



# Professional Versatility in Audiovisual Sports Media During COVID-19. An Interview with Ibero-American Filmmakers and Journalist (2020–2022)

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**Abstract.** Sports programs represent one of the most consumed entertainment products in the world, however, in 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic put this entire media ecosystem into crisis. This study aims to analyze the professional versatility developed by journalists and audiovisual sports media producers in Ibero-America to continue exercising their work during the confinement imposed by the pandemic. The methodology applied was qualitative, semi-structured interviews were carried out that allowed us to know the different degrees and types of polyvalence that they applied to continue producing content, despite the fact that there were no sports tournaments. As a result, it was obtained that journalists developed and learned technological functions, developed new topics and it was concluded that teleworking was established as a new professional versatility that remains valid beyond the pandemic.

**Keywords:** Sports journalism · Covid-19 · television

## 1 The Mediatic Context

With the Covid-19 pandemic that began in 2020, around 250 high-level sports competitions will be canceled around the world [1]. This is not a small consideration given that the transmission of sporting events has an important presence in media such as television, given the high levels of tuning that these programs generate and, therefore, the economic profitability that they produce [2]. This paralysis of tournaments affected the production of sports programs. At a general level, television had to reorganize its programming due to the need of the audience and the increase in lighting [3], which is frequent in emergency situations, where the population increases their needs for information, but also for entertainment programs [4–6]. With the social distancing restrictions, non-television technologies such as video calls, cell phones, the cloud, and teleworking began to be

used more intensively, although this did not completely prevent journalists from seeing their physical or emotional health affected [7, 8]. In this sense, to continue working, the sports journalists and other members of the production teams developed a series of qualities, or professional versatility, that allowed them to face such a difficult context.

### 1.1 Professional Versatility

As noted in the previous section, the progress of media convergence and information technology has led to the development of professional polyvalence in journalism. Said versatility, as defined by Deuze [9], they allude to the combination of mastering news-gathering techniques and storytelling techniques in all media formats. Thus, the polyvalent ones come to be the different tasks that the journalist performs beyond his own specialty, that is to say that, for example, a reporter no longer only fulfills that function, but can also record or edit. From productivity, Justel, Micó and Sánchez [10] argue that the polyvalent model turns the journalist into a more productive professional because it is possible to produce in various formats, but it must be rigorous in order not to fall into inaccuracy. Regarding quality -especially audiovisual-, Wallace [11] affirms that versatile BBC journalists manage to develop a good job as cameramen, editors or reporters, but despite this, a minimum quality threshold must be maintained because directors and managers would have to value the development of multi-skills that include greater productivity. Regarding the application of versatility on television, and García [12] proposed that the following scenarios existed: immobility -the journalistic writing maintains its traditional tasks-; total versatility -journalists are capable of producing for multiple platforms-; integrated polyvalence -develops in an unforced way-; ambivalent polyvalence -owners invest in technology, but the development of multiple roles is limited-. Regarding the classification of models, Micó [13, 14]. They state that, thanks to media versatility, journalists create content for various media; thematic, professionals develop content for various and for various thematic sections; and technological, in which they carry out all or a large part of the production processes. To understand this diversity of polyvalences, Salaverría, García and Masip [12] propose the following categories (Table 1):

## 2 Methodology

This research is of a basic and descriptive type, it has been carried out applying the qualitative approach because it is intended to know the social reality from the point of view of its protagonists, proposing subjectivity and intersubjectivity as legitimate objects of scientific knowledge [15]. In this sense, the general objective is to describe the professional polyvalence developed in audiovisual sports media during the COVID-19 pandemic. As specific objectives, it seeks to examine the degree of technological, thematic and media polyvalence of media professionals. Audiovisual sports chosen during the aforementioned period. It is also proposed to identify the permanence of professional transformations, within the polyvalence of the chosen journalists, between 2020 and 2022. The analytical method was applied because the development of professional polyvalences in audiovisual production in sports channels is studied and how they were

**Table 1.** Journalistic professional polyvalence degrees

<b>Grade of versatility</b>	<b>Description</b>
Grade 0: monomedia journalist and not versatile	The journalist works for a single medium and performs a single function
Grade 1: Multimedia and versatile journalist	The professional works for more than one platform and performs the same function on all of them
Grade 2: monomedia and versatile journalist	The journalist works in a single medium, but performs various functions
Grade 3: Multimedia and versatile journalist	The professional works in different media and produces content for the various platforms, performing functions of different journalistic disciplines such as writing, photography, editing, voice-over, etc.

applied in each of its constitutive stages pre-production, coverage and post-production, by journalists and filmmakers who executed them. The empirical information was collected by applying the semi-structured interview technique, since it is a method that allows questions to be applied to saturate the categories. The questions were descriptive and structural [16], established in a script validated by experts. To answer the research questions, it was determined to work a sample in a chain or by networks -snowball-, identifying key informants, who, in turn, recommended the following interviewees [15, 17]. For this reason, the sample was intentional because it allows information to be provided on specific thematic and conceptual aspects of the subject under investigation [18]. It was decided to select the participants based on their positions, deciding to interview producers, reporters and post-producers who worked in these media during the pandemic. Cameramen were excluded because during the height of the pandemic they did not broadcast, cover or record sports. The sample consisted of:

- Julio De Feudis: producer and post-producer for ESPN, United States, with 25 years of professional experience (JD).
- Ornella Palumbo: presenter and reporter for ESPN, Peru, with 12 years of professional experience (OP).
- David Gayón: producer of Win Sports, Colombia, with 17 years of professional experience (DG).
- Valentina Rincón: host and reporter for Win Sports Colombia, with 7 years of professional experience (VR).
- Luisa Calderón: post-producer for Win Sports, Colombia, with 16 years of professional experience (LA).
- Manuel Paz Soldán: producer of Movistar Deportes, Peru, with 18 years of professional experience (MP).
- David Chávez: reporter for Movistar Deportes, Peru, with 14 years of professional experience (DC).

- Manuel Arellano: post-producer for Movistar Deportes, Peru, with 25 years of professional experience (MA).
- José Stuart: producer of DSports, Peru, with 12 years of professional experience (JS).
- Julio Vílchez: driver and reporter for DSports, Peru, with 16 years of professional experience (JV).
- Roly Mengual: producer and journalist for Mediapro – Conmebol, Argentina, with 18 years of professional experience (RM).
- Marta García: producer, director, post-producer and special envoy for Marca, Spain, with 13 years of professional experience (MG).
- Alberto Ortega: audiovisual editor for Marca, Spain, with 14 years of professional experience (AO).

The interviews were carried out using the Zoom application, between October 2022 and February 2023. As they were semi-structured interviews, they were carried out with the base questionnaire, but cross-questions were applied that allowed delving into the specialized perspective of each interviewee. Subsequently, they were transcribed to carry out the coding and organization of the data that answered the research questions [19].

### 3 Results

When asked: What is the first thing you remember from the early days of the pandemic? The interviewees state: “Uncertainty, in fact, concern. All paralyzed; there are no sports in the world,” (JS); “great concern for the family, for what was coming to us, a scenario so unknown to us and to everyone” (JV); “The first thing that comes to mind is that I lost my job”, so that was the biggest fear” (LC). Faced with this uncertainty and concern, each medium began to reinvent their production processes so as not to stop programming: “it was surprising and, later, an obviously unthinkable adaptation process ensued, especially from a technological point of view” (OP). This technological adaptation included developing new professional skills to cope with confinement and, in turn, continuing with audiovisual production in each medium: “It hit us all very hard, and more so when our day to day depends on events, and in the work group we invent ways to make content” (VR). The professional adaptation meant the development of functions that went beyond what their profile required, to the point that they began to learn, develop and innovate new skills forced by confinement, although these versatility already have a previous sporting background: “The issue of versatility was already happening, remember that the 2018 World Cup in Russia began on this path, but now it is already a form, it is mandatory, let’s say, that is, nobody can leave home without their mobile phone and without their capacity, nobody can be a special envoy without the possibility of recording videos and generating audiovisual content” (AO). Although the development of professional versatility had been taking place for some time, the arrival of Covid-19 forced its implementation, but under different conditions because previously it was stimulated by joint production work on sports channels. With the pandemic, the panorama was different, the interviewees became versatile from inside their homes, however there were already some who considered that the versatile profile was necessary for audiovisual production: “For me, who is a producer, a journalist or whatever, you must at least know how a camera works, you must at least know how a Zoom software

works to be able to transmit, at least do an in - out in an editing line to be able to send, right?" (DG).

### 3.1 Technological Versatility

When this type of polyvalence is defined, emphasis is placed on the professional's participation in all or part of the information production process [13]. Specifically, we refer to the stages of audiovisual production, which are: pre-production, coverage and post-production, where each professional participates in a specialized way. With the pandemic, as we interpreted the interviewees, journalists had to play combined roles between what was theirs as professionals and what they had to play in other disciplines to carry out their programs from confinement. Most of the interviewees agree that, having to work from home, there was no possibility of implementing the production systems that exist in television channels or when these media broadcast sports from stadiums or cover press conferences, training or mixed zones. In each of these audiovisual productions, the work is multidisciplinary and, as a whole, the face-to-face and integrated effort of different professional profiles such as producers, cameramen, set designers, cinematographers, reporters, post-producers, among others, is needed to be able to produce and broadcast. Sports programs. With the pandemic, the above changed abruptly; The professionals had to develop transversal polyvalences to be able to cover this need for teamwork remotely, understanding this as the extra functions that these professionals performed beyond what they normally perform. In this sense, for example, reporters and hosts used video calls, they used applications such as Zoom, vMix, LiveU, Instagram to interview and host programs from their homes. In the same way, they had to implement their scenery, lighting, microphones and other implements to present better composed audiovisual frames (DG - P - JD - JV - VR). Therefore, it can be said that the journalists developed skills in staging, art direction, and camera direction: "Analysts, they made their own little study at home and left from there" (JD). These staging's did not become as sophisticated and aesthetic as those carried out on television sets, but they implied the establishment of domestic audiovisual production processes. Another function highlighted by the professionals consulted was the direction of the frames of the people they interviewed. From this angle, they began to record the material and send it remotely to the post-producers - work that, in face-to-face times, was the responsibility of the cameramen -, in addition to establishing an audiovisual literacy process with their colleagues, so that these latter could adequately compose the frame from which they were going to be interviewed (OP -VR - DG). Other professionals updated previous functions that they had exercised before occupying the position they held when the confinement was declared. This was the case of the producers, who before reaching that position had worked as interviewers, cameramen or editors (JS). When the need to work remotely arose, they had to collaborate with the production process by reapplying those positions they had held in the past: "I gained patience, I gained contacts because I had to be a journalist many times, I had to do the interviews, I had to do the coordination, that is, generate my content myself" (JS). This function of conducting virtual interviews was widely applied by various members of the production teams, because it was the most feasible content to carry out in confinement and allowed television programming to be covered: "During a pandemic, sometimes conversations flowed and we were all

doing interviews, the drivers, the reporters, the producers were all interviewing”. (OP). In some media, the field producers -in charge of conducting the matches or coverage-, since they did not have to organize anything in person, began to support the interviewers in the technical issues necessary to carry out the video calls (OP). In other cases, the editors acted as virtual cameramen, because the signals emitted in the production of some program, such as virtual FIFA soccer games, were sent to the editor’s computers to be recorded and subsequently post-produced (MP).

From the technological point of view, the journalists consulted assure that they learned to handle different applications for the same function, most recognize that the most used for interviews, talk shows and debates was Zoom, but from there they migrated to others more specialized in audiovisual production. Such as vMix, which allows you to interconnect more devices and control audio, video and signal monitoring functions. In addition, vMix allows more dynamic transmissions and coverage without the use of heavy equipment: “We have become more versatile, there are times when you can move an ATEM with a computer, all the deployment that is supposed to be enormous. And there are other times that, for whatever reason, I am doing from Vmix” (MG). They also came to use several applications that performed the same function, but diversified their use, such as when they used video calls from different brands but for different functions. Thus, they used Zoom to conduct inter-views or television programs and Teams for pre-production meetings (MG - AO). At the same time, professionals recognize that they have learned to use social networks to generate content as well; These contents were used to be published on the same network and, at the same time. They were reused in the main signal of the sports channel (DC – AO). All these polyvalences developed from a technological point of view allowed us to continue producing, but it is worth noting the level of digital technological advancement in which the pandemic appeared: “If this had happened, 15 years ago, it probably would have been impossible, I would have had to stop signal anyway. So, the pandemic came at a time when the technology was quite developed and that helped us get ahead” (JD).

In other cases, the journalists consulted developed didactic functions through training or self-training in audiovisual functions. The first thing happened in the media, such as Marca, where it was decided to train certain workers in other functions so as not to fire them in the midst of a health crisis. The foregoing occurred with the photographers, who only fulfilled this function in the face-to-face coverage of sporting events, so it was decided to train them in audiovisual post-production, a didactic task that fell to the company’s editors who had to teach them, remotely, through of a tedious and remote process that included video calls and even long phone calls to teach them step by step because those trained were people of legal age (MG). In this way, a specific audiovisual literacy process also took place, which implied the transfer of specialized knowledge between professionals. In other cases, the interviewees carried out autonomous and self-taught learning specialized in their usual function, such as when an editor investigated and learned more about post-production (MA), others carried out the learning of audiovisual knowledge related to their work activity through courses virtual (RM).

### 3.2 Thematic Polyvalence

Thematic polyvalence is one where journalists prepare news and content on various topics [13, 14]. This investigation shows that both producers and the other members of their teams had to create content in an adverse context where there were two negative conditions for their professional performance: the cancellation of sports activities and forced confinement: “So, there was to start thinking about what we could do differently, what we could do to continue producing, to be able to continue making content, that was the enormous difficulty, because we didn’t know how” (MP). Faced with these difficulties, they had to develop the ability to create new themes linked to the sports situation in the pandemic, which was already complicated: “All of this causes people to reinvent themselves and see what they do for that and then the sports, entertainment, were no exception and generated many types of documentaries, types of exclusive interviews, many things like that” (DG). They extended their media agenda by expanding it to other issues, demonizing the predominance of hegemonic sports in the usual news production, such as football for Latin America (DG - MP - MA - JV - LC - MG - AO). This lack of content also implied proposing and developing content that reported on how the pandemic was affecting clubs, championships, and players. Other topics were developed on the latter, directing the interviews that became more profiled towards the human side (OP - MA) (Table 2).

It should be noted that these themes were developed in an integral and cross-sectional manner by the production teams, since the producers thought, devised and coordinated the themes (MP - DG - JS), the reporters did the coverage from their homes (OP - VR - JV - DC), and the post-producers also assembled them through remote work (LC - MA - JD). Some of these themes remain, but with less presence or are no longer part of the sports media agenda, because with the restart of the tournaments, interest was once again focused on these activities and the production of content was reoriented towards them. In other cases, some of these topics are referred to alternative sections or platforms that the main medium has and that continue to be very well received (MG - AO).

### 3.3 Polyvalence Mediatic

After the Covid-19 pandemic, media versatility is also applied, through which the communications professional can create content for various media and platforms [13, 14]. To be more specific in these results, and following the taxonomy of Salaverría, García and Masip [12], it is evident that the professionals participating in the sample developed grade 2 to a greater extent, because they worked in their media of origin, but performed various functions of audiovisual production, unfolding their usual activities prior to the pandemic. In grade 2 of the polyvalences there were also journalists and filmmakers from various media who produced content for other platforms of the same company, as in the case of Marca, where the editors, in confinement, no longer only produced textual content, but they also began to make audio-visual products for the other platforms of the company. Thus, these professionals began to generate audiovisual content -such as interviews by video calls and direct through Zoom, vMix or social networks-. They have continued to apply this same versatility in the 2020 World Cup in Qatar, but this time the journalists were equipped with cell phones with which they made their dispatches

**Table 2.** Some themes developed by sports journalists in the first stage of the pandemic

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Formats and contents</b>
Current issues pandemics	Interviews, debate programs, reports, special reports, informative notes, among others, that dealt directly with the championships, clubs and athletes paralyzed by the pandemic
Hybrid themes	Realities where the interaction between athletes and their admirers was encouraged Transmission of FIFA soccer championships and other video games adapted to television narrative
Poli-sports themes	Interviews, reports, special reports, informative notes, among others, on sports and athletes who do not belong to the hegemonic sport of the country
Theme of remembrance	Interviews, panels, reports, special reports, informative notes or documentaries on issues of the past that updated sports campaigns, club or sports stories and celebrated anniversaries
Projective themes	Interviews, panels, reports, special reports, informative notes informing about the future of the pandemic and its impact on sports and the restart of competitions
Health themes	Interviews, panels, reports, special reports, informative notes, programs with recommendations to maintain health during the pandemic
Physical education themes	Interviews, panels, reports, special reports, informative notes, seminars, talks or programs with information and advice to promote physical education in the audience
Miscellany	Interviews, panels, reports, special reports or informative notes on specific topics such as quotes from athletes, tabloids, etc.

and connections from the headquarters they had been designated (MG - AO). In general terms, in the interviews we found that journalists and filmmakers have been acquiring skills to carry out various functions of the sports audiovisual production process, put to the test in the aforementioned international tournament: “In the World Cup all the special envoys had a microphone with the cup and with the Marca sponge, with your mobile phone and a microphone you can generate audiovisual content and that, in this World Cup, was already being promoted, but in this World Cup it has been promoted a lot, a lot” (AO). It should be noted that we found a variation of this degree that the authors have not raised, and that is that there were some journalists and filmmakers who also produced content for other media that were not in which they work, but for their own social networks (JD - JV). This is not a phenomenon generated by the pandemic, since there were already those who were doing it before it, but nevertheless it was fostered by the confinement by having more time and technologies available to do it; It means, rather, that they are able to create content for various platforms. During the pandemic, many journalists or hosts carried out conversation programs through Zoom or other apps of this type, now they have returned to carry them out in person on sets, but not for

television channels, but rather their own programs broadcast on their networks. Social, which results in a new versatility because they produce for the traditional media where they work and also for their own native digital media.

In any case, what the pandemic put to the test was the level of professional versatility that these professionals had or their ability to develop them in confinement, which amounts to demonstrating what the audiovisual labor market had already been demanding for years, but that not all exercise or exercised at the same level. The pandemic advanced conditions that everyone had to develop, especially since journalists are part of one of the groups with the greatest technological attachment: “The pandemic accelerated this process, that is, what we thought or I thought was going to happen in 2025, or in 2028, it came to pass in 2020” (DG).

## 4 Discussion and Conclusions

The abrupt digitization imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic caused a change in the professional profiles of journalists, making them more competitive. If in recent years the media market has witnessed the reduction of jobs in newsrooms [14], during the pandemic, the development of multiskilled skills prevented the mass layoffs, and in some of the organizations knowledge transfer processes were implemented among the professionals themselves to relocate unemployed workers to other functions. Many of the polyvalences acquired are directly related to technologies that, due to the health emergency, increased their use during the pandemic, such as video calls, networking and the use of mobile phones as a communication and production device [7, 8]. The information collected allows us to conclude that both these ICTs, as well as the polyvalences that were generated, have been established as part of the current production processes, where each medium applies them according to the circumstances and conditions of production, even being used in the last World Cup. Football of Qatar 2022. Based on this, it is proposed that these skills be called as Audiovisual polyvalences of remote acquisition, understood as those that were learned and implemented in the context of confinement, where digital technology allowed the interconnection of the professionals involved but that do not result from an organic process and extended temporality like those that have been developed even before the pandemic. Although we point out the above, it is worth investigating whether or not the media or audiovisual journalistic professionals will continue to apply these learning methodologies and professional specialization.

As for the thematic polyvalences, these come to be the discursive capacities of journalists to produce a diversity of topics [13]. Thus, the evolution of this professional capacity favors the learning by journalists of different kinds of content; the media build their thematic agenda according to journalistic values and the interest of the audiences. In the case of audiovisual sports media, the generation of their contents is structured based on the realization and transmission of sporting events, specifically, those that have economic or programming importance [2, 20–22]. From these broadcasts, all kinds of television programs are generated that inform and entertain the audience with content that takes them as transversal thematic axes for the production of most of its programming formats. But at the beginning of the Covid-19, when the national competitions and more than 250 international tournaments were canceled [1], A thematic crisis was propitiated,

because these sports media stopped having the supply for their audiovisual production. From this they had to create and incorporate differentiated topics because there was no longer sports news and face-to-face coverage could not be done due to the quarantines. In this way, topics such as the following were disseminated: current pandemic, hybrid, sports centers, remembrance, projective, health, physical education and miscellaneous. Some of them are still maintained, but when sporting events return, they occupy a smaller proportion in the programming, or have been referred to specialized platforms that the media have created to deal with them.

In order to understand the development of media versatility, this research shows that the participants, during the confinements, are mostly located in grades 2 and 3 of the Salaverría, García and Masip typology [12]. However, this cannot be generalized to all professionals in this field, because this research is qualitative and, for this, it is proposed that studies with a quantitative approach should be applied. This classification in our results serves to understand what levels of polyvalence the participants developed. And, based on the evidence processed, it is worth updating this typology by incorporating a category that includes the content produced by journalists for their own social networks and that they carry out in parallel with their work in traditional sports media, which in turn is constitutes a new stage in the media polyvalence of the Micó typology [13].

In short, according to what was stated, there were journalists who were in grade 1 but went to grade 3 due to the training that was provided remotely during the pandemic. One of the positions that carried out the most versatility was that of conductors or reporters, since they carried out various functions that allowed them to carry out their productions from their homes and, in addition, exercised audiovisual literacy functions. It is necessary to raise a discussion about the name of the typology called technological, which alludes to the fact that professionals operate different equipment for different functions, although it also points to the execution of various functions. Therefore, the category of functional versatility is proposed to understand the various convergent procedures that a professional performs within the different stages of audiovisual production -pre-production, coverage, post-production-. Lastly, teleworking also constitutes a new versatility established from the pandemic that remains in force in these media in a hybrid way where workdays are combined with remote workdays during the week.

This research was not exempt from certain limitations, including the conformation of the sample, because the participants are not easily accessible and being able to agree on the times for the interviews is complicated due to their working hours, which are long. Although the criteria of the participants are focused on the production of sports audiovisual media, this study can be extended in the future to other disciplines or genres such as fiction, documentary or advertising; In addition, it is time to pay attention to other technological phenomena that will require more professional transformations, such as the application of the metaverse, the Internet of Things or artificial intelligence. Due to its qualitative approach, the results and conclusions cannot be generalized, but they can serve as a reference for those interested in expanding scientific knowledge on the subject.

**Acknowledgment.** To the Research Department of the Peruvian University of Applied Sciences for the support provided to carry out this research work UPC-EXPOST 2023 - 1.

This paper was also co-funded by the research project: “App-Andalus”, with reference number EMC21\_00240, funded by the “Secretaría General de Investigación e Innovación”, Junta de Andalucía (Spain), thanks to the Emergia Program.

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