

THE (PRIVATE) NEWS SHARING REPORT

A starting guide for
researchers and journalists



A REPORT BY JOSÉ MANUEL NOGUERA-VIVO

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with the help of Research Grants 18/19 from the Catholic University
of San Antonio (Murcia, Spain)*

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A STARTING GUIDE FOR RESEARCHERS AND JOURNALISTS

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This is a report by
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a journalist working at the Catholic University of San Antonio (UCAM, Spain), where he is the Head of the Communication Sciences Department. This project has been supported by a research grant from UCAM to do a research stay as a Visiting Scholar at the American University of Washington (AU), USA, and with the help of professor Joseph Graf at AU.

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Special thanks also goes to colleagues and scholars who selflessly dedicated their time to talk and hold meetings. They shed light on many topics reflected in the report. They are Silvio Waisbord, Saif Shahin, Ericka Menchen-Trevino, Patricia Aufderheide, Amy Eisman, Chiqui Esteban, Leonard Steinhorn, and Margaret Farley.

The interviews are expressions of personal opinions as journalists and they do not necessarily express the official point of view of the media where they work. Inquiries for further information about this research can be sent to jmnoguera@gmail.com or jmnoguera@ucam.edu

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INTRODUCTION

Journalism is not just bigger on the internet after publishing, it is bigger also because it starts before. On the Internet, on the one hand, a journalist can have a community even before having a journalistic product. On the other hand, social recommendations, incidental consumption of news and online private messages are giving a broader reach to journalism, as we know it now.

Because publishing is not the end of the journalistic routine, the whole process now is longer. You cannot fully understand what “news” means for people if you do not understand how and why they are sharing the news on online private platforms. Private messaging networks are adding new challenges to journalists and the media. When we are talking about online private environments, issues such as sources, fact-checking, misinformation, privacy or (fake) news are being redefined, as well as the notions of trust, community, public service and media literacy.

In 2018 the Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro was accused of running a whole fake news campaign through WhatsApp with hundreds of millions of messages against his opponent. This scandal is just an example of the growing relevance of fact-checking and the need for media literacy skills among users of private messaging networks.

Many news sites added a WhatsApp sharing option in their news during the last few years (Benton, 2014) and it seems like private channels, such as this one, could become a “major traffic driver for news sites” (Kümpel, A., Karnowski, V., & Keyling, T., 2015: 10). We cannot entirely know what people are doing with news in private messaging networks, but what we can see is what the media and journalists are doing with these platforms. This report is a draft of these actions.

In news sharing research, a new broad theoretical foundation is needed, with quantitative studies, digital ethnographies or uses and gratifications approaches, and even combining these theories and deriving new ones. We utilize the results of this preliminary research to provide insights so that journalism can be improved, and academic research of journalism can move forward in news sharing research.

The main goal of this executive report is to help journalists and researchers get a deeper understanding of the news sharing processes in private messaging apps, channels, and networks. Share it, but not in a private way. Make it as public as you can.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This report is divided into the following six research questions:

- 1) How appropriate are private online messaging networks for journalism?
- 2) Can private messaging be useful for building trust between the media/journalists and communities?
- 3) How can journalists use private channels/platforms to be part of a community?
- 4) What are the new skills that the media landscape is requiring of journalists?
- 5) What do we know about the audience that is using private messaging for News Sharing?
- 6) What are the best media practices with private online messaging?

1. THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE

If we think about the intersection of the online world and privacy, we can see in the next figure how the last area is the newest and least researched field in journalism, despite its growing influence on issues such as fake news or political communication. As it is said, when something arrives to your personal private messaging networks (WhatsApp, Telegram, Direct Messages, text messaging, etc.), it is always a sign of virality. And **there is a paradox here of *private journalism*, or journalism transmitted and perhaps even created within private messaging services. How do journalists pay attention to this?** How could they do it? It would be a kind of journalism based on enabling specific conversations and services to small communities, not just in geographical terms, but communities of interest

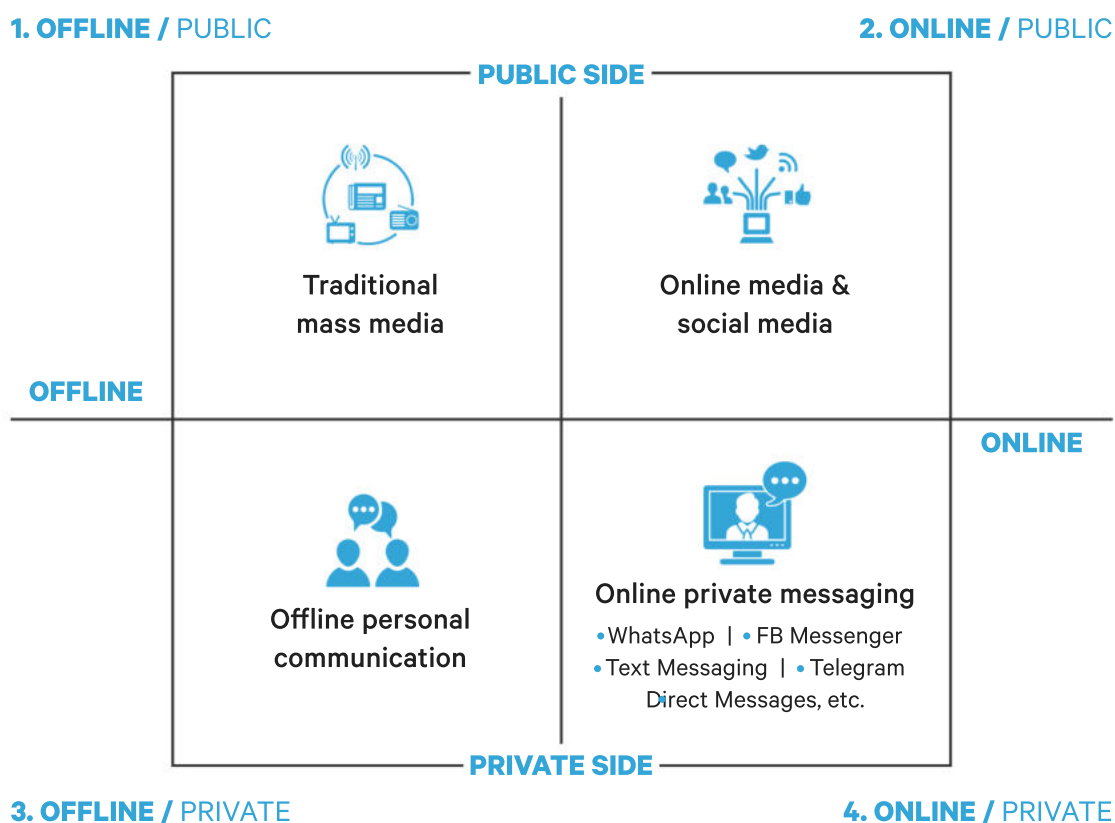



Figure 1: The four coordinates of communication related to privacy and journalism



We could define “private journalism” as those processes, products and relationships with the audience made by journalists –in a conscious way- through online private messaging networks, most of the time in order to offer more personalized experiences, by building trust and being part of the community of readers itself.

This journalism is designed to reach a particular profile of audience, those who are using or exploring private communication for news sharing:




I´d say we do [share news on WhatsApp] but I think a lot of it would be a news article and then following that, for the next two weeks would be memes and a load of p*ss-takes but depending on the article

- Joe, 18 years old, UK. -

In one of its recent reports, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2019) analyzed the different profiles of news consumption in young people. Joe’s statement would fit the profile of an audience with “Low Consumption”, where other social channels such as Instagram have an informative role.

This audience profile is not an isolated issue for specific countries or regions, but it is worldwide. For instance, during an Indonesian survey (ICFJ, 2019), 41% of respondents –from more than 1,500 people– said they trust the news they got through WhatsApp. In an era when misinformation is spreading faster every day, this kind of data is useful to understand the growing role of platforms and the media in order to offer resources to improve people’s media literacy. Who is sharing news there? What content and what for?



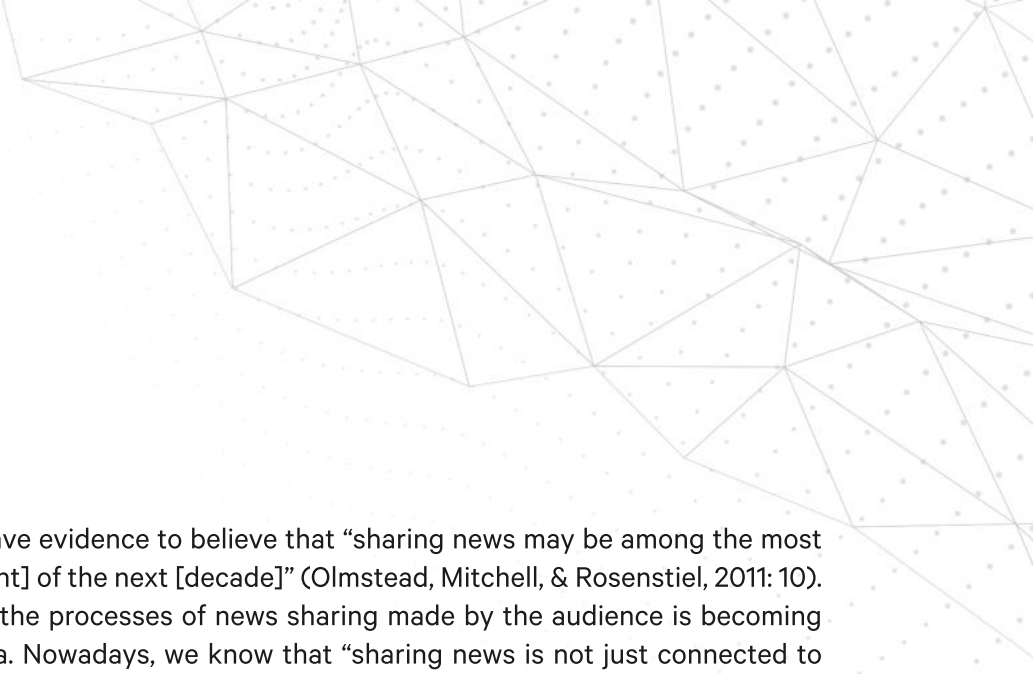
As a field of study, **News Sharing is a useful research area to underline one of the main paradigms in the post-internet era: participation as a product.** As the media industry deals with participation itself as a product (Noguera-Vivo et al., 2013), one of the consequences is “incidental news consumption” (Boczkowski, Mitchlestein & Matassi, 2018), in other words, now we do not look for news, news arrives in unexpected channels, formats and ways.

And although the metaphor of echo is still powerful, there are no evidences of real echo chambers in users’ media repertoires (Dvir-Gvirsman, S., Tsfati, Y., & Menchen-Trevino, 2016).

The media industry is reacting too to the tricky scenario for journalism offered by private messaging networks. The Indian website The Quint moved last June from WhatsApp to Telegram because of the growing difficulties for publishers on this platform, and they did it with the following message: “[We] will no longer be on WhatsApp, owing to changes in its policies regarding news publishers. You can now get the latest news on our Telegram channel” (TheQuint.com, first published June 22, 2019). As we will find in some of the interviews in this report, private online spaces are valuable but are also tricky spaces for journalism, especially in the case of the lack of help offered by WhatsApp to media.

First of all and as Silvio Waisbord said, “we think in a social way. We are not Robinson Crusoe when we are thinking or taking a stand, we are influenced by social acceptance, with or without proofs” (2017). We are influenced by those around us.

Secondly, this paradigm comes together with a complicated issue related to the fight against fake news and misinformation: fact-checked information is likely to be more shareable when it supports the way we think than when it denies our beliefs (Shin & Thorson, 2017). We are more likely to believe those things we agree with.



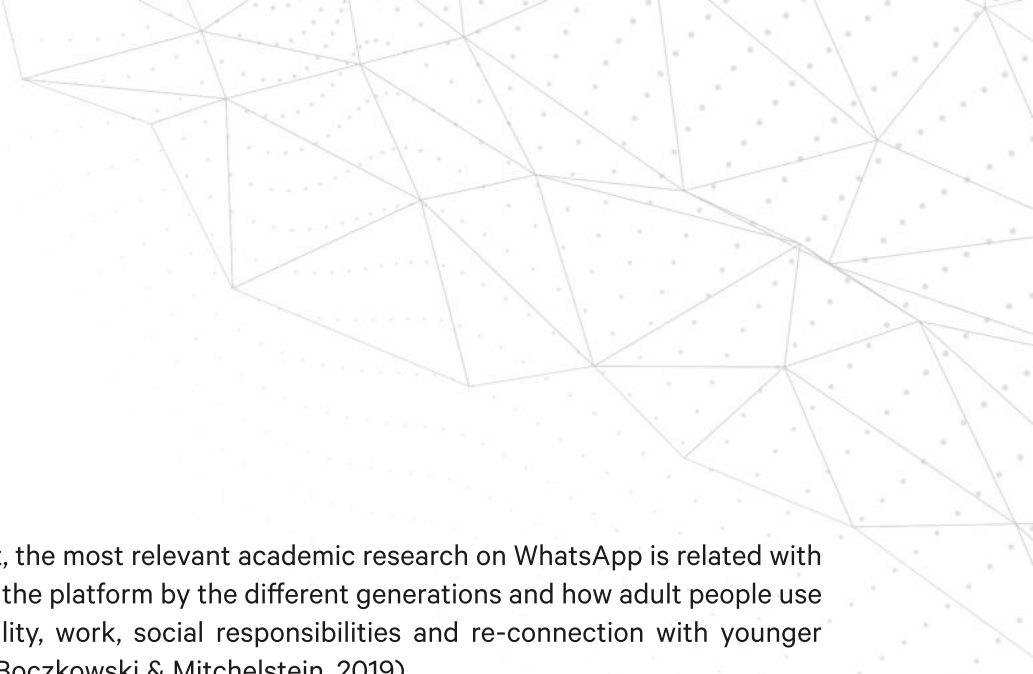
In the meantime we have evidence to believe that “sharing news may be among the most important [development] of the next [decade]” (Olmstead, Mitchell, & Rosenstiel, 2011: 10). The skill of managing the processes of news sharing made by the audience is becoming essential for the media. Nowadays, we know that “sharing news is not just connected to the notion of consumption, it is also narrowly linked to how we understand the news” (Noguera-Vivo, 2018: 150).

For instance, “the observation of other people’s news sharing activities leads to more (incidental) news exposure and, ideally, to confrontation with other opinions and ideas” (Kümpel, Karnowski, & Keyling, 2015: 1). New research needs to “overcome process positivism and the concentration on successful news sharing” (Kümpel, A., Karnowski, V., & Keyling, T., 2015: 10). In other words, we need “failure stories” too. Having information about the non-shareable content is as valuable as the opposite, that is, the most shareable content. As we will also see in the interviews with journalists, the media have to learn to use the language adopted by memes and hoax so that they can use it with accurate information.

On the opposite side of the most optimistic theories about democratization of communication and the political debate, we found that people share news on social media to gain reputation, to draw people’s attention, and to attain status among peers. These motivations are the results of several studies (Boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010; Lee & Ma, 2012; Ma, Lee, & Goh, 2011) and they would be placed under the model of the “self-serving status seeker” (Kümpel, A., Karnowski, V., & Keyling, T., 2015: 8). Is it the same when we talk about online private channels?

Confirming if public attitudes of audience about news sharing are the same in closed online spaces is one of the pending issues for media and journalists. “We do not want to invade. We understand that WhatsApp is not like Twitter or Facebook; we see it as a private space for the users to interact with family and friends”, explained Diana Larrea Maccise, content editor at Al Jazeera Media Institute (IJNET, 2018).

Then, there is a clear unresolved tension here: WhatsApp is a private space with information of public interest – and this information needs to be verified. Therefore, some kind of journalistic job in private online spaces is needed.



Larrea Maccise is right, the most relevant academic research on WhatsApp is related with the “domestication” of the platform by the different generations and how adult people use it for a mix of sociability, work, social responsibilities and re-connection with younger generations (Matassi, Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2019).

The key point with WhatsApp is how it can be used as a tool for getting real conversations and relations with readers, listeners or subscribers. In fact, The Daily Telegraph –the second largest weekday quality newspaper in circulation in the United Kingdom- found that “users of its WhatsApp audio service are 12 times more likely to become paying subscribers than the average reader on its homepage” (WARC, 2019).

As we said at the beginning of this report, journalism can start before on the Internet. And by saying “private journalism” we do not mean just the possibilities of private messaging networks, but also all the ways of private communication offered by social media. In this sense, useful advice was underlined during the last ONA Conference (New Orleans, U.S., September 2019).

We can observe the following tips to manage Twitter’s Direct Messages (DM) for journalism:¹

- Cultivate sources via DM
- Try to engage with other users, then direct the conversation over to DM
- Keep your DM’s open if you want to be reachable and put out calls to action
- Turn them off at night and on weekends though!

Cultivating sources seems to be the first step for a bigger goal with private online platforms: building your own community and/or being part of that community. As we will see during the following interviews, journalists are finding out how to use these channels in order to get personalized relationships and conversations with the audience –subscribers in some cases- or to offer specific content.

¹Via @EricMarkDo, 1:45p.m., Sept. 11, 2019

2. THE INTERVIEWS

All the interviews represent the journalists' point of view and they are not necessarily the official opinion of the media and institutions where they work. Because of the design of this report, the questions were deleted but you can easily figure out the kind of questions by reading the selected answers.

INDEX OF INTERVIEWS

1. **Natalie Van Hoozer**, The International Center for Journalists, SembraMedia Ambassador at the USA.

2. **Kristine Lois Villanueva**, Audience Engagement Editor at The Center for Public Integrity.

3. **María Sánchez**, Operations Editor at The Washington Post.

4. **Damià Bonmatí**, journalist, AJ+, Al Jazeera Media Network.

5. **Matthew Bennett**, journalist, The Spain Report.

6. **Lorena Arroyo**, digital journalist. Univision Noticias.

7. **Joaquín Ortega**, Head of Content at Newtral.

8. **Mario Vera**, journalist, Project Consultant at Maldita.



NATALIE VAN HOOZER

Journalist. The International Center for Journalists (ICFJ), ICFJ Knight Fellows & SembraMedia Ambassador at the USA - @NatVanH


“Media should develop relationships of trust, audience can have a greater sense of trust with messaging privately”

FACT-CHECKING AND STARTING A NEW PROJECT

Fact-checking is an important component for media organizations to incorporate now and going forward. However, I think that the approach to incorporating fact-checking into news organizations needs to be different for every newsroom. Newsrooms have varying sizes, focuses and specialties, and I do not think that all newsrooms have the capacity to function as fact-checking organizations equally. It is helpful for some news organizations to be the leaders in fact-checking and others can learn from those organizations. Chequeado in Argentina is a pioneer and a resource in regards to fact-checking, not all organizations can fact-check at the deep level that Chequeado does.

When individual journalists launch their own digital projects, I think an essential step is to do research about who you want to serve. I am the United States ambassador for SembraMedia, a Spanish-language nonprofit dedicated to empowering Spanish-language media entrepreneurs. In order for SembraMedia to know what Spanish-language media startups were out there and what type of support they needed, SembraMedia conducted a study called Inflection Point. This study analyzed the entrepreneurial media landscape in Latin America.

SembraMedia also recently published Starting Point, which assessed the landscape for teaching in a university level. SembraMedia was then able to plan how best to serve these audiences, once it was identified who comprised the audience and what help they needed most.



Looking for diversified sources of revenue is also an important area in which to develop when starting a digital project on one's own. Putting together a team with diverse strengths will also help with finding different revenue sources and having a solid project overall. For example, at SembraMedia, we like to remind people that they should probably not start an independent media organization with a team exclusively comprised of reporters. In addition to those journalists, there should be someone with more experience in business/finance, so that someone on the team is able to help guide everyone on how to run the media organization as a business.

PRIVATE NETWORKS

Private networks are something that media organizations all over the world are exploring, especially organizations with niche audiences or organizations trying to reach audiences where misinformation spreads rapidly.

MEDIA LITERACY AND MORE SENSE OF TRUST

I do think media organizations have a role to play as far as teaching their audiences media literacy. While I do not think many audience members will want to take the time to fact-check information themselves, I think media organizations should develop relationships of trust with their audience members. If there is trust between a media organization and its audience, the audience will feel more comfortable coming to journalists with questions and will be receptive to fact-checked information from that media organizations.

I think audience members can have a greater sense of trust with a media organization with messaging privately. This is the case with some media organizations in the U.S. and Mexico which serve undocumented communities. Members of the undocumented community are able to communicate more openly with the media organizations involved because they are able to message privately. Looking at the recent news about the hateful, violent messages of the U.S. Border Patrol private Facebook group, or the private messages uncovered from the governor of Puerto Rico, it is clear that people participating in a private messaging network can be inclined to speak more openly.



KRISTINE LOIS VILLANUEVA

*Audience Engagement Editor at The Center for Public Integrity –
Previously POLITICO - @kristine_ish*

“ The challenge is Social Media was not made for journalism, was made for sharing ”

BEING AN AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT EDITOR

Metrics, understanding the meaning of numbers is of much importance. Videos, articles, Instagram Stories... by reading all the metrics people are engaging with us faster and clicking through more and so on.

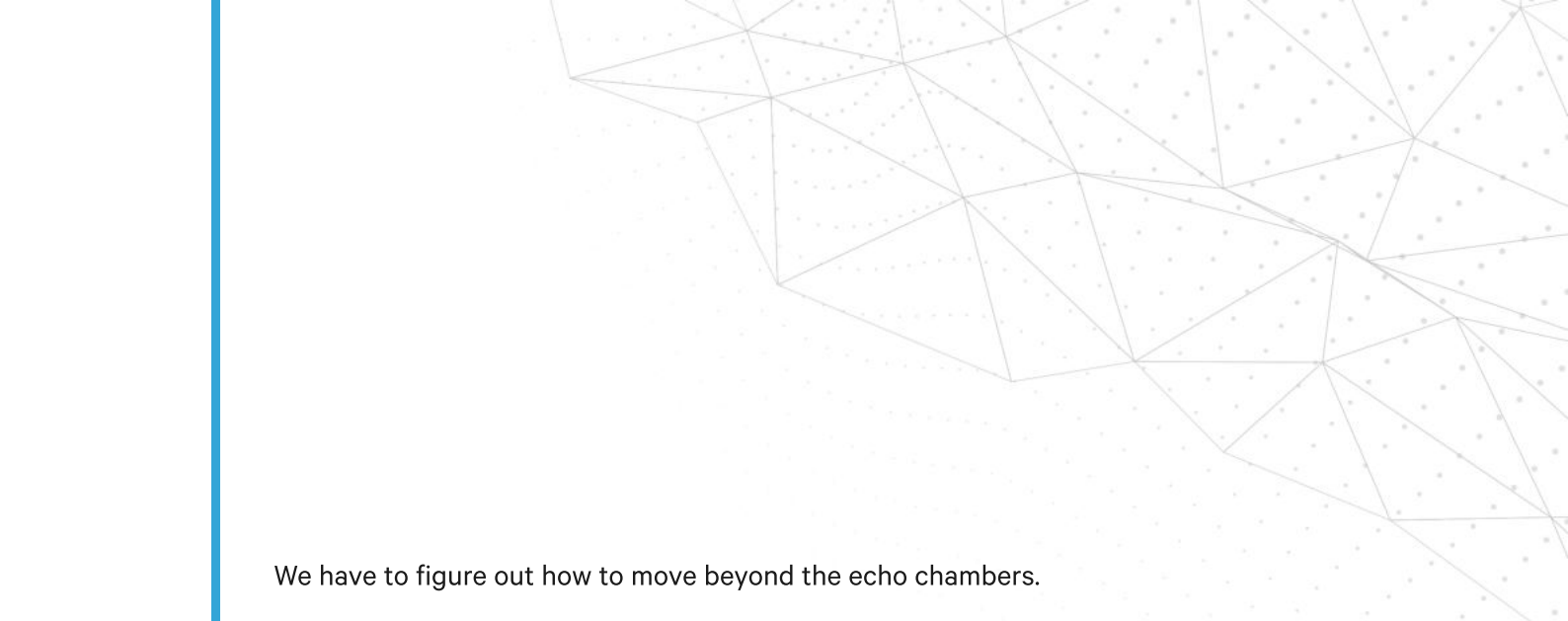
A lot of people think that the Audience Engagement Editor is only for Social Media but there are groups of people who are not on Social Media. Think about undocumented immigrants and WhatsApp, it is a really good example of that.

I don't necessarily think that news gathering is only through Social Media, I also think that therefore there are other kinds of ways like meetings and events, for example.

You have to think critically about which Social Media is meaningful for the audience and which one is not meaningful for them.

SOURCES IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Not only is this a problem for the media, it is also a problem for academic institutions or medical institutions. In order to tackle something like that, the meaning for media organizations is that media can't lean on their legacy anymore, that is not good enough anymore. ... I also think that it is important to partner with civic organizations outside news media to gain people's trust.



We have to figure out how to move beyond the echo chambers.

I think that the challenge here is Social Media was not made for journalism, Social Media was made for sharing.

I am really skeptical in that they [social platforms] are really interested in working with news media organizations, because our goals and their goals are different. For instance, their metrics for engagement and ours are different.

I am very worried about people from Facebook or from Twitter who do not have a media background to know what a legitimate source is or isn't.

It is great to use it [private platforms] to build a community or to be part of a community but I also think that a lot of these channels are closed for a reason. Fear, vulnerable groups... we [as media] have to be at least critical when we publish, avoiding putting people at risk.

TECHNOLOGY & JOURNALISM

We have to expand our idea about what journalism is with technology and different ways of communication. A lot of people say “hey, I need to know what is going on today” but also a lot people need that information available in a different way. For example, with natural disasters, like hurricanes, it was kind of terrible the way news media handled it, because as a citizen I only want to know where can I get food, electricity or gas for my car, I do not have time to read how terrible hurricane Sandy was because I know!

You cannot reach everybody, people will choose to believe what they want to believe.



MARÍA SÁNCHEZ

*Journalist. Operations Editor at The Washington Post.
Former Univision Noticias and ProPublica - @mimapamundi*

“ Thinking about our audience is a basic skill if we want to be read by the people ”

Now we have specialized journalists who are experts in tracking information flows about fake news and doing journalism withit from a critical perspective and, at the same time, without amplifying the fakes. They do approaches from the accountability, looking for the platform responsibility and trying to find out who made the information and their intentions, and also empowering people to see all these contents in a more critical way. I think the best one doing this so far has been Craig Silverman.


Facebook has hired fact-checkers many times and has been doing it for some time but, as a user, I have never seen this clearly reflected in its content.

All this is not new, but the reach has been amplified with the help of social media. People always have been looking for the kind of content that reinforces your preexisting ideas. That is not new, however. The new thing is the reach that content can have in the new media landscape.

STRATEGIES

Media do not use the kind of dissemination strategies used by the hoax. They [hoaxes] are made with memes, images, audio formats... many of the characteristics used by misinformation to amplify efficiently are not used by media in the same way with their truthful stories.

We have had a bubble around fact-checking, especially after Trump's presidency.



The media ecosystem has changed in so many levels. We cannot think, write or choose the stories in the same way anymore.

The journalist must be familiar with all the parts of the process, and thinking about our audience is a basic skill if we want to be read. Which community would be interested in this topic?

Instagram has a strong audience engagement and I think it is a social network where we will have many troubles during the next electoral campaign.

As a journalist on Univision I was in a project about hate crimes and readers were sending us possible stories through WhatsApp. In fact, one of those messages was the base for an article on hate crimes in Walmart² and we can now remember what happened in the mass shooting in El Paso.

WhatsApp is still a very hostile platform for media.

NEW SKILLS

We will need journalists specialized in platforms like WhatsApp, with skills such as knowing the language of the platform, asking for help to the audience or getting sources from distribution lists, to be able to tell what is happening there.

DEEP FAKE

In my opinion, the most dangerous manipulation is to edit real videos in a way that this video seems to say something totally different. Nancy Pelosi's video is an example.

²See the article:

<https://www.univision.com/univision-news/united-states/dozens-of-hate-fueled-attacks-reported-at-walmart-stores-nationwide>



DAMIÀ S. BONMATÍ

Journalist. AJ+. Al Jazeera Media Network - @damiabonmati

“ The part of society that tends to be misinformed are those more dependent on social networks for information ”


AUDIENCES

As a journalist on Univision I met a particular kind of audience at the U.S.: the immigrants. They are very humble. They are undocumented people, from a low-income level. I guess the Hispanic who is using Instagram has a different sociocultural level, and he or she was born here. I feel this profile is less vulnerable with fake news.

But in broad sense, the immigrant people with low academic formation and poor jobs have big understanding troubles. For them information comes from the whole concept of “the phone”, there are not more categories than that, there are not sources which are more trustworthy than others. In that sense, they are much more vulnerable.

I think Facebook and WhatsApp are relevant platforms. The second one is relevant for the immigrant who was born abroad. They have a higher sociocultural level. They came to the U.S. for better and qualified jobs. The American who was born in the U.S. is not used to WhatsApp because people here are used to having packages for cell phones that include unlimited text messaging in their data plans.

Now the non-qualified immigrants are starting to use WhatsApp too, but Facebook Messenger is still the most common messaging network to most of them. As a journalist I have contacted with them a lot through Facebook Messenger. They could lose their phones but, still, they would keep their FB Messenger.



In WhatsApp you are not sure about the reach of your videos, and that is something you know in social networks. Once a friend of mine sent me a video through WhatsApp which was a copy of the kind of videos we do on AJ+. It was totally a fake video, by copying our characteristics: logo, color, typography, size... by the way, AJ+ is partner with Verificado, a Mexican project which verified many fake news disseminated on WhatsApp.

Media such as Univision did –mainly with natural disasters like hurricanes- very visual campaigns, with cards, a kind of information that must be very shareable.

CALL TO ACTION

With Hurricane Maria there was a huge problem with Puerto Rico, the island was isolated and I did (with Univision) a Call to Action: People in the U.S. with family in the island contacted with us and, in some cases, our reporters at the ground could find their relatives at their homes. Reporters recorded videos to let the relatives know they were fine. In this project the role of WhatsApp and Facebook was essential.

The problem is you have to work hard to make money with these products and even when you get it, you are still a slave to these platforms. You feel like a slave but at the same time it is the only way [as a journalist] to reach some people.

We have successful business models in journalism which don't need social networks to make money with the product. But these models focus on a specific part of society, they are already well-informed, like the Washington Post subscriber, The New Yorker... you reach those people in a way of more quality. So, on the other side, the part of society that tends to be misinformed are those more dependent on social networks for information.

I am pessimist, I think we go towards a world with well-informed people, those with money to pay quality information, and people who depend on social media to be informed.

The articles I publish must go through three different types of editors, and these articles have to compete in the same scenario as videos with relatives going to the gym, a nutritionist blogger or a video saying that kale salad is good to fight against cancer. The problem in this landscape is our consumption of social media is more emotional than rational: if I want to believe kale salad is good for cancer I will believe it.



MATTHEW BENNETT

Journalist. *The Spain Report* - @matthewbennett

“ WhatsApp allows me a bigger and more direct way of contacting some of my subscribers ”

The balance is positive. WhatsApp is something wanted for some of my subscribers. It allows me a bigger and more direct way of contacting them.

CONVERSATION

I have normal conversations with my readers on WhatsApp. I send the same news to all the members in my list, but the conversations, the answers, are private. WhatsApp is a channel, a tool. It can be full of good information and useful conversations, or full of lies and propaganda. The dangerous part of WhatsApp is that it is not public. If you are not in that group you miss out on information.

The [WhatsApp] group of our beer mates, the group of parents at the daycare or the messages related with the issue of Catalonia in Spain... we are influenced by all kinds of groups.



MICRO-MORALITIES

I call this micro-moralities. You are influenced by the communication dynamics and rules set by every single group on WhatsApp.

This can be problematic and dangerous. We have no clue about these processes because they are private. Maybe the dissemination of fake news is easier because you receive the information from trusted friends and, if you do not know that it is false you are not going to look for a way of fact-checking.

I have received fake news from very smart friends so many times, and they are sharing crazy things because they are sure it is real.

My advice would be: publish less content and use it to have real conversations with the most engaged users. That works for me.

WhatsApp does not have an API available for public use. This is better for having personal relationships but it makes the process of publishing content more complicated in terms of journalistic work.



LORENA ARROYO

Digital Journalist. Univision Noticias.

Former BBC News and EFE Noticias - @lav_arroyo

“ We have to encourage the critical thinking and offer digestible data to the audience ”

The digital audience of Univision comes mostly through Facebook. We don't publish anything without fact-checking previously and without consulting our own sources. We have a great responsibility because many times our audience only have information through Facebook and TV. For many of them [audience], to be informed is not a priority, and it is not a priority even when news is about political issues that are directly connected to them.

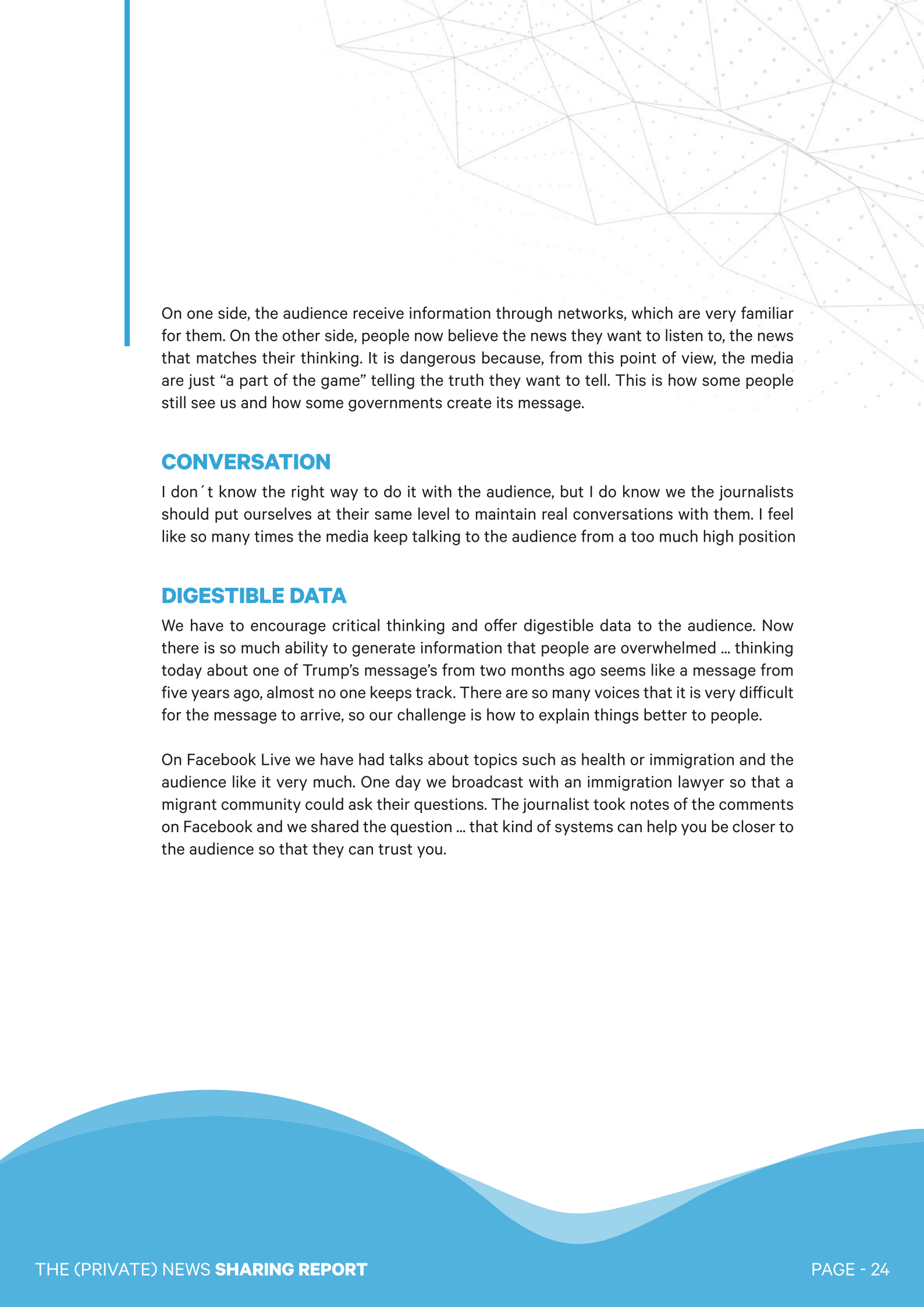
One of the biggest issues in this country is that the White House is one the main producers of fake news.

In social networks we do more things than just linking to the article. We have to offer a very “digested information” for our audience, for instance news such as “Your rights when you are undocumented and Customs & Border Protection comes home”.

PRIORITIES

Most of times, our audience's priority is not to be informed. Their priority is sending money to their families and going every day to work or looking for a job, instead. In this context, our priority as journalists is to know both our audience and what could be helpful for them.

Many times service journalism is confused with activism. But letting the people know their rights is not activism, it is journalism.



On one side, the audience receive information through networks, which are very familiar for them. On the other side, people now believe the news they want to listen to, the news that matches their thinking. It is dangerous because, from this point of view, the media are just “a part of the game” telling the truth they want to tell. This is how some people still see us and how some governments create its message.

CONVERSATION

I don't know the right way to do it with the audience, but I do know we the journalists should put ourselves at their same level to maintain real conversations with them. I feel like so many times the media keep talking to the audience from a too much high position

DIGESTIBLE DATA

We have to encourage critical thinking and offer digestible data to the audience. Now there is so much ability to generate information that people are overwhelmed ... thinking today about one of Trump's message's from two months ago seems like a message from five years ago, almost no one keeps track. There are so many voices that it is very difficult for the message to arrive, so our challenge is how to explain things better to people.

On Facebook Live we have had talks about topics such as health or immigration and the audience like it very much. One day we broadcast with an immigration lawyer so that a migrant community could ask their questions. The journalist took notes of the comments on Facebook and we shared the question ... that kind of systems can help you be closer to the audience so that they can trust you.



JOAQUÍN ORTEGA

Head of Content at Newtral - @Ortega_Tuiter

“ WhatsApp is an early alerts system to detect some trends in social media we cannot reach in a first stage ”

PRIORITIES

Not many journalistic projects, used it as public service, have a response as positive, direct and fast by the citizens as WhatsApp. People send us what they think it could be fake, and their quick response to say thank you is a very grateful experience for us.

The topics where we have more questions from the audience are those related with migration and political information, mainly critiques to political leaders. The amount of time we need to give response through WhatsApp varies, there are topics we can solve in just one day and other topics demand weeks in order to do fact-checking in a proper way.

People in WhatsApp talk to us in a very direct and informal way. The most common sentence is “It is that true?” And they usually attach a picture or link.

Our messages are written by a journalist and we try to offer the best personalized answer we can.

NOT A SOCIAL NETWORK

There is a common mistake when WhatsApp is analyzed: it is not a social network such as Facebook or Twitter; it is a private messaging network. As a private network –as it happens with phone calls- the approach has to be different. We can only ask users to share our fact-checking among friends and family. We can also ask them to have the fake news and disinformation they receive. We cannot come into private conversations.



NOT JUST FACT-CHEKING

Not only are we using WhatsApp for fact-checking, people also send many questions about hot topics, transparency issues or how the government is using taxes. Everyone in the newsroom is involved in some way, but we have two people which are constantly managing the communication flows of WhatsApp messages and answers.

Usually, when something becomes viral on Twitter or Facebook there is a parallel flow of virality through WhatsApp. So in some way it is a kind of early alerts system to detect some trends in social media we cannot reach in a first stage.

It would be very interesting to know more accurately how many people are really fulfilling their informative needs with private channels, and how many of them need more traditional media or use trusted sources in a proactive way.

BEST PRACTICES

In South Africa, colleagues from Africa Check are working really well. They launched a sort of voice-based newsletter. It is especially designed to be shared as a WhatsApp audio, in this piece of content they verify fake news received by this platform.



MARIO VERA

Journalist – Project Consultant at Maldita - @marioverasi

“ We receive about 250-300 daily messages through WhatsApp, even more with big breaking news ”

WhatsApp has become a key communication tool between Maldita and the audience. A proof of this is the amount of support messages we receive so that we keep doing this fact-checking task through WhatsApp. The balance so far is very positive. In Maldita we want to have a narrow relationship with our audience and WhatsApp is one of the reasons to get it in an easier way.

For a few months ago we have had ambassadors with “Super-powers”, who have a deep understanding in specific fields and help us with our work. For instance, they can help translating from Russian or explaining a tricky topic. This helps us on a daily basis to be faster and more effective.

We receive about 250-300 messages a day from our audience through WhatsApp, even more when big breaking news happen. Most of these messages are questions about fake news, disinformation with data or something that looks like a fraud.

Knowing the frequency of questions about the same topic helps us know what kind of content is going viral.

If we receive a day one hundred requests on WhatsApp on the same topic, we try to focus on that issue to offer an answer to our audience as soon as possible. In these situations, media should have organizational skills, an informational calendar forecast and journalists who are able to fight against misinformation.



HUMAN RESOURCES

Maldita's Newsroom has a specialist who focuses on solving the community's questions and doubts.

ROUTINES

We know the average consumption time in platforms like WhatsApp is higher than in social networks such as Twitter or Facebook. We also know that the audience's behavior in messaging channels is different, being closer and more informal with the rest of users. The problem with these channels is they are still hermetic for the media in terms of how information is shared by the people. We do not have basic information like the most shared topics or the most shared contents. What we know is the relation we have with our community of readers and the content they send us. We must keep working in that way. In addition, we also have to keep demanding more collaboration between the media and messaging channels.

As media, we have tools to identify the distribution channels used by our readers when they share content from our website through any kind of device. We also know the incoming clicks from any kind of channel. However, we do not know how the process is inside of that channel. That information would be very interesting.

DAILY ENGAGEMENT

Constant communication with the audience through channels like WhatsApp implies daily engagement with the readers with many resources and efforts focused on that task.

3. THE BEST PRACTICES

In this section we selected the 12 best media practices from 6 countries. They developed private messaging networks –or ephemeral channels-. They are related to the improvement of media literacy of audience with online private environments.

MEXICO

VERIFICADO was a project launched to combat misinformation during the 2018 Mexican presidential elections. Verificado did political fact-checking with thousands of WhatsApp messages sent by the audience. More information is available at: <https://verificado.com.mx>

SPAIN

MALDITA and **NEWTRAL** offer WhatsApp accounts in order to do fact-checking of facts and news that the audience send them. More information is available at: <https://maldita.es> and <https://www.newtral.es>

MATTHEW'S WHATSAPP LIST was developed by the journalist Matthew Bennett and can be accessed by subscribers who pay \$5 or more. It offers insights into his journalistic project on Patreon, an individual but deep coverage to help Spaniards understand “where the nation [Spain] is heading”. Bennett has more than 400 “patrons” (subscribers). More information is available at: <https://www.patreon.com/matthewbennett>

SOUTH AFRICA

AFRICA CKECK did a good job by fact-checking with WhatsApp, even providing with some media literacy tips against misinformation in private online messaging. More information is available at: <https://africacheck.org/factsheets/five-steps-to-fight-fake-news-and-false-information-on-whatsapp/>

THE UNITED STATES

DOCUMENTED SEMANAL is a Spanish-language Whatsapp newsletter from an independent news organization covering the topic of immigration in the city of New York. In addition to providing needed immigration updates in Spanish, subscribers can also send questions by phone. Information is available at: <https://documentedny.com/whatsapp>

EL TÍMPANO is a project with SMS text messaging in Oakland, California. It is a Spanish-language media organization in Oakland, California, using SMS text messaging distributing news to the Spanish-speaking residents in the area who do not receive enough news in Spanish.

RADIO AMBULANTE is a Spanish-language podcast based in New York, which sends out a weekly WhatsApp newsletter to its subscribers. These newsletters sometimes include voice memos.

UNIVISION tried out WhatsApp to distribute news and information during Hurricane Irma in 2017. More information is available at: <https://www.niemanlab.org/2017/09/univision-is-trying-out-whatsapp-to-distribute-news-and-information-during-hurricane-emergencies/>

THE WASHINGTON POST launched a WhatsApp channel focused on India's elections. Correspondents provided with updates and offered some information "behind the scenes". More information is available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/pr/2019/04/17/washington-post-launches-whatsapp-channel-indias-elections/>

PRIVACY PROJECT is a platform for media literacy on personal data developed by The New York Times. It is an Opinion Section whose goal is to analyze privacy. More information is available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/opinion/internet-privacy-project.html>

UKRAINE

UKRAYINSKA PRAVDA created its first Telegram channel in 2017. Since then, journalists have turned Telegram into a preferred source. More information is available at: <https://www.niemanlab.org/2019/07/how-journalists-in-ukraine-have-turned-telegram-into-a-preferred-source-of-news/>

UNITED KINGDOM

THE DAILY TELEGRAPH'S journalists Danny Boyle and Chris Page launched the Telegraph Audio Briefings on WhatsApp in early 2019, a WhatsApp group with two short voice messages every weekday at 8.00am and at 5.30pm. The updates are followed via text message with link to articles.



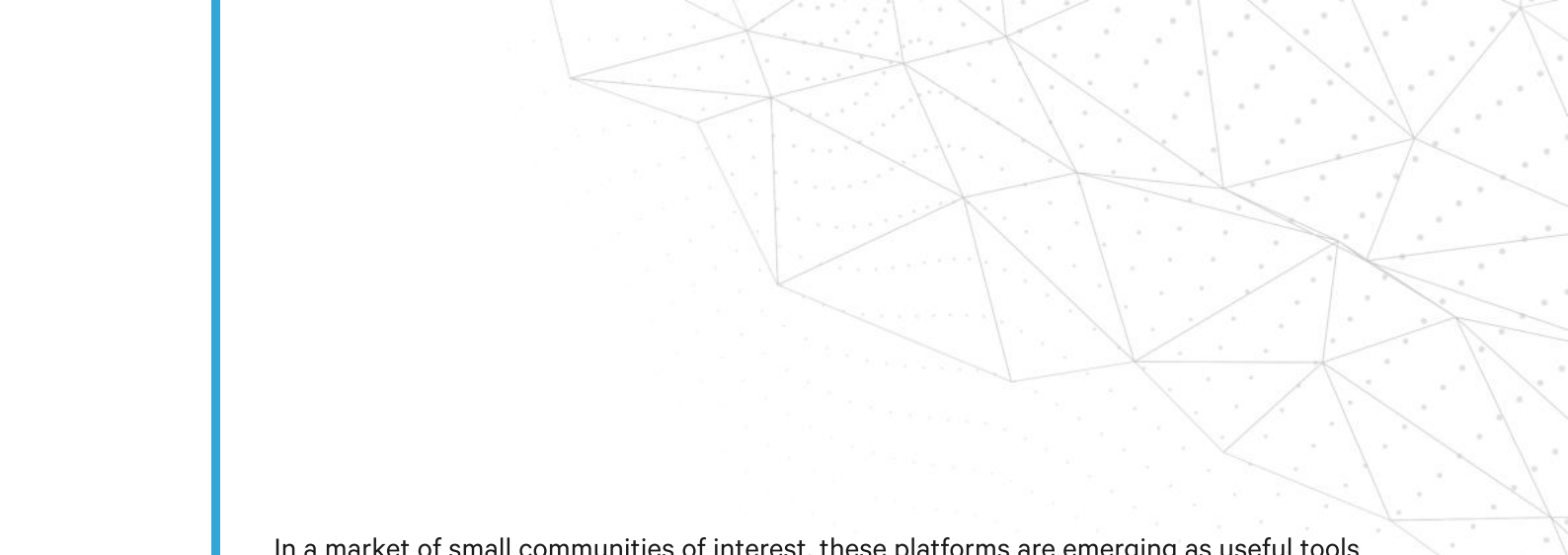
4. CONCLUSIONS

The fact that many of the best practices are based in the United States and are Spanish-language projects does not seem a coincidence. As some journalists pointed out during the interviews, private online networks are powerful tools to connect in a more intimate way with underprivileged minorities. They need more privacy in some cases (like when they have migration issues unresolved) and these channels are a fast and cheap way of getting information (WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, text messaging...). In this sense, this could be a new big wave for the called **service journalism, not just during natural disasters (see Hurricane "María" in Puerto Rico) but also in a broad and daily sense:** legal issues, civil rights, education, micro-economy, etc.

As many interviewees said, private messaging networks are a valuable space of relationships for journalism, but also an opaque and problematic platform for media. Given the problems to monitor behaviors from outside, more research seems to be needed from qualitative (in-depth interviews, focus groups, Q methods...) and reception studies approaches (audience). There are two spheres with higher relevance for online private messaging: political information and breaking news.

WhatsApp is being a leading agent in the journalism field for private messaging networks. By building trust with the audience, it has been proved as an accelerator for getting deeper relations, and as a useful means to making readers into subscribers. As a private messaging network –and not as a social network–, the media cannot be inside private conversations. For this reason, building trust relationships is so important. From a mutual feeling of trust, media can be receivers of messages and content sent by the audience.

Online private messaging networks are not friendly for media and journalists. These platforms are opaque. They do not offer public metrics with which to keep an eye on the reach of the journalistic content. And beyond that, as one interviewee said, there is tension here, “they are closed for a reason”. They serve for personal contacts more than news consumption, which becomes more than ever in a consequence of the so-called incidental consumption.



In a market of small communities of interest, these platforms are emerging as useful tools for **building trust in a deeper way** than mainstream media can do in a public way. The personalized relationships are a key point, but they need successful human resources. On the other side, the consequence of a successful management of trust is how journalists –in an individual level- become part of the same community where they are looking for sources, subscribers or new topics. Maybe this is the only way to respect the personal nature of these platforms.

Knowing your audience is underlined as the most valuable new skill for journalists. It entails something new in 2019. It means to know all the parts of the journalistic process. Beyond that, it involves studying the special nature of each online platform. Who is there. Why and how. It speaks of a kind of “internet culture” –more appropriate than the so-called digital culture-, which is useful to understand how each generation is using each platform in different ways. Knowing the special nature of the private messaging networks is just a small part of the huge media landscape, but is also a part where people are sharing news and, most of times, sharing misinformation.

Journalists and media organizations need to know more about these processes in order to be part of the solution instead of being part of the problem. We have a varied range of excellent practices offered by some media, which understand the effect and relevance of sharing news in private online networks.

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