Advertising and Sustainability in Ecuadorian Digital Media: La Posta and El Comercio on Instagram

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Abstract. The transition to digitalization is a challenge for the media in social networks. This study reviews the situation of the Instagram accounts of two Ecuadorian media: La Posta and El Comercio, considering the transformation of digital journalism or cyberjournalism, new narrative forms, and hypertext, multimedia, and interactivity as characteristic elements of contemporary digital journalism. On this basis, advertising in this social network is reviewed by analyzing 780 posts in both media. The relationship between the publication and the advertising content is described, and the challenge of sustainability and profitability of traditional and native-digital media in social networks is posed. The study identifies the most frequently used native advertising formats and the emerging creation of new journalistic forms.

Keywords: native advertising · digital journalism · media

1 Introduction

The widespread use of the Internet in recent years has also impacted journalism [1]. In this new media scenario, information strategies, narrative schemes, and the relationship with the audience have been modified [2]. Some authors point out that due to the massive consumption of technology, communication has had to be configured differently [3]. The digital journalism that emerges in this context raises some points related to the democratization of information, the potential market it can reach, and the new business model to promote sustainability.

The consolidation of digital journalism began 25 years ago [4], and since then, it has been studied in different theoretical frameworks. Digital journalism has also been defined as digital media, cyber journalism, and online journalism, showing its many edges and variants. Although there is no single term for it, digital journalism refers to the different forms of journalism that use digital resources.

There are several studies on the relationship between journalism and digital resources and the changes this has brought. [5–7] consider that we are facing significant transformations, not only because of the massive emergence of new digital media but also because of the changes that traditional media have had to make to adapt to the new digital reality, and the emergence of multiple devices, formats, and resources to reach the public,

followers, and audience, without forgetting the mechanisms of economic profitability such as payment for advertising or subscription.

[8] highlights the platform, temporality, scope, ownership, authorship, and approach as characteristic criteria of digital media. Although there is a close relationship between the press and the audience through digital channels and platforms, its main characteristic is the use of websites, blogs, and social networks (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Twitch, etc.), demonstrating that hyper textuality, multimediality, and interactivity are aspects of digital journalism [4, 9]. These aspects allow a better understanding of the environment in which digital journalism operates.

This article addresses the role of interactivity today because this feature is related to the conditions and actions of sustainability and profitability of digital media. This research raises an exercise of exploratory and descriptive character in two Ecuadorian media (La Posta and El Comercio) on Instagram, considering publications that include advertising in the regular creation of news in different formats to analyze the strategies implemented. This study describes the publications of the Instagram channel of the analyzed media, contrasting the formats of traditional media with those of digital native media.

1.1 Advertising Challenges of Digital Journalism

According to the National Multipurpose Household Survey (Follow-up to the National Development Plan), in Ecuador in 2020, 70.7% of the population had access to the Internet, and 44.6% of the population used social networks on smartphones. Regarding Instagram, [10] estimates that there are 6.2 million Instagram users.

The widespread use of technology through mobile devices is one of the challenges facing advertising, as it impacts not only advertising design but also the creation of content to attract the attention of users surfing the Internet. "New audiences use the media to be informed, but above all to be entertained, relying on contents that are at the service of enjoyment and not persuasion" [11]; the principles of user interaction and participation are based on these aspects.

The concepts related to display advertising and native advertising allow a better understanding of the phenomenon mentioned. On the one hand, display advertising is a format (super banner, skin, sky capper, pop up, floor ad) in which ads usually include images, text, audio, and video and are found on web pages and social networks, in the margin of the content presented (start or end) or in the middle of the content. When users click on them, they are redirected to the landing page. In this business model, four formats value the ratio of user impressions on the displayed content: cost per thousand (CPM), cost per click (CPC), cost per action (CPA), or a flat rate. [12] points out that one of the most relevant aspects of this type of advertising is the CTR (percentage of clicks over the number of impressions); for this reason, the levels of interaction generated with audiences are relevant. For this reason, the levels of interaction generated with the audiences are relevant, for which the application of engagement, which relates the total number of followers to the total number of interactions, will be relevant.

This type of advertising has advantages such as the possibility of measuring results, attractive and editable formats, the ease of segmenting audiences, and generating intelligent and interactive advertising [12, 13] points out that Instagram's algorithm considers

the following aspects to present advertising to users: interest, interaction, time of use, popularity among users, frequency, and value. Due to the complexity of this algorithm, brands advertise on accounts with a significant number of users.

On the other hand, native advertising "takes on the specific form and appearance of the publisher's editorial content" [14]. [15] describes it as a form of advertising in which the advertising content is integrated into the platform and the format of the editorial content surrounding the ad. [16] defines it as a form of advertising that adapts to the editorial environment of the platform on which it is published to enhance the user experience and increase the relevance of the advertising content. [17] defines it as a form of advertising in which advertising content adapts to the format, quality, and context of the surrounding editorial content to provide a non-intrusive and valuable advertising experience for the user. One of the precepts of this type of advertising is that it is less invasive and is often not considered promotional content. However, native advertising has been criticized because it could damage the ethical process of information generation and detract from the seriousness of the information content audiences receive.

According to [11], there are different native advertising formats:

In-feed ads: advertising formats integrated into the timeline of the different social networks mixed with the rest of the publications promoted by the network of contacts of the user who receives the advertising impact.

Paid search ads: the pioneers of native advertising were search engines incorporating sponsored searches. Sponsored links in search engines are an example of native advertising as they are integrated with the search results and are only differentiated by their location (before the natural results) and color.

Recommendation widgets: small applications of the advertiser located on the homepage of the media or in any of the spaces of the site, which redirect the user to a landing page created by the advertiser.

Promoted listings: native advertising that does not usually appear on editorial content pages; it is more common on search engines, apps, or e-commerce portals. Products with a promoted content heading are displayed in the same way as other products sold in the space where they are advertised.

Content-integrated ads: formats perfectly integrated into the editorial line of the media in which they are published, adopting the same form as the rest of the content offered. These formats are similar to the advertorials of the traditional press that should arouse interest and attract users' attention as editorial content does (p. 213).

The digital context includes concepts related to engagement and the intention to monetize in social networks. Some studies, among which [18] stand out, have analyzed and reviewed cases in which emerging business models are applied in digital and native media.

The media must understand the behavior of audiences in the digital environment and consider engagement as the ability to react to the content published, considering views, visits, clicks, comments, and likes. The concepts of relevance and engagement are related. Castells, Pont, and Codina (2022) define relevance as the capacity to influence society by generating public opinion, considering its visibility on the Internet. Considering what these authors state, the strategy implemented by the media is regarded as the most relevant aspect. Engagement is defined as users' participation in activities involving interaction

with a brand through social networks, including publications, comments, and hashtags [20]. Although there is a formula to calculate engagement, more is needed to effectively determine the relationship between audience and followers with specific publications. This is because the digital context is mobile, and there may be interactions from users who are not necessarily followers. This suggests that the concept of engagement also implies the expression of a relationship of loyalty.

2 Methodology

A mixed research design was applied using content and discourse analysis. For this purpose, two media were sampled in the social network Instagram: La Posta and El Comercio. This is an exploratory and descriptive study. [21] state that methodological exploration is necessary to equip, adjust, reformulate, and create procedures and instruments. Methodological reconstruction not only needs external information from theoretical postulates; the method needs information that the sociocultural context (the object) provides to the research.

[21] following Verón, points out that research cannot be done without empiricism when it comes to communication. For this reason, all publications from October 2022 were reviewed, and those that included advertising content within the informative content (news, reports, reels, infographics, memes, etc.) were selected. To evaluate engagement, the formula used is: total interactions over total followers times 100.

The content analysis was performed using a matrix that collects information and investigates the content of the publications made by the accounts under study, considering the categories to analyze the following content quantitatively and qualitatively: media, date, publication title, format, elements published, number of likes, number of comments, number of reproductions, use of meme, type of response, advertising, and sponsor.

Publications that included advertising were identified and categorized according to [11]: in-feed ads, promoted listings and paid search ads, widgets, and content-integrated ads.

For analysis of the results, MAXQDA analysis software was used to code, interpret and present the data.

3 Results

La Posta is a multimedia digital newspaper that was founded in 2017. This platform provides content on social networks for the audience to be informed. It is also an advertising platform that sells creativity and impact, not only through advertising space but also through the publication of journalistic content (Posta, 2023). Its principal shareholders are Anderson Alejandro Boscán Pico and Luis Eduardo Vivanco Arias. As a result of its activities in 2020, the company had a profit of 67,266.99 USD.

The value and originality of La Posta are based on the following:

a. Originality and frontality in the published contents and using transmediality tools.
b. 64% of its readers use it as a means of contrast (Salvatierra, 2020).

c. The main differentiating characteristic is the construction of advertising spaces that are not static, cold, and lacking data (Posta, 2022).

La Posta provides an advertising service in two of its most relevant segments on YouTube and advertises in its publications on Instagram and other social networks.

Grupo El Comercio C.A. was founded in 1906. Its objective is to contribute to the development of Ecuador in a free, democratic, and supportive manner by generating content for its audiences and advertisers. Its services are classified into print media, commercial printing, and multimedia content. The group's print media are El Comercio, El Ambateño, Semanario Líderes, and Últimas Noticias, and its websites include El Comercio.com, Benditofutbol, Revistafamilia.ec, compraya.ec, revistalíderes.ec, and Ultimasnoticias.ec. The financial situation of this media in recent years has been challenging, reporting 16 MM of losses in the Superintendence of Companies of Ecuador until April 2022.

The digital appearance of El Comercio was in 1996. "The main page was a scanned note of the printed edition with a link to the displayed note of the printed edition and an index of additional links to other sections" (¿Cómo Evoluciona Un Medio En La Red? 6to. Rediseño de El Comercio.com… - Cobertura Digital, 2005). This first step led to a sequence of designs and constant modifications worthy of recognition from different sectors. However, it was not until 2010 that it began to venture into social networks (Rivera, 2011).

In this study, 780 publications on Instagram were considered (266 on El Comercio and 514 on La Posta). For the analysis, only publications that included advertising were identified. In the case of El Comercio, 24 publications were found with advertising content, representing 9%, and in the case of La Posta, 184 publications were found, representing 35.7% (Fig. 1).

Due to La Posta's business model, the prevalence of advertising in its content guarantees the sustainability of the media. Since its inception, La Posta has been defined as a media, an advertising platform, and a website that publishes creative, eye-catching, and rigorous content for brands to advertise in the digital spaces generated by the media.

A relevant element is the contrasting news nature of La Posta's publications. This media is known for its rigorous journalistic investigation, making some readers review and contrast the published contents with other media investigations. Some of the most
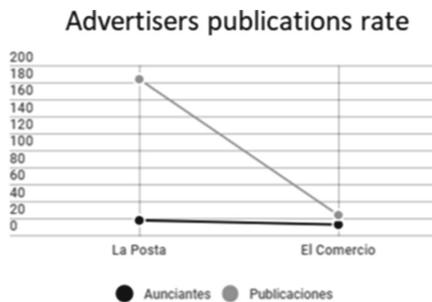

Fig. 1. Advertiser-publication ratio.

relevant investigations have been linked to corruption scandals, such as La magia reguetonera de Baby Yunda, Vacunados VIP, and the Gran Informe del Gran Padrino.

La Posta's publications encourage users (audience-followers) to use the different social networks and digital platforms it uses to follow up on investigative topics at other times.

Another outstanding element is the innovative and disruptive techniques that characterize its journalism. Its publications contain short videos and images; 69% show videos, and 30% contain static images. It is worth mentioning that the 184 publications reviewed had 231,587 likes.

This digital medium has significant influence and visibility; its publications have 2,229,920 reproductions and 13,908 comments. Its strategy to motivate interaction with the audience allows the configuration of the prosumer, with a 670% engagement rate.

During the month under study, information was published from 18 different advertisers (@9roundecuador, @aguamana.ec, @buenplantickets, @cooperativacacebce, @forbet.oficial, @hampicannabis, @labikina_ec, @llantascooperec, @quadriccio, @rapiditooriental, @ticketshow, Cemento Selvalegre, Colasil, Cooperativa Andalucía, Ecovis, Fantastik, Motorex, and Uribe Schwarzkopf). Regarding the type of advertising, we found mainly in-feed ads, recommendation widgets, and in some cases, ads integrated into the content.

Considering the information collected and the exploratory analysis of the headlines of posts with integrated ads on Instagram, the relationship between words and their prevalence is as follows (Fig. 2):

The topics and editorial lines of the media are the same. There is no thematic relationship between advertising and news content. The journalistic approach is constantly maintained to cover political and social events rigorously.
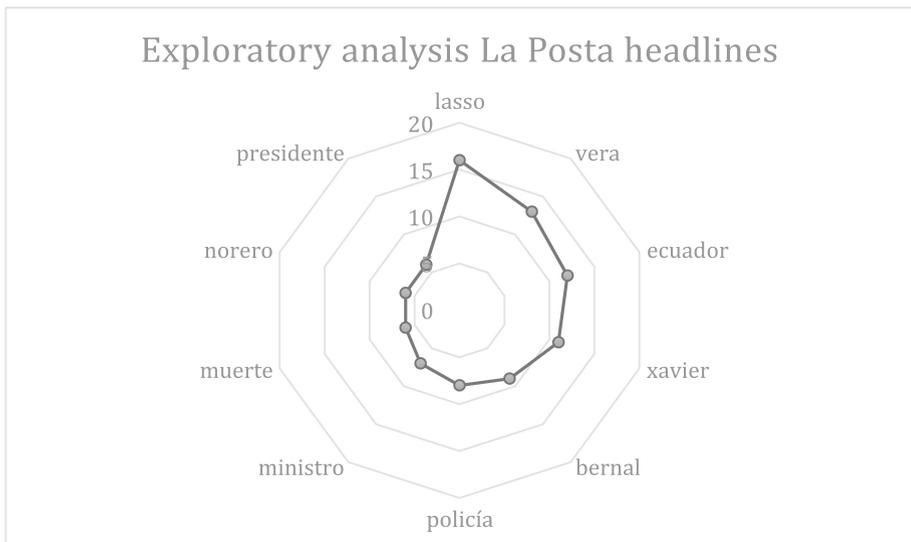

Fig. 2. Exploratory analysis of the headlines published on La Posta's Instagram account.

The media focuses on four critical aspects: the quality of information, innovation in the presentation of journalistic content, effective advertising strategies, and interaction with the audience.

Regarding the native advertising formats used, the following data were collected (Fig. 3):

• In-feed ads: 69.1%
• Recommendation widgets: 26.48%
• Content-integrated ads: 4%

In-feed ads prevail, indicating that advertising is integrated into the content disseminated on the social network.

El Comercio is part of Grupo El Comercio C.A; its main activity is writing, publishing, and administrating newspapers and magazines. This is a traditional media that currently publishes content in digital channels. Due to its experience and tradition and the thoroughness of its research and publications, it has a considerable number of followers. However, it has not managed to monetize in digital channels as other digital native media have done.

The data analysis showed that the total number of publications of El Comercio represents 51% of the publications of the digital native media La Posta, evidencing that El Comercio has fewer publications on Instagram. In addition, 266 news items were reviewed, and only 24 had advertising.

El Comercio has 13 advertisers (@mrx.effects, @tempodesign, @allnaturalec, @almacenestiaec, @bancobolivariano, @charlotteschool.ec, @cinemarkec, @coca-colaec, @complejomushucruna, @redautomotoresyanexos, @teatrosangabrielquito, @veris_ecuador, and Telesistema). The most significant amount of advertising is related to the accounts @redautomotoresyanexos and @veris_ecuador.

El Comercio seeks audience participation, which is why it has included in its publications Michimercio, a fictional character with a feline appearance and human personality,
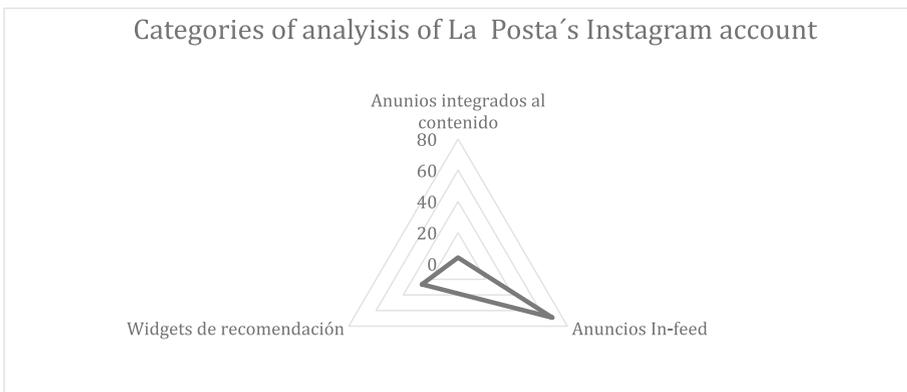

Fig. 3. Categories of analysis of La Posta's Instagram account.

with characteristics created considering the votes of its followers and readers. El Comercio does not "connect" its publications with those of other social networks; they only show a link to the web version of the media in the description of its Instagram account.

The exploratory analysis of the headlines that include advertising showed that their thematic relevance is not related to the social or economic situation of the country. The discursive correlation of the terms is not related to any news content, having exclusively an advertising character.

Its strategy is to present the news using graphic resources, so carousel-type images in short videos are widespread in its publications. The 44 publications reviewed had 227,002 likes, 85,979 reproductions, and 2,223 comments. In the month under study, engagement was 26%.

Regarding the native advertising formats used, the following data were collected (Fig. 4):

• In-feed ads: 32%
• Recommendation widgets: 50%
• Content-integrated ads: 18%

El Comercio considers these aspects in its publications: a variety of news topics, the use of images with descriptions mentioning the advertiser's accounts, and the use of hashtags to indicate sponsored content. El Comercio's favorite format is recommendation widgets with in-feed ads.

El Comercio's business model is related to subscription services, advertising in digital channels and social networks, and the offer of editorial services. However, engagement levels do not favor sustainability with the marketing of digital journalistic services only. This is why El Comercio continues to try to recover the newspaper's print publication, which is increasingly sporadic, suggesting that a lack of definition hinders the strengthening of actions in digital channels.
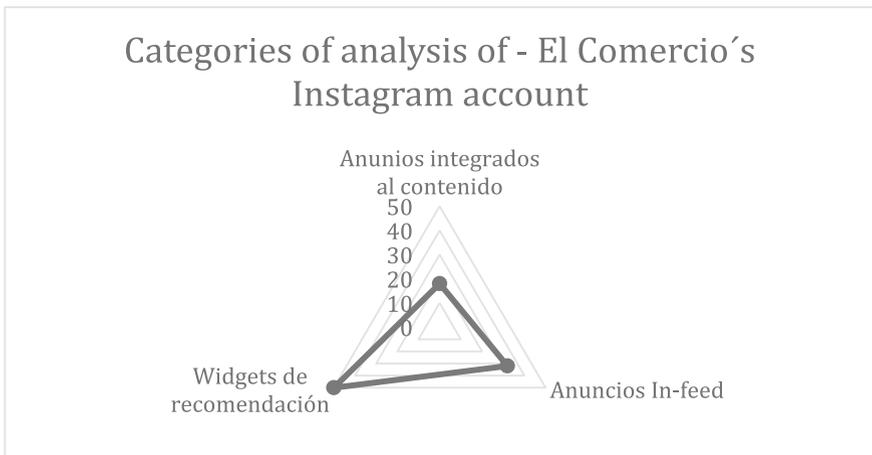

Fig. 4. Categories of analysis of El Comercio's Instagram account.

4 Conclusions

The digital transformation has established new rules for journalism and media, introducing new and different operation dynamics for the production and distribution of content. The study of the two media allows analyzing their main characteristics and pointing out the difference between the strategies of digital native media and those of traditional media in digital space, as well as the difference concerning the creation of content and the formats they apply. In both cases, advertising formats are varied, and those that include short videos to promote interaction through links and hashtags are the ones that have the most significant impact on the audience. It is worth mentioning the importance of the resources and narratives included to monetize and facilitate the sustainability of the media.

The study showed a tendency to present journalistic content through micro-investigations developed as a series so that the information is not entirely delivered in a single day and the topic remains of interest to the audience, thus maintaining a constant interaction of readers with the media. This style of narration and storytelling has more acceptance than those publications in which the content responds to the immediacy of information consumption without going deeper into the topic.

Native advertising, which considers ads integrated into the content, is the most effective way to generate income without saturating the audience with advertising from sponsors.

It is important to consider the ethical challenges of transparency that exist, as the media outlet must identify mechanisms to ensure that advertising inserts are not confused with its editorial line. Considering the situation of the analyzed media, it can be concluded that although advertising is not the only form of financing, it continues to be a viable alternative for the sustainability of the media. This could result in the media prioritising the achievement of clicks rather than relevant information content.

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