
Miscellaneous

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When digital audiences disregard the journalistic agenda: conceptualization and evolution of the news gap

Abstract

The digital media environment, transformed by the increase in multiplatform content, reflects a growing divergence of news interests between the journalistic agenda set by the media and the real preference of audiences. This difference in criteria forces the media to compete for the attention of a fragmented and detached public by combining current news topics with other soft, spectacular or curious topics on their agenda. The international scientific literature has referred to this phenomenon as a “news gap,” although in a dispersed manner and with a lack of systematisation in its study. This paper addresses this phenomenon through meta-research, a systematic review and content analysis based on the Prisma model (N=901), with the aim of offering its conceptualisation and evolution in the academic literature from its beginnings in 2010 to 2023. The results compile the research and contributions on the news gap from the perspective of the media that produce content on demand, not always following journalistic relevance or criteria, and the audiences that consume and disseminate it. It is an object of study barely a decade old which, although not integrated in its approaches and methods and with the absence of a standardised model to address it systematically, confirms a structural, multi-platform and multi-support gap that manifests itself as an open and expanding area of study, pointing to the loss of attention of a fragmented audience on the most relevant journalistic selection in a process of disintermediation.

Keywords

Agenda-setting, news gap, audience consumption, digital journalism, PRISMA, social media, systematic review, social media.

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1. Introduction

The dynamics of news production, consumption and dissemination have undergone constant updating and change with the digital transformation of the last three decades (Salaverría, 2019), which has manifested itself in both journalists and audiences and their interrelationship. Digital audiences, able to autonomously create, select and interact with content (Schlegel, 2019; Masip, Ruiz-Caballero & Suau, 2019), construct their own navigation for reading and following the news (Torres da Silva *et al.*, 2017) through platforms parallel to the media, such as social media (Newman *et al.*, 2023), operating outside professional journalistic filters and mediation. This casuistry fragments information and makes it ubiquitous and multiscreen (Benassini, 2014), combining journalistic content with that of other users or political and institutional actors in the same space (Calvo & Aruguete, 2018). This context saturates news channels with messages, creating a “news overload” (Goyanes, Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2021) that forces the media to compete in order to survive economically and achieve sustainability (Berglez *et al.*, 2017).

The “hegemonic” relevance of digital audiences (Berrocal *et al.*, 2014), in addition to the primacy of social media as one of the main “gateways” to news alongside the media (Newman *et al.*, 2021), is displacing the power of journalistic “curation” or media gatekeeping. This role is now also taken on by users (Baresch *et al.*, 2011), who act as “social filters” rather than professional filters of information (Bro & Wallberg, 2014); or by algorithmic recommendations (Eysenbach, 2007), which select content in a personalised and “invisible” way, according to the user’s preferences (Lobo, 2017).

All these previous changes, and in particular the autonomy of users, who are able to inform themselves independently of the media through various platforms, place the audience at the centre of the selective process of the news agenda: it is no longer a question of “what the media do with people,” but “what people do with the media” (Weaver *et al.*, 2010, p. 3). Thus, if the theory of agenda-setting, in its beginnings, established that the media were able to direct the public’s gaze towards certain topics or attributes based on their selection and creation of a hierarchy (Fenoll, 2015; Ardèvol-Abreu, Gil de Zúñiga & McCombs, 2020), the influence of the multiple sources consulted by the individual in the digital environment would increase a phenomenon of “agenda melding” (Shaw *et al.*, 1999), which conceives the formation of the agenda beyond the media and considers that its establishment occurs with the confluence of all the sources that reach the subject, including their interpersonal relationships or their exposure to social media (Palz, 2016). In this way, the public agenda, that is, the “mirror in which the issues given priority coverage by the media are reflected” (Tamayo & Carrillo, 2005, p. 659), would also depend on the issues highlighted by other users and platforms.

Faced with this displacement of the media, which are experiencing growing public distrust and insufficient subscriptions (Newman *et al.*, 2023), journalistic brands are relying on business models that attract the public’s attention in order to maintain their monetisation and economic survival. They are thus suffering from a “crisis of relevance” (Castells-Fos, Pont-Sorribes & Codina, 2022), in which they opt for marketing strategies (Perreault & Ferrucci, 2020) and the supply of content on demand that satisfies their audience (Larrondo, Meso & Peña, 2020; Santander, Elórtogui & Buzzo, 2020), rather than newsworthiness criteria based on the timeliness or impact of the information (de la Torre & Téramo, 2015). As a result, the news agenda is modified, combining the offer of informative journalistic content with other tabloid or spectacular topics that try to attract the user to access the media’s website and promote consumption and traffic, thus generating economic benefits.

The coexistence of ‘hard’ journalistic content, typical of content considered of public interest, with ‘soft’ or sensationalist content has been studied from perspectives related to clickbait (Bazaco, Redondo & Sánchez-García, 2019; Araujo, Serrano & Novoa, 2021); on its impact or consequences on public opinion and the media agenda (Munger *et al.*, 2018; Baum & Jamison, 2006; Nguyen, 2013); and, in particular, on the relationship between journalistic production and consumption by multiplatform digital audiences.

The latter case is particularly reflected in the conceptualisation of the “news gap,” a phenomenon –and the subject of this paper’s research– that posits the existence of divergent interests and preferences between the content and treatment that the media highlight as relevant and what their audiences actually choose, both in what is read on the web (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013) and what is shared or disseminated off the web (Bright, 2016).

1.1. *The state of play: three stages of the news gap as an object of study*

The study of the news gap began in 2010 (Boczkowski, 2010) and, despite being recent, there is a consolidated literature that has demonstrated the confirmation of this phenomenon and the variations of its object of study. The following paragraphs present a brief summary of the state of the art, taking into account that the meta-investigation of the phenomenon is presented later as a central contribution to the results of this article.

The news gap has been addressed in the pre-existing literature from three main perspectives or lines of work: an initial conceptualisation in a thematic gap between media and readers; a first widening of the gap to the multiplatform audience of social media; and a gradual expansion to other variables and study casuistry in line with the evolution of media and audiences in the digital environment and the context of current information.

In a first phase, research into the *news gap* aimed to measure the phenomenon from the theme of the news highlighted on the front page of digital newspapers and the sources most read by users, representing the difference between those issues highlighted under the criteria of journalistic relevance and newsworthiness and those that really receive the preferential attention of the audience that consumes them. A phenomenon that was originally called the “choice gap” (Boczkowski *et al.*, 2010; Boczkowski & Peer, 2011), then the “thematic gap” (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein & Walter, 2010) and then, based on the work of Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2013) and onwards, the *news gap*. Although the first two terms seek the same objective –to analyse the divergent thematic selection between journalists and readers (Zamith, 2015; Boczkowski *et al.*, 2012)– it is the concept of “news gap” that crystallises in the academic literature and expands on the initial study, adding the comparison of the front page, the most read, the most commented and the most sent by e-mail (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013). A disparate selection of information caused by audiences who choose or avoid specific news items –autonomously and on demand–, which is favored by a journalistic way of publishing that offers the news in an individual and disaggregated manner (Schlegel, 2019; Choi, 2021).

This first notion of the phenomenon, applied over the years to media contexts in other territories and multiple case studies (Muñiz & Castillo, 2017; Tristán & Álvarez, 2018) establishes that, while journalists and editors prioritise “public affairs” linked to the professional journalistic relevance of current affairs, politics, international affairs and economics, the reading audience prefers “non-public affairs,” i.e., sports, leisure or the police (Muñiz & Castillo, 2017; Groot & Costera, 2018; Tristán & Álvarez, 2018), with an outstanding soft treatment (Diez-Gracia & Sánchez-García, 2022).

This trend, which had already been observed in analogue times (Bogart, 1989), although it is now increasing mediated by access to the Internet (Muñiz-Zúñiga, Duvergel & Castillo, 2017), is especially noticeable in periods of stability, since moments of crisis or political intensity tend to reduce the gap, as the media produce more information on these issues and public consumption also increases (Tristán & Álvarez, 2018). It would seem, therefore, that the power of setting the agenda depends on the current information context (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013).

In what could be considered a second line of work, studies such as that of Bergero (2015) add to the object of study, as another space of thematic divergence, the diffusion that users prioritise on social media. However, it was Bright (2016) who consolidated this conception from the theoretical point of view by coining the term “social *news gap*.” This name includes the news that social media users share on these platforms as one more axis of the divide. Their preferences are characterised by prioritising issues of social welfare, science or technology (Antón-

Crespo & Alonso-del-Barrio, 2015), thus marking a selection which is independent of that of the front page and the most read found in previous studies. At the same time, other research contemplates this disparity in consumption-dissemination on social media and points to the performance of these platforms as sources of newsmaking and part of the new newsworthiness criteria (Pérez-Díaz, Arroyas & Zamora, 2020) capable, in addition, of containing their own public agenda (Rubio-García, 2014).

The third and final phase in the research of the news gap is especially notable from 2020, where the study of thematic divergences between media and audiences continues and is extended to a myriad of casuistry, including: multiple social media, selection in other media such as mobile applications (Castro-Pérez, Diez-Gracia & Sánchez-García, 2022), variability in electoral periods (García-Bruno, 2020; De León *et al.*, 2021; De León & Vermeer, 2022), political intensity (Mitchelstein *et al.*, 2016) or crisis (Masullo, Jennings & Stroud, 2021); divergence in other variables of form and content, such as the feelings present in the information or the journalistic genres with which they are published (Ormen, 2019); the attributes or characteristics that describe the topics highlighted by journalists and audiences (Arceo-Vacas & Álvarez-Sánchez, 2020); and the frames or set of attributes with which the information is presented (Zunino *et al.*, 2022). Experimentally, Chan *et al.* (2022) studied the possible neurological reactions that their exposure to the most read and shared news causes in individuals.

Faced with this variability and multiplicity of studies on the news gap in just 10 years and the relevance of the “hegemonic” role of the selective audience (Berrocal *et al.*, 2014) towards the media, the main objective of this research is to analyse the phenomenon of the *news gap* from an academic perspective (O1) based on a systematic review or meta-research. With the specific objective (o1) of outlining a conceptualisation of the phenomenon of the news gap based on the main milestones of its research history, the distribution of existing academic production, its methods, areas of application and main theoretical-empirical contributions.

2. Materials and methods: systematic review and content analysis

The research resorts to a systematic review and content analysis that allow the object of study to be described in an updated and detailed way, in a systematic framework through a structured selection and analysis of academic reference sources that allow its relevance to be understood (Gómez-Luna *et al.*, 2014; Blanco-Alfonso, García-Galera & Tejedor, 2019). To do so, three scientific databases are chosen: Web of Science, Scopus and Dialnet Plus. The first two are supported by their multidisciplinary, breadth and majority use, with consensus recognition of their rigor and strategic importance (Codina *et al.*, 2020). The third, Dialnet Plus, is motivated by the need to cover Ibero-American scientific publications that may escape the other two repositories (Blanco-Alfonso, García-Galera & Tejedor, 2019). These include, among others, those containing the FECYT seal of quality in the area of Scientific Communication, Information and Documentation (FECYT, n.d.).

The search and selection procedure has three steps, following the standards and order established in the Prisma model (Page *et al.*, 2021), included in the systematic review model of Aguaded, Civila and Vizcaíno-Verdú (2022), divided on three steps (Figure 1):

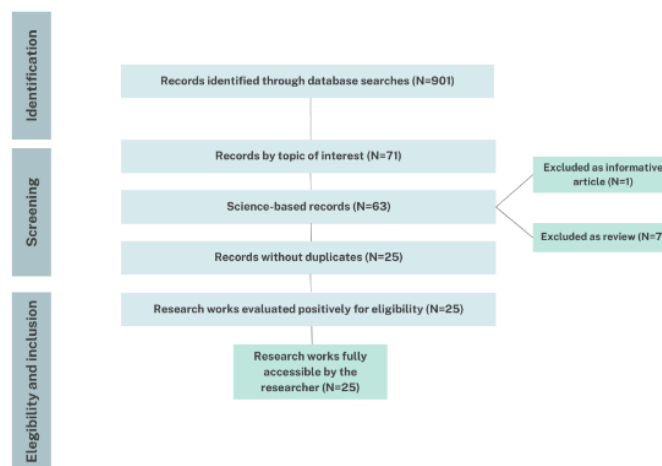
1. Identification of records. The search is limited to the most frequent terms used to refer to the phenomenon in question, both in Spanish and English: *brecha informativa*; *choice gap*; *brecha temática*; *thematic gap*; *news gap*; *brecha de las noticias*; *brecha noticiosa*; *social news gap*. This first step returned a total of 901 items.
2. Screening. Inclusion and exclusion criteria considered relevant to the research are applied, based on the Prisma recommendations (Page *et al.*, 2021). First, the works that address the topic of interest are selected, reducing the initial sample to N=71; then, those with a scientific basis are retained, excluding informative works or reviews. This second screening narrows the sample to N=63. Finally, duplicates are eliminated, obtaining a useful figure of N=25.

3. Eligibility and inclusion. We select for coding those that, after filtering, do indeed deal with the phenomenon of the news gap in a specific and central way, and which are accessible for reading, analysis and subsequent content analysis.

Added to the sample of three repositories, in a complementary way, are those works that cite the work on the news gap (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013) and the social news gap (Bright, 2016) as foundational concepts on the divergence of thematic hierarchisation between journalists and multiplatform audiences. For this purpose, the “Search citing articles” function in Google Scholar is used to cover the largest possible sample, and they are selected following the same eligibility and inclusion criteria previously proposed.

The initial search returned a total of 901 items which, after screening and selection, resulted in a useful, final sample of N=25, with research articles in 11 countries from three continents that have been published in the most relevant indexing bases between 2010 and 2022¹.

Figure 1. Systematic review process of the scientific literature on the news gap based on the Prisma model.



Source: Own elaboration.

From the refined sample (N=25), the content analysis model of Sánchez-García *et al.* (2021) was applied to each unit, grouping the 14 qualitative and quantitative study variables into four categories:

1. Research identification (C₁): Author, year, type of publication (journal, book, etc.), university, country, search word used and hyperlink.
2. Object and subject of study (C₂): Focused on the news gap applied to different information perspectives and/or platforms.
3. Methodology used (C₃): Research method, scope of application (national, international or case study) and sphere of the gap each one addresses (web front page, most read, social media, engagement metrics, etc.).
4. Theoretical-empirical contributions (C₄): Validation or invalidation of the gap, terminology proposal, criticisms or other contributions.

3. Results

The results are presented in detail below, following the order of the four categories proposed in the above content analysis. Due to the small sample, the data are generally provided with

¹ Following an Open Source academic commitment, the complete list of the open sample is available in <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.25375180.v1>.

cardinal figures, although percentages are used when the result is considered to be particularly representative.

3.1. Evolution of the research: chronology and academic distribution (C1)

The first category of meta-research on the news gap (Figure 2), focusing on its identification variables (C1) (in order: type of publication, year, authorship, university and country) shows a meager, incipient corpus, largely developed by the founders of the concept, Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, pioneers in American universities.

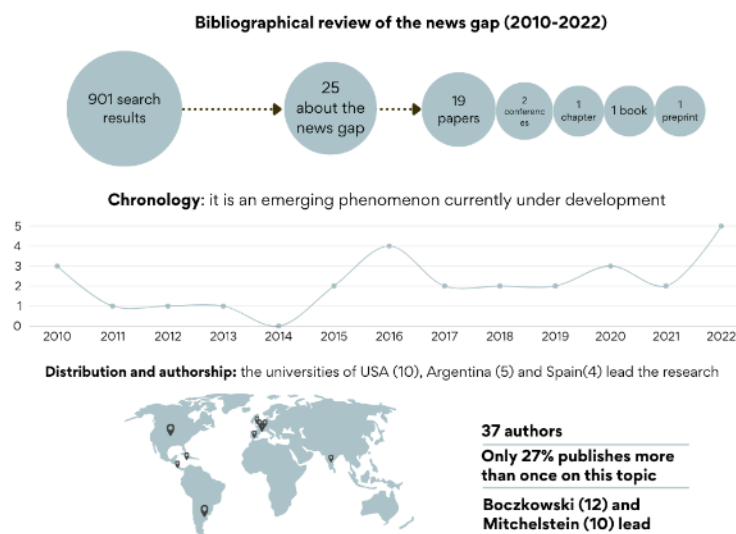
Of the 25 unique research studies referring to the news gap and its derived concepts, the research studies were mainly published in scientific articles (19), followed by two books of proceedings or papers (2), one book (1), one chapter (1), one doctoral thesis (1) and one pre-print (1), in addition to one item whose origin could not be identified (1).

The origin of these studies is in 2010, with the introduction of the choice gap concept (Boczkowski, 2010) to refer to the differences in the thematic selection in the news between journalists and readers within the media agenda. The evolution of the research is slow but stable during the decade, with annual publications from 2011 to 2014, increasing to two in 2015 and experiencing a first peak in 2016 (4). During the last years of the decade, two publications per year appear, until the beginning of 2020 (3), with a special impetus in 2022 (5). Thus, 16 papers were published in the first decade of development, while there are already 10 publications in the last two years.

In terms of authorship, the research is dominated by a total of 37 researchers, although only 10 of them (27%) publish on the subject and only two, Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, in North American universities, do so more than twice, with 46% and 38% of the publications, respectively. These are followed by researchers from Cuban centres, such as Álvarez-Calvo (2); Swiss, such as De León (2); and Spanish, such as Diez-Gracia and Sánchez-García (2).

The distribution of the 37 authors is concentrated in universities and centres in 11 countries, with a predominance of the United States (10.40%), Argentina (5) and Spain (4), followed by Costa Rica (2), United Kingdom (2), Switzerland (2), Netherlands (2), and with only one participation from Germany, Cuba, Denmark and India. It is worth noting the Ibero-American representation in this list (12.48%), with Latin American countries representing 32% and Iberian countries 16%.

Figure 2. Sample, chronology, distribution and authorship of the research on the news gap (2010-2013).



Source: Own elaboration.

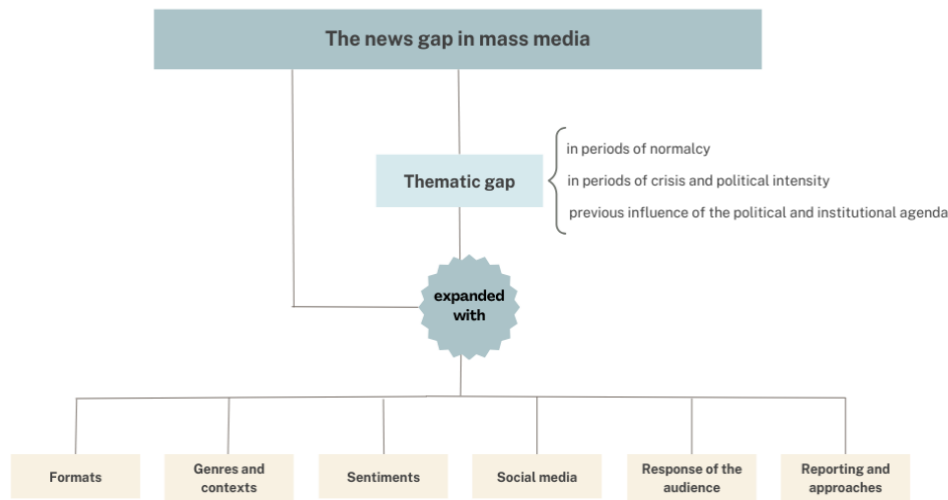
3.2. Object and subject matter of the news gap study (C2)

The results of the next category of analysis (Figure 3) focus on the object and subject matter of the study (C2). Both allow us to divide the research on the gap around two main lines, sometimes coinciding: the majority line is that which links the study of the gap to the thematic divergence between journalists and audiences (18.72%); and the less researched line (although reiterated over time and which could be considered a sub-area of the main one), focused on the narrowing of the news gap in periods of crisis or political intensity (9.36%). In this regard, two studies confirm that the gap is independent of the ideological line (2) (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein & Walter, 2010; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2017), and another studies the specific influence of the political agenda and institutional actors in the establishment of media thematic priorities (1) (Muñiz & Castillo, 2017).

The lines of research on the gap are expanded from the media perspective through the study on the divergence in the treatment and approach of news (3), and their formats, genres and contexts (3) (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein & Walter, 2011; Bright, 2016; Tristán & Álvarez, 2018).

Secondarily, only one research focuses on the feelings present in the information (Ormen, 2019), comparing the cover gap with the topics that journalists publish in their social media (Jaraba & Tejedor, 2020) or, from a more experimental perspective and closer to Psychology, they analyse the brain's responses generated by exposure to the most shared or read news (Chan *et al.*, 2022).

Figure 3. Main lines and topics on the study of the news gap (2010-2023).



Source: Own elaboration.

3.3. Methods and areas of application: discrepancies in news gap analysis (C3)

The third category (C3) breaks down the data on the methods used, the areas analysed and their fields of application (see Figure 4).

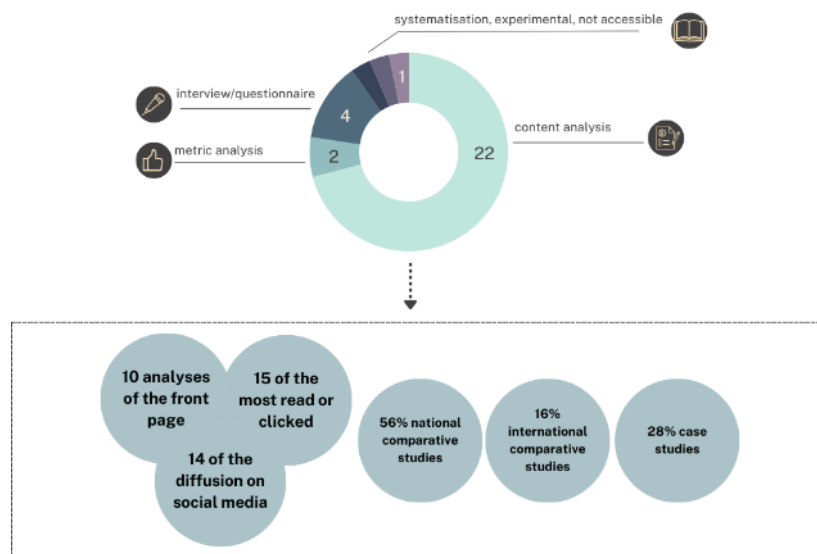
Regarding the methods applied, it can be seen that most studies (22.88%) use content analysis. It is noteworthy that three of them apply Artificial Intelligence tools or software for this purpose, such as machine learning (2) (De León & Vermeer, 2021, 2022) or topic modelling (1) (Ormen, 2019), which detect common structures or themes in the contents based on given instructions or parameters. In addition, 7 of the 21 content analyses (28% of all research) are complemented by another methodological technique: added surveys or interviews (4) (Masullo, Jennings & Stroud, 2021; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2017; Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013; Castro-Pérez, Diez-Gracia & Sánchez-García, 2022) addressed to the audience or to journalistic

editors; including the analysis of metrics or interactions of news in social media (2) (Bright, 2016; De León & Vermeer, 2022); and incorporating sentiment analysis to content (1) through dictionaries (Ormen, 2019).

Of the three remaining papers that do not apply content analysis, one case employs a systematisation of previous studies (Muñiz & Castillo, 2017); other resorts to an experimental methodology through a study of brain responses in the audience through neuro-imaging monitoring (Chan *et al.*, 2022); while a third uses Big Data techniques (Chakraborty *et al.*, 2019).

The areas of application of these methods, meanwhile, indicate research focused especially on comparative studies of various media in national territories (14.56%), led by the USA (5) and Argentina (3), and followed by Spain (2), Costa Rica (2), Cuba (1) and Mexico (1). The next most frequent investigations are case studies (7.28%), including analyses of specific media such as *El País* (1) or *El Diario* (1) in Spain; BBCNews in the United Kingdom (1), *The New York Times* in the USA (1), or *Río Negro* in Argentina (1). More specifically, one study focuses on the analysis of the gap during an election campaign period in Mexico (1) and another on the divergence in the news concerning Covid-19 vaccines in Argentina (1). The international comparative study is the least frequent (4, 16%). Specifically, Boczkowski, Mitchelstein and Walter (2010) compare a total of eleven media from Argentina, Mexico, Germany, the UK and Spain; Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2013) analyse 20 media websites in seven countries and three regions (the USA, Western Europe and Latin America); De León and Vermeer (2022) contrast media content on Facebook from eight European countries and their engagement metrics; while Chakraborty *et al.* (2019) compare *The New York Times* in the USA and *The Guardian* in the UK.

Figure 4. Methods and areas of application in the study of the news gap (2010-2023).



Source: Own elaboration.

Finally, the spheres of the gap on which the 25 academic papers focus show a disparity of criteria that prevents the establishment of a standardised pattern of analysis regarding what is studied within the most relevant in the media, in the audiences or in the networks, and regarding how it is compared and how it is limited or justified.

In the case of the media, most (10) focus on the web front page, i.e., the top, most prominent part of the main web page; others (2) replace it with the main page in its entirety; and some (2) also include the print front page and mobile app front page, respectively. A last study replaces this analysis by a relevance ranking directly elaborated by professional editors applied to a corpus of news.

In the case of the web section referring to the most read, there is a growing interest in articles (15) focused on this section, which is complemented by other studies (2) focused on the most commented within the web.

The study of relevance in multiplatform dissemination, i.e., the most viral content or the content with the highest audience engagement, is the one that shows the greatest diversity of criteria. More than half of the studies (14) include a sample related to this area, although there is a lack of consensus when choosing what to compare: “Most Viral” in networks (6), most shared from the web (1), most engagement (4), “hot topics” in networks (1) or most sent by e-mail (1).

This divergence of criteria regarding what is analysed can also be seen in how what is published, read and disseminated are interrelated in the studies: some (6) compare the information on the front page or on the main page of the media, or commented on the website itself; others (4) contrast this front page with the most disseminated news on social media, comparing both formats (4) or only dealing with what is published by the media and what is most viral on other platforms (2). A few studies (4) unify the front page, the most read and the most viral in the empirical work. The remaining studies (4) do not apply these parameters or do not make them explicit in their methodologies.

3.4. Theoretical-empirical contributions of the research on the news gap (C4)

The totality of the results gathered in the meta-research of the analysed publications (N=25) confirm the existence of the news gap in all its phases of study, and it is even considered “structural” (Tristán & Álvarez, 2018) in the digital environment. Preceding studies also agree on the decrease in the gap during periods of crisis or political intensity (6), even to the point of disappearing (2) (Mitchelstein *et al.*, 2016; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2017) or reversing (2) (Chakraborty *et al.*, 2019; Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, & Walter, 2012); that is, when the multiplatform audience consumes or disseminates these issues in a greater proportion than the coverage offered by the medium on its front page.

However, their theoretical conceptualisation reflects disparate terminology. News gap, the term coined by Boczkowski and Mitchelstein’s (2013) original research, is the most commonly used (18), followed by its translation followed by its Spanish translation as “brecha informativa” (6). Bright’s (2016) concept, “social news gap,” also receives 6 mentions, reflecting the interest in extending the study of the gap to social media, where it is confirmed that users choose to share content other than what they read on the web and what journalists prioritise on the front page. However, the term “choice gap,” coined around the object of study (Boczkowski *et al.*, 2010), and “thematic gap,” with which it was renamed in 2012 (Boczkowski *et al.*, 2012), barely appear in 4 references each.

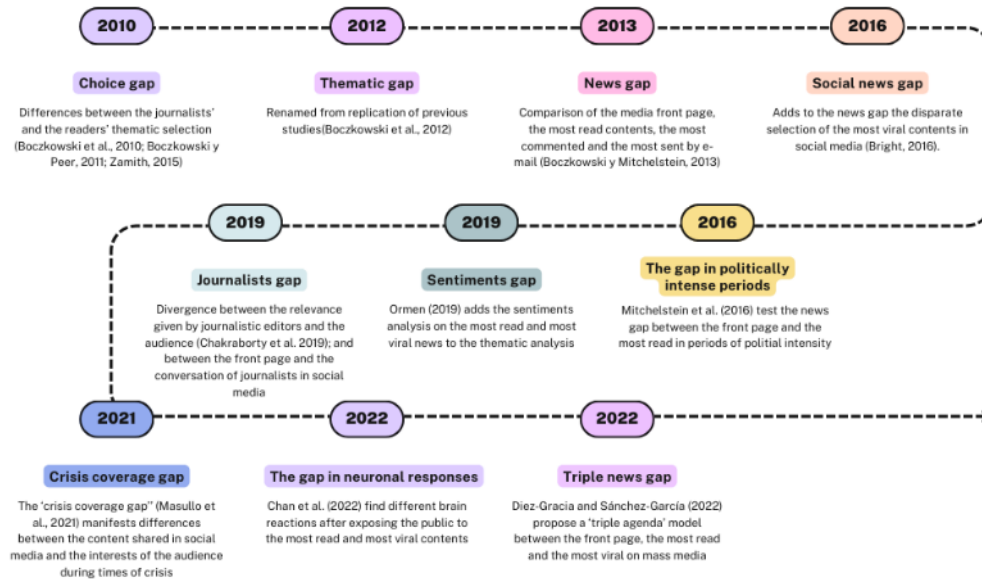
In addition to the main terms searched for the systematic review, the analysis of meta-research results reflects the correlation of the news gap with five parallel or complementary concepts or variants:

- Triple digital agenda, to refer to the divergence between the preferences of the Front Page, the Most Read and the Most Viral (Diez-Gracia & Sánchez-García, 2022). It is detected in contexts of “normality,” i.e., non-electoral and non-crisis.
- Brain-response gap. A discrepancy found at the neurological level, from the exposure and monitoring by neuro-imaging of the individual, to the most shared and most read news (Chan *et al.*, 2022).
- A gap in news coverage when citizen demand does not match media supply in periods of crisis (Masullo, Jennings & Stroud, 2021). Similarly, although not with this term, Diez-Gracia, Sánchez-García and Redondo (2022) find disparate preferences around coverage in contexts of political intensity, such as national elections, emphasising the tabloidisation and the soft tendency of a hard topic, such as political current affairs.
- Gap between the topics that make the front page of the media and those that are the subject of conversation of journalists in their networks (Jaraba & Tejedor, 2020).

- Gap between the relevance perceived by professional news editors and by the audience (Chakraborty *et al.*, 2019) from a corpus that is evaluated with a ranking by both groups.

The results of the international, evolutionary and comparative tour of the main gap concepts are arranged chronologically in Figure 5².

Figure 5. Main milestones of the news gap research during its first decade of study (2010-2023).



Source: Own elaboration.

The chronological journey through the research allows us to identify an evolution in the study and verification of the news gap that begins in the digital context and gradually expands to various platforms, media and social media of different kinds. It also highlights the absence of a standardised or general theoretical-empirical model that applies to the different cases found in the scientific literature; instead, each study particularises its case and variables, on each occasion interrelating different criteria and definitions of the media front page, the most read and the most viral, even with up to ten different terminologies.

From this joint perspective, knowledge gaps are also identified with respect to the causes that directly lead to the gap, especially around Reception Studies: there are no studies that specifically analyse why audiences make their reading and dissemination decisions or why they disregard the criteria established on the front page. Likewise, there is no specific approach on how to reduce the gap, nor has there been any study of the real consequences for newsrooms and the sustainability of the media.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The systematic review and content analysis developed in this work with the application of the Prisma model (Page *et al.*, 2021) allows the news gap phenomenon to be conceptualised and delimited from a corpus of international research, with more than a decade of experience in 11 countries in three continents with varied media contexts, thus fulfilling the main objective of the study (O1). Specifically, the analysed works progressively confirm, through different methods, the expansion and consolidation of a “news gap” that is the name for the growing phenomenon of a discrepancy of news interests between the media and their multiplatform audiences.

² The theoretical and conceptual contributions of each specific work analysed regarding the news gap are available in <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.28494320.v1>.

The international study of this phenomenon in the digital environment has gradually expanded its initial line of work, focused on the thematic selection discrepancy of media and web audiences (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein & Walter, 2010; Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013), towards other media (Bergero, 2015; Tarullo *et al.*, 2016) and other devices (Castro-Pérez, Diez-Gracia & Sánchez-García, 2022). In this progression, the activity of users who only share content without reading it on the web has gained special relevance, reflected as relevant actors that increase the gap (Bright, 2016), forming one more sphere in the gap and highlighting the interest in attracting this niche of “viralising” users.

The analysis of the meta-research on the news gap in terms of its methods, areas of application and theoretical-empirical contributions (oi) indicates a general consensus on the existence of a disparate information preference between what is most highlighted by the media on its front page, what is most read on the web and what is most shared on the networks. A “triple” gap (Diez-Gracia & Sánchez-García, 2022) that starts from the media’s central agenda and reflects, in a more structural than conjunctural way (Tristán & Álvarez, 2018), the selective and autonomous navigation of the audience (Torres da Silva *et al.*, 2017) that varies in some cases in periods of crisis or political intensity (Tristán & Álvarez, 2020; De León *et al.*, 2021), although without having found common results in this regard throughout the analysed sample.

In contrast to this generalised consensus on the existence of the news gap, the incipient and limited existing international corpus (N=25) and its temporal and methodological disintegration allow us to conclude that, despite the confirmation of the phenomenon in different media in a context of the “crisis of media relevance” (Castells-Fos, Pont-Sorribes & Codina, 2022), more studies are needed in the face of a journalistic and social reality in permanent transformation and of “high technology” (Pérez-Seijo & Vicente, 2022). Thus, it is considered necessary to corroborate the gap in a standardised and systematic way under a unified model that responds to the evolution of the original proposal of Boczkowski & Mitchelstein (2013) and its study horizons. It seems now, during the 2020s and the impulse of Artificial Intelligence, that it is necessary to continue analysing new perspectives of the news gap and the impact of such factors as algorithmic curation; or to expand emerging aspects of the gap, such as its operation in periods of crisis (Masullo, Jennings & Stroud, 2021); or the impact of different sources on the audience’s perception of information in a context of “agenda melding” (Palz, 2016). Another area of study remains open, to analyse the direct and real impact of this autonomy and the audience’s own criteria on the media and their business models, and whether there are feasible strategies to reduce the gap.

In short, it is considered that, despite the evolution of its conceptualisation in the last decade, the news gap is presented as an open and relevant area of study, whose research must continue in a changing environment, which is multiplatform and dependent on the media context (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013) that requires constant updating by noting the growing ability of the audience to ignore the journalistic relevance and establish their own consumption pattern based on their preferences and the influence of their context as a whole (Palz, 2016). In short, the journalistic challenge of reducing the news gap is still open from two perspectives: by modifying the journalistic agenda at the demand of the audience and regaining their trust and the influence of the media. A relevant matter to achieve media sustainability that combines the survival of their business models with quality and journalistic criteria.

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