (2009) argues that innovation in digital media depends on five factors: newsroom autonomy, the relevance of new technology, the role of management, newsroom work culture, and innovative individuals.

On the other hand, and in a more specific way, scholars have studied the phenomenon of innovation from various perspectives (Belair-Gagnon and Steinke 2020), such as business models (Marín-Sanchiz and Carvajal-Prieto 2019), newsroom organization (Schmitz Weiss and Domingo 2010), news genres and journalistic formats (Lopezosa et al. 2022; Sixto-García et al. 2023), new professional competencies (Ramírez de la Piscina et al. 2016), new channels of information dissemination (Guallar et al. 2021; Sedano and Palomo 2018), production processes (García-Avilés et al. 2018a), the impact of technologies (Spyridou et al. 2013), or the management of interactivity (Barredo-Ibáñez and Díaz-Cerveró 2017), among other fields.

Despite the different dimensions that can be considered when addressing innovation in the media, some authors have criticized the dominant reliance on technological advancements in its conceptualization (Barnhurst 2012). This technology-based approach requires a more profound reflection on the transformations it brings about and the market dynamics introduced by tech companies: "Yet, the concept of innovation itself has received little critical scrutiny. Slippery in its usage, innovation predominantly connotes either technical changes in news production and distribution or changes in funding models for journalism" (Creech and Nadler 2018, p. 183). Furthermore, there has also been a call to understand the social factor of technical innovation (Bruns 2014), moving away from simple technological determinism, as it is "journalism that gives technology purpose, shape, perspective, meaning, and significance, not the other way around" (Zelizer 2019, p. 343).

1.2. Journalism, Platforms, and Audiences

The intersection between journalism and technology has been extensively explored in the academic realm. Recent studies confirm the growing influence of technological advancements in the media industry, with their implementation in newsrooms aimed at enhancing the quality of products and expanding their dissemination (Schapals and Porlezza 2020). In Spain alone, two-thirds of journalistic innovations introduced between 2014 and 2021 are associated with the application of technology for the conception or development of the idea (Arias-Robles et al. 2023).

Simultaneously, the dependence on external companies within the media industry is accentuated, underscoring the significant role that platforms, also referred to as digital intermediaries (González-Tosat and Sádaba-Chalezquer 2021), fundamentally play in the production and distribution of news content (Chua and Westlund 2021; Nielsen and Ganter

2022; Simon 2022). Consequently, in the Western context, the media industry finds itself immersed in a process termed "platformization", stemming from the profound reliance that media outlets have developed on digital platform companies, such as the commonly known as GAFAM—Google/Alphabet, Apple, Meta (formerly Facebook), Microsoft, and Amazon. These platform-based businesses (Srnicek 2016) enable content developers to track and create detailed profiles of users' activities and preferences (Nieborg and Poell 2019).

Platformization has been defined as "the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems, fundamentally affecting the operations of media industries and production practices" (Nieborg and Poell 2019, p. 85). Within the journalistic field, this phenomenon is identified as a sixth stage in the digital landscape, resulting from the "interrelationships established between Big Tech and legacy media organizations or native digital journalistic entities, with implications for production processes, management, financial sustainability, circulation and distribution of journalistic information, and audience reach and participation" (Barbosa 2023).

Some scholars have emphasized that the introduction of artificial intelligence and automation technologies in news media seems to increase the journalistic industry's dependence on external technological players, primarily due to the high costs associated with developing AI-based systems and resource constraints (Simon 2023). The role of these companies in news organizations' processes can materialize in two main ways: through the acquisition of their tools, services, or infrastructures, or by considering them potential research and development partners (Simon 2022). The impact of artificial intelligence and automation on digital media innovation has been addressed by several studies (Noain-Sánchez 2022; Túñez-López et al. 2021),with some relating it to a broader cultural shift stemming from the so-called hi-tech journalism (López-García and Vizoso 2021). The significance of these technologies in newsrooms has steadily grown since the 2010s (Pérez-Seijo et al. 2023), integrating into numerous processes and tasks primarily in pursuit of cost reduction and increased efficiency (De Lara et al. 2022; Diakopoulos 2019).

However, and beyond technology, the current environment of the media industry requires a constant production of content ready to meet the demands of the audience (Kosterich 2021). Thus, some journalistic companies pursue a model of innovation closer to the audience, giving them a more prominent role in the conception and design of products and services. In the mid-2010s, Lewis and Westlund (2015) estimated that the journalistic profession was transitioning from a production-centered approach to a user-centered one.

This shift has been facilitated by the growing availability of quantitative data—for example, through digital metrics—about the behavior and preferences of the audience, allowing for a more significant adaptation of production, distribution, and communication to the needs and demands of the public to maintain their interest (García-Avilés et al. 2023; Ferrer-Conill and Tandoc 2018). This reality is depicted in a study by De-Lima-Santos and Mesquita (2021), where it is noted that data journalists in Latin America distance themselves from technological determinism and seek to contribute to an audience-centric approach to narrative innovation in newsrooms. Some innovation labs also adopt user-led approaches, although "the suggested focus for activities is heavily dependent on meeting user expectations and user-centered design" (Mills and Wagemans 2021, p. 1479).

1.3. Typologies of Media Innovation

Media innovation can encompass different aspects of the media, ranging from the introduction of new formats or technologies to changes in business models. A number of studies have attempted to catalogue the different forms that innovation can take, as well as the mode or degrees in which these changes occur within the companies. Among the available typologies is that of Lindmark et al. (2013), who articulate media innovation in two dimensions: on one hand, the type of innovation, which can refer to content (theme, message, form, or style), the way it is consumed, the production and distribution, or the business model (including the organization of an industrial sector); on the other hand, the temporal aspect (innovation maturity or closeness to market), which can be long-term,

medium-term, or short-term. Another classification that has been applied to media outlets is the four Ps of innovation proposed by Francis and Bessant (2005): product, process, position, and paradigmatic innovation. The same has occurred with the classification outlined in the Oslo Manual (OECD/Eurostat 2005), whose quadruple division—product, process, marketing method, and organizational method—has also been applied to the study of innovation within media organizations.

Storsul and Krumsvik (2013) have argued that at least ten key factors influence innovations in the media: market opportunities and user behavior, regulation, technology, behavior of competitors, leadership and vision, industry norms, organizational structure, capacity and resources, company strategy, and culture and creativity. In this connection, Belair-Gagnon and Steinke (2020) identified six types of generative mechanisms of innovation in journalism: "participative (open, distributed, networked, and collaborative); normative (friction, resistance, and normalization); disruptive (quick change and fractured); diversity (gender, race, disabilities, etc.); emotive (humor, fun, and play); and experimentative (disruptive)" (p. 7).

Not all innovations are equally important. According to the degree of change they bring about, a distinction is made between radical and incremental innovations. On the one hand, radical innovations involve a sudden breakthrough with regard to the previous state (products, processes, or services), creating major disruptive changes (Schumpeter 1934). In fact, these generally introduce a paradigm shift in the market segment, altering the current business model. On the other hand, incremental innovations refer to minor changes or improvements to already existing products, processes, services, or methods. Most of these innovations go unnoticed by the audience and rarely affect how companies are structured or the dynamics inside them (Mulgan and Albury 2003). Compared to radical innovation, incremental ones are more common in journalism (Storsul and Krumsvik 2013).

2. Materials and Methods

One of the main challenges that media outlets face today is the management of innovation, whose main objective is to achieve greater profitability in organizations; better adaptation to changes and market trends; optimization of production processes; and, ultimately, operational efficiency. In this context, the objective of this research was to analyze the perception of the journalistic and academic sectors regarding the approach to journalistic innovation in digital media. To address this purpose more precisely, it is specified in two specific objectives:

- To identify specific areas where there is a greater perceived need for innovation in digital media.
- To determine the challenges that are still considered pending when addressing journalistic innovation in digital media.

The design of this research is based on a qualitative methodology. Specifically, the data collection technique known as a focus group was applied, "whose goal is to collect the maximum amount of information possible in a predetermined time about the perceptions or attitudes of the group of people that has been intended to be represented by the formation of this particular group" (De Miguel 2005, p. 265).

The focus group took place at the Faculty of Communication Sciences of the University of Santiago de Compostela (Spain) in November 2022. A total of 11 individuals with extensive and diverse experience in the field of communication and journalism participated (see Table 1). In particular, two different profiles were represented: on one hand, academic experts specialized in digital journalism with a professional background (N = 6), and on the other hand, media managers or professionals in the field of journalism and digital communication (N = 5). Of the total participants, nine were men and two were women. The authors of this article participated in the session, with one serving as the moderator and the other as an observer. The participants' interventions unfolded in several rounds, where different issues derived from the scientific literature on the study subject were addressed.

Table 1. List of participants.

Participant	Gender	Sector
P1	Female	Professor and researcher specialized in local journalism.
P2	Male	Public service media.
P3	Male	Digital communication agency.
P4	Male	Professor and researcher specialized in political communication and misinformation.
P5	Male	Digital native media.
P6	Male	Professor and researcher specialized in corporate communication and social media.
P7	Female	Professor and researcher specialized in television and audiences.
P8	Male	Digital native media.
P9	Male	Legacy media.
P10	Male	Professor and researcher specialized in business models in the news industry and social media. Board member of a press association.
P11	Male	Professor and researcher specialized in radio and television news.

Own elaboration.

Having obtained explicit consent from the participants, the session was recorded for subsequent transcription. A thematic analysis of the qualitative information extracted from the focus group was conducted using the ATLAS.ti 9 software, ensuring greater systematic coding of the data and better exploitation and optimization of the results obtained (Sabariego-Puig et al. 2014).

3. Results

The following are the results extracted from the focus group. Firstly, the participants' perspectives on the direction that innovation in digital media should take were examined. Secondly, the challenges that journalism companies face in terms of innovation were identified.

3.1. An Audience-Centered Approach

Upon analyzing the results, a consensus was identified regarding a central idea: technological determinism has dominated the majority of debates, approaches, and even applications concerning journalistic innovation in digital media. This reality, also reflected in the academic sphere, as perceived by scholars, with a high volume of research primarily focused on technological innovation, concerns participants for two main reasons. First, because, although technology often plays a significant role in the implementation of innovations, it is assigned an excessively dominant role at the expense of journalistic quality. Participants emphasized that it should be conceived as a complementary tool for introducing changes and new approaches in products, processes, or services, aimed at enhancing journalistic practice and content offerings. Second, sometimes technology is introduced primarily driven by the disruption it has caused in the market or the hype promoted by the technology industry, aiming to position itself as a pioneering media in the introduction of technological advances and developments.

> *"Typically, the innovation process tends to start in reverse: there is a technology, and we test it, even if it's not useful at all. The tool must serve a purpose"* (P2).

> *"Digital newspapers have a difficult relationship with innovation. They lag behind. Almost everything that was implemented did not originate within the media organizations, especially in terms of technology. It was developed elsewhere and adapted to the media [. . .]. When media outlets began to engage in innovation and established departments or structures for innovation, such as interactive infographics, they performed well in terms of awards and brand image but were a disaster in terms of audience engagement"* (P5).

In the face of this context, and in a digitally evolving landscape by definition, participants expressed a unanimous opinion: digital journalistic media should embrace an

audience-centered innovation approach. This entails utilizing the resources and tools available to the company to listen to the demands and issues of the audience and respond to those identified needs, primarily through an offering of tailored, distinctive, and useful content and products for the public.

"Innovation must focus on audiences. Fortunately, digitization allows us to know at all times what the needs of audiences are, what they are asking for. That doesn't mean you have to hand them things on a platter, but you do know where they're going. Thanks to analytics specialists, we can know every second what the audience is demanding. I think the important thing is to focus on innovation and provide the means to meet that demand. The user has to be at the center" (P9).

Participants consider that this audience-centered strategy, which should permeate editorial decision making, should revolve primarily around three fundamental pillars:

1. "News Diet": diverse news agendas, approaches, and voices that meet the information demands and interests of different audiences. This involves effectively adapting the content and product offerings, including the topics covered and the approaches adopted, to reach, engage, and connect in an effective way with different audience segments, all while maintaining journalistic quality.

2. Ways to tell and represent the news reality: incorporating new narratives and formats to respond the needs of the audience that the media outlet intends to address.

"To explore new formats and new approaches. Media outlets are losing the young audience, which is turning to alternative channels because they want new formats, points of view, and content [. . .]. We lack investment in the audience of the present and the future" (P10).

3. Adaptation to new consumption dynamics and patterns, especially on new platforms, such as Instagram or TikTok. This involves exploring their communicative and informative potential and experimenting with content tailored to each channel. However, participants stressed the challenges that dependence on third parties poses in terms of control over the audience and digital sovereignty.

"If we talk about new audiences, the problem is that we are not reaching them, and we have to go to other platforms. What is happening is that in some media outlets, to reach that younger audience, the profile of the journalist is the young journalist with digital skills. These are more personalized stories, narrated in the first person. In this case, it's not about a more technical specialization, like data journalism. It's about understanding the language of the new platforms" (P1).

"Structures that are flatter and more based on the consumption of social networks are becoming increasingly effective. And that is content innovation, that communication. But it is very difficult to develop something new because it is challenging to build an audience. That is a big problem: we are stuck behind third-party networks that are constantly changing the rules of the game" (P5).

"Vice or Playground were dependent on the traffic generated by Facebook, and suddenly, Facebook said 'Goodbye!', it dropped by half, and they had a big problem. It's not innovation; it's trying to save the day by leveraging what already exists" (P3).

For many of the professionals, innovation in digital media should be conceived as a kind of staircase, a gradual process where each step represents a new editorial decision made in pursuit of a quality final product that aligns with the needs of the target audience:

"In order of implementation, the first step would begin with the narrative: what content is more attractive to engage readers? This connects with new formats: what new formats can I experiment with to reach the audience I want? We have a significant problem because we're not reaching young people, for example. And this ultimately leads to thinking about new technologies: what can I do to have a good narrative or content that

reaches the new audience with a specific format? Why? Because I want to do business, expand the business base" (P8).

"The main elements of innovation are audience, products, processes, and technology. Firstly, we work for the audience, so we need to know what they want. To reach them, we must offer products that solve problems [. . .] To create those products, processes need to change. This requires changing schedules, roles, routines, staff, functions, etc. Finally, tools are needed, which are usually technological" (P2).

Hence, some participants weigh in on the notion that innovation cannot be conceived without a cross-cutting character, serving as a tool to address the challenges of the digital landscape and achieve effective adaptation to the constant changes in the media environment. These professionals believe that innovation should not be confined to a specific department or area of the media outlet but should be understood as a process that cuts across all functions and levels, involving as far as possible all members of the organization.

"In innovation, there has to be a factor of transversality: that all members of an organization are on the same page and move at the same pace when it comes to innovating, carrying out. . . capturing audience interests, creating content" (P9).

"Innovation affects services, content, business models, organizational charts, job roles. . . Innovation is a process that impacts everything" (P5).

3.2. Outstanding Challenges in Digital Media Innovation

According to the participants, digital media currently face several pending challenges in the realm of innovation. Scholars and practitioners identify at least six main forms: internal pedagogy, external collaboration, investment, slowdown, sustainability, and qualitative methods.

Firstly, some participants pointed out that there is a lack of internal pedagogy in media organizations when addressing innovation in the company. They believe that any introduction of a new or improved product, process, service, or organizational method should be accompanied by a clear and understandable explanation for the organization's members. This is to prevent rejection—sometimes associated with job losses or the elimination of professional roles—and to facilitate the understanding and acceptance of proposed changes. It involves adopting a comprehensive educational strategy focused on explaining the processes of change while promoting an innovative culture within the organization.

On the other hand, part of the experts and professionals consider that a pending challenge is to approach innovation in a collaborative way. This involves advocating for an open innovation model based on collaboration with other actors and external partners (production companies, advertisers, start-ups, etc.) to foster creativity, efficiency, and the ability to adapt to the constant transformations of the digital scenario. In this strategic approach, they assign a central role to universities as research environments: scholars can provide valuable insights into understanding trends, audience preferences, and changes in the media landscape, while contributing to the development of new ideas and approaches at the same time.

"Perhaps it is time to synchronize clocks between university and business. More collaboration, more mutual listening, more transfer. Be that laboratory or observatory they are waiting for" (P10).

"It's difficult to reach a revolutionary process alone; to get out of the bubble. These open innovation processes benefit everyone" (P2).

In this line, investment is also mentioned as an essential complement to innovation processes, not only in technology, but also in research and human capital. The latter focuses on the recruitment of specialized profiles and a commitment to developing digital skills to meet the demands and needs of a segmented and disengaged audience.

"Innovation goes hand in hand with other 'I's: investigation [research] and investment. The latter has two components: the technological component and the human component,

which is fundamental. Where does innovation come from? Through technology or people? For me, through people. The three 'I's but with an 'H' for human" (P4).

"Most media outlets face obstacles to invest in research. And they hardly have the minimum human resources to produce journalistic content. Only the major media outlets can do it" (P9).

"Investing human research time and a lot of dialogue. Here, universities also have a lot to contribute" (P7).

Fourthly, the need to slow down the innovation processes is brought to the forefront. Instead of rushing to adopt new trends or technologies driven by hype, the wow-effect, or industry pressure, there is an advocacy for careful reflection and the gradual introduction of changes.

"When an idea this comes with great intensity, it's not innovation; it's a copy. It's important to incorporate routines into the different innovative elements that already exist. We must not confuse excitement with innovation" (P2).

Fifthly, some participants point out as an urgent challenge the need to innovate in terms of business models in search of profitability and even survival. Here, there is also a call for slowing down and deliberate decision making in the pursuit of sustainable models.

"Some media outlets are moving at a very fast pace, and we haven't finished testing something, and then something new comes up, and we change, forgetting what we were doing yesterday. That's the fault of speed. Many times, we have the feeling that everything is moving very fast, and we don't finish testing if something works. Something new comes up, and we change without checking if the previous model was working" (P10).

"TikTok visualizations are very good in terms of engagement. In terms of revenue? I'm not so sure if it's enough for survival" (P6).

One of the strengths of the new digital context is the ability to understand the audience's behavior better than ever and, therefore, know what works best. However, some participants also emphasize the importance of using qualitative methods to get a deeper and more detailed understanding of the needs, preferences, and expectations of audiences. This, to varying degrees, also implies an investment.

"Listening to the audience is not just about mapping the instant digital footprint. It doesn't allow us to move forward. As part of innovation, we should opt for more qualitative methods, not merely surveys, to listen to the audience. Micro- and macro-communities with the audience and interest groups from which to involve people. Seeking that value with the audience" (P7).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This work sought to address the perception of innovation in digital media among news media professionals and communication and journalism scholars. The academic literature has extensively focused on the transformations occurring in legacy media (García-Avilés 2021), while the study of innovation in digital media constitutes a still-emerging area. Therefore, the purpose of this article was to generate a deeper understanding of how media experts—both from a professional and academic perspective—comprehend innovation in the digital media ecosystem, focusing the study on the areas considered most crucial and the challenges still perceived as pending.

Technological disruption impacts the media industry, often setting the pace of change as a driver of change (Crossan and Apaydin 2010) and pressuring news outlets to experiment with the latest developments or advances in the market (Posetti 2018). However, this indiscriminate technological adoption sometimes occurs at the expense of the quality of content and services offered. This represents a break in a crucial commitment during the process of incorporating new practices and approaches (Pavlik 2013b).

The impact of digitization on the media and what is known as polymediatization has transformed the rules governing the media industry (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). The latter concept refers to the process by which disruptive technologies created in other industries transform the rules of the media ecosystem (Gholampour Rad and Nisar 2017). In these circumstances, the cognitive abilities of organizational leaders are vital for understanding the dynamics of this context and triggering strategic changes. Datafication in the current communicative context also poses a challenge to media and digital literacy, especially concerning the involvement of young people and their civic and democratic engagement (Elisenda Estanyol et al. 2023). Furthermore, the impact of artificial intelligence on journalism (AI) implies new challenges and opportunities for both creators and consumers, who must acquire new competencies and skills, as well as a heightened ethical and social awareness regarding the responsible use of AI (Davenport and Mittal 2022).

Building upon the objectives outlined at the beginning of this research, three key areas (O1) were identified that set the roadmap for the media when implementing innovation: audiences, content, and technologies. This implies adopting an approach primarily centered on the audience (Wöhrl et al. 2023); working on the editorial level to diversify topics and perspectives; and, finally, experimenting with narratives and formats by adapting content to digital platforms and the demands of users. However, the results of this study have also enabled the identification of a series of challenges (O2) summarized as follows: to collaborate, to raise awareness, to listen, to invest, and to reflect.

Collaboration, supported by the framework of open innovation (Aitamurto and Lewis 2013), is related to what other authors have termed the social factor (Mills et al. 2023). On one hand, it involves internal collaboration to build trust within organizations (Porcu et al. 2022), aiming to prevent opposition and skepticism to change within newsrooms and raise awareness among so-called "resister" professionals (García-Avilés et al. 2019). Many innovative initiatives introduced do not originate within the media organizations, so there is also a demand for investment in human capital with digital skills to understand and adapt to the demands of the different audience segments, especially the younger ones. Traditional audience measurement methods are perceived as insufficient in the current scenario, and qualitative techniques are proposed to better understand the needs of these audiences and personalize the offerings, both from a production and distribution perspective.

This idea has already been endorsed in previous research (García-Avilés et al. 2023; Wöhrl et al. 2023; Rodríguez-Vázquez et al. 2020; Mills and Wagemans 2021), emphasizing the crucial value of integrating users in all stages of the innovation processes: exploration, ideation, creation, and testing. There is a need to listen to audiences and respond to their demands and expectations with tailored, useful, and quality products.

This preference for a user-led innovation rather than a technology-first approach seeks to value the audience, understood in the current scenario as the core of the revenue model, and build a sustainable relationship (Rodríguez-Vázquez et al. 2020). Nevertheless, the dependence on third parties, under the umbrella of the platformization of digital journalism, poses risks in terms of independence and loss of control by media companies (D'Haenens et al. 2022). On the other hand, the role of external partnership is also relevant (connecting with other entities such as universities and other key players in the industry to adapt more efficiently to changes and promote creativity), addressing the process from a collaborative standpoint. All of this is aimed at ensuring the sustainability of media business models.

The results of this work stress the importance of investing in technology, research, and human capital. However, there is an emphasis on the need to approach the innovation process gradually and thoughtfully, without being carried away by the emotion that implementing these changes may generate. Referred to in academic literature as incremental innovation (Krumsvik et al. 2019), it focuses on the introduction of subtle changes and small improvements in products. This requires a slowing down of the innovation processes, introducing reflection along the way, and adapting appropriately to the novelties and changes adopted. However, this strategy must also encompass transversality for an

effective adaptation to the changing digital landscape, ensuring that the innovative mindset permeates the company culture and reaches all areas of the media organization.

Finally, regarding the limitations of the study, it should be noted that this is an exploratory analysis based on a small sample conditioned by the applied technique and therefore it does not represent the global reality of the analyzed phenomenon. In this regard, there are future research avenues that could focus on addressing this topic systematically, complementing the chosen method with other qualitative techniques that help define the reality of organizations.

Understanding the key elements that facilitate innovation processes in newsrooms is essential for academics to gain a deeper understanding of innovation in this environment. At the same time, a better comprehension of these innovative processes provides news organizations with the ability to reinvent themselves and improve their long-term survival prospects. Therefore, this study could serve as a starting point for future research in this area, highlighting the challenges and issues emerging in the media landscape in Spain.

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