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Reference press metamorphosis in the digital context: *clickbait* and tabloid strategies in *Elpais.com*

Abstract

In a context marked by technological uncertainty and the search for a viable business model, the digital media have succumbed to various strategies to attract audience, reflected in the clicks generated by each reader. This article focuses attention on a reference newspaper as *El País,* to discuss what options were incorporated in order to attract visitors to the website. By using a quantitative and qualitative methodology, a study was carried out on four sections added by *Elpais.com* in the last two years: *SModa, Icon, BuenaVida* and *Verne*, which have generated significant traffic, particularly the latter. The conclusions of the analysis show a commitment to tabloidization, with anecdotal, lifestyle or curiosity content, while the so-called hard news is absent from these new sections. This circumstance coincides with headlines that have some characteristic features of the popular press, which act more as bait to capture the curiosity – and also generate income each time they are clicked on – rather than as informative elements. The fragmentation of the texts, and their list-style structure, mimic the success of some native digital media, while moving away from the standards of the quality press.

Keywords
Tabloidization, clickbait, reference press, quality, digital audience, innovation, *Elpais.com*

1. Introduction

In recent years the struggle for a digital audience has become as fierce a battle as those once traditionally fought in the printed media, especially in the race for first place, between the two main contenders *Elmundo.es* and *Elpais.com*. The latter finished the year 2014 as "the world leader in Spanish digital newspapers", with 12.4 million individual visitors from computers and mobiles[1]. The newspaper attributed this success to several initiatives, including the *Verne* section launch, "the space for the most amazing things on the Internet." This proposal, inspired by *viral*

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[1] "La web de *El País* cierra 2014 como líder mundial en español" (*El País*, 1/2/2015).

content[2] and curiosities, emerged on the web in late September 2014, following the bid for audience attention and *soft* news that had begun in 2012 with the partnership with *Huffington Post*. Subsequently, the inclusion of sections devoted to the magazines distributed with the newspaper started, although with contents independent of the printed versions: *SModa, Icon* and *BuenaVida*.

This article analyses the strategies used by *Elpais.com* through these new sections that have helped to increase the audience. From a study of the contents and presentation, this research aims to determine whether the mechanisms that the media presents as innovation and as a method of attracting new readers, falls in line with a quality newspaper or responds to a drift towards popular proposals characteristic of tabloidization.

Unlike studies focusing on the evolution of the sections that have traditionally conveyed weighty contents (hard news), such as international politics and economics, this analysis detected a new trend in the online edition of the newspaper, namely the emergence of spaces that seek to attract additional reader traffic, through light contents which, if not banal or viral, were also using headline and writing strategies closer to the tabloids, as identified by Conboy (2006), than to the informative and interpretative press.

2. Theoretical framework

After years of expansion and revenue growth, the newspaper industry has faced a crisis of global dimensions over the past decade, characterised by three inter-related factors: falling sales, declining advertising revenues and job losses, all fuelled, according to various international indicators (OECD, 2010; ASNE, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2015), by the closure of newspapers and journalist layoffs.

An in-depth study of the Spanish context offers a similar image. Between 2007 and 2013, advertising revenues in Spanish mainstream media reduced by almost half, of which 65% was in daily newspapers (from 1,894 down to 662 million euros invested) (Infoadex, 2013, 2014). Between 2008 and 2014, journalistic job losses numbered 11,875, a figure that has increased with fresh layoffs and new employment regulation (APM, 2014). In parallel, between 2001 and 2013, the press suffered a drop in sales of 1.2 million copies – a variation of 29.6% – according to the Association of Spanish Newspaper Publishers (AEDE, 2012).

The advent of digital technology and the international financial crisis led to a collapse of the traditional media business model –based on advertising and copy sales, (Curran, 2010; Franklin, 2012; Starr, 2012; Picard, 2014)– and forced the industry to undertake a radical transformation, in a situation dominated by uncertainty (Currah, 2009; Franklin, 2014; Pavlik, 2013). These circumstances accompanied the widespread commitment between 2011 and 2014 to various digital payment models (Casero-Ripollés, 2010). This fourth stage of the *paywall* evolution, or the blocking of content without payment (Arrese, 2015) is linked to a greater willingness by users to pay (Picard, 2014b), in particular for mobile content or to complementary linked services (Goyanes, 2014). However, the dilemma between free access and payment is far from resolved. The viability of either model involves contextual factors, ranging from the contents for which charges could be made to the prestige of the publication, the ability to attract large audiences, or the business conditions, such as the Scott Trust which supports *The Guardian* (Arrese, 2015; Carson, 2015; Sjøvaag, 2015).

A fundamental aspect derived from the business model is the quality of content that can be financed and the ability of digital media to play a counterweight role (that of "watchdog") developed by the press, especially when the cost savings involve a deterioration

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[2] The term viral is used with reference to that content which is rapidly distributed through networks, using a biological simile.

in the standards, or when the need to attract audience collides with the news value (Currah, 2009; Starr, 2012; Picard, 2014; Pickard & Williams, 2014).

Data analysis and real-time audience metrics condition the behaviour of editors when selecting topics that capture the interest of the audience, or their rapid replacement if not (Tandoc, 2014). This is true not only in media using the business model based on readers' free access, which requires significant traffic to attract advertisers, but also those which have established a payment system (Schlesinger & Doyle, 2015). Furthermore, there is a decisive move towards low cost content (Currah, 2009) "about the wildest celebrities, uploading lovable cat videos, highlighting salacious headlines" (Tandoc, 2014: 14). An orientation identified by Karlsson (2014) as belonging to tabloidization, with a resounding "Goodbye politics, hello lifestyle".

2.1. *Tabloidization and content trivialization*

Under the heading of tabloidization, info-entertainment, content trivialization or banalization of contents, from the final decade of the twentieth century, various studies have shown that a process of quality erosion has been underway in the media, referring to the drift towards publishing subjects and styles characteristic of the tabloid press (Sparks & Tulloch, 2000; Zelizer & Allan, 2010). Research in this field has a tradition of several decades, both in the sphere of the television and the written press (Kurtz, 1993; Langer, 1998; Esser, 1999; García Avilés, 2007), not only in the selection of topics, but also in the presentation of content from the most entertaining and digestible angles.

In spite of the attention it aroused, tabloidization still does not have a clear definition (Bird, 2009) and the perception of some authors contrasts with that of those who, from the cultural studies perspective, require an unbiased view of content connected to popular culture (Fiske, 1989) or demand that the rhetoric or the elitist approach do not replace critical reflection (Rowe, cited in Esser, 1999). Taking Kurtz's definition, Esser noted that tabloidization implied an idea of process, involving the contamination of the quality press with contents more appropriate to the popular press, and maintains that it should be analysed with a multi-dimensional approach, using a broad range of indicators (1999). This transformation is affected by both economic pressures and those imposed by advertisers, with demands for far more striking and shocking contents in order to attract readers (Esser, 1999; Sparks & Tulloch, 2000; Reinemann *et al.*, 2011), all of which was amplified at a time of severe economic crisis and business model uncertainty (Rowe, 2011). Magin & Stark appealed for a correlation of factors including market structure and strategy of the media (2015).

Critics of the changes that have approached the conventional press to the world of the tabloids, claim it devalues public debate and, ultimately, democracy. Since the 90's, several works in this area based on content analysis methodology, have studied the evolution of the treatment of political information, to highlight the increased focus on scandals and unbecoming behaviour (Franklin, 1996; Kepplinger, 1998) or to emphasize the personal angle (Berrocal, Domínguez & García, 2012). However, empirical studies have failed to produce conclusive results of the effects on democratic life of tabloidization (Skovsgaard, 2014).

2.2. *Themes and expression*

Considerations about the dynamics of tabloidization or info-entertainment tie in with the distinction between hard and soft news, in order to highlight the growing importance of the latter. Reinemann *et al.* considered that the distinction between hard and soft news is based on three categories: the subject (its political relevance), the focus (in a social sense including its consequences in relation to the individual and the episodic) and style (the impersonality and absence of emotion in relation to the personal and the emotional) (2011: 14).

According to the previous distinction, so-called service journalism or lifestyle journalism would fall squarely into the category of soft news, taking into account the remoteness of topics with regard to the political arena, and its growing presence considered a sign of tabloidization (Hanusch, 2012). Fürsich noted that, although it is part of so-called popular journalism, the diversity of issues that are addressed (food, health, fitness, fashion, decoration, family, leisure, entertainment, music, art or beauty) makes it difficult to define their character, committed to offer service and advice to a reader who makes decisions as a consumer (2012). In contrast with classic positions which contemplate this journalism as a kind of "aberration" of serious journalism, some authors advocate studying them according to their characteristics and their ability to explain social change (Fürsich, 2012; Hanusch, 2012).

Beyond the subject, the language component plays a substantial role in the identification of the tabloidization process (Bird, 1992; Magin & Stark, 2015) or in the sensationalist characterisation (Molek-Kozakowska, 2013). In fact, Conboy in his study of the British tabloids emphasises its role as a shaping factor. "Language is employed across the tabloid paper in a systematic way to build a composite version of their ideal, average reader's vocabulary and style: a sort of vernacular ventriloquism" (Conboy, 2006: 14).

Both Bird (1992) and Conboy connect the language of this press with orality, and they refer to Ong (1982) to highlight the traits that persist in the written language, in particular to manifestations that embody the popular press. "The tabloids (...) bear all the hallmarks of a residual, oral tradition, illustrated in their history, content, writing style and reader response" (Bird, 1992: 4). That is why this study pays special attention to the linguistic aspects and its relationship with the contents.

3. *El País,* from press reference to 'viral' strategies

The effects of tabloidization on the Spanish quality press have been discussed for more than a decade, in case studies (Labio, 2008), content analysis (Humanes, Martínez Nicolás & Francescutti, 2009) or comparisons to highlight the influence of the characteristic forms of the free press on that for payment (De Miguel & Berganza, 2013). Within this framework, the analysis of practices of a newspaper like *El País*, presented by Imbert and Vidal-Beneyto (1986) as *of reference* –a term that is often used as a synonym for the prestige or quality press– offers a new perspective on this phenomenon, linked to the digital environment. In their book, the authors ascribed *El País* in this category, based on various criteria: presentation austerity and rigor of content, "that should be authenticated by the verification of the sources, pluralism of opinion, rejection of the sensational and the pledge to an individual style." This goes hand in hand with a priority commitment to international news and cultural issues, a line that in 2004, Vidal-Beneyto identified with the newspaper[3].

The vulnerability factors attributed by Starr (2012) to the American press industry – great dependence on advertising; incidence of generational change in the loss of readers, and the delicate economic situation of the newspaper companies – may apply to a large extent to the Spanish context (Díaz Nosty, 2011; Casero-Ripollés & Izquierdo, 2013) and, in particular, to *El País*. A financial situation, which has been left to an investment fund to refinance its debt, to the record of employment regulation that led to the dismissal of more than two hundred professionals, some of them veterans of renown, or to the closure of delegations (Serrano, 2010; Peñamarín *et al.*, 2015), to be added to the search for new

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[3] "'Le Monde' y los diarios de referencia", de José Vidal-Beneyto (*El País*, 5/7/2004).

readers. In fact, since early 2015 the newspaper sections functioned with goals, periodically evaluated in a "meeting analysing metrics and leadership"[4].

The current context characterised by the absence "of a business and professional model" and by the dynamics of "trial and error", represents a serious threat to quality journalism, according to the President of the Prisa Group that publishes *El País*, Juan Luis Cebrián[5]. Additional to the resort of quoting essays, one should add the adoption of initiatives that have enjoyed audience success in other media – beyond consistency with the editorial line – which has led to the proliferation of structured texts in the form of lists; to the BuzzFeed style; and the decisive move towards viral issues[6], and to surprising, interesting and practical contents, or those which convey positive emotions (Berger & Milkman, 2012) susceptible to being shared on social networks. These *viral* strategies developed in the field of marketing, are an important resource to boost digital traffic and to the media's ability to attract more advertising revenue (Newman, 2012). Their power is in direct relation to the evolution of the different forms of access, since 35% of Spanish users learn news through social networks (Newman, 2015: 14).

Miguel Corcobado of Prisa digital, suggests that traditional media are making a concerted effort and, in spite of the dominance of the dynamic trial and error, and the difficulty of monetising content, "one of the ideas that are functioning relatively well is the creation of other native media, that share the spirit of the original publication, but are clearly directed to another type of reader"[7]. *Verne*, led by Delia Rodríguez, positions itself in this line. In just five months this section managed – rom its opening as a blog in September 2014 to March 2015– to concentrate almost 9% of the total *Elpais.com* traffic, incorporating new audience to its site from mobiles and social networks[8]. In May, seven months after launch, it accounted for 12% of access to the digital edition and 75% of its networking traffic originating from social media, mainly mobiles. This has allowed the attraction of new users, different to the standard reader of the newspaper.[9] After the unsuccessful experience in the period 2002 to 2005, the medium operates with no current paywall for its contents. In fact, after recording a 19.3 million euro loss in the three years when the closed paywall model was used (Cea Esteruelas, 2009), and yielding up its leadership to its main competitor, *Elmundo.es* (Salaverría, 2007) –a position not reverted until ten years later[10]– it has remained outside the process of incorporating payment methods.

The commitment to viral content has played an important role in *Verne*'s success. The Director shows the analysed topic searches aimed at attracting attention and being massively shared, although limited to banal questions: "I have learned to exploit the weaknesses and natural interests of brains to create contents difficult to resist. Every time someone clicks on my content (or fails to), I notice, I analyse, I learn from it and then use this knowledge on the next occasion" (Rodríguez, 2013: 14).

Viral strategies are closely linked to a headline pattern known as clickbait, referring to the action of clicking on the digital link. Media such as *Upworthy* have achieved millions of views with this hook that, unlike the informative headline, calls upon the reader's curiosity

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[4] Retrieved from http://links.uv.es/wgNgU6t.

[5] Retrieved from http://links.uv.es/NKX3nKk.

[6] The *Enredados* section (*Elmundo.es,* from November 2014), *Flípalo (Lavanguadia.com*, from May 2015), or the RTVE programmes *Cámara abierta* and *Tvemos* (summer 2015) are some of the examples of feedback between the internet, social networks and the conventional media.

[7] Retrieved from http://toyoutome.es/blog/del-lector-al-usuario-nuevos-medios-con-nuevos-retos/36654

[8] The figures were disclosed in the XVI Huesca Congress of Digital Journalism. Retrieved from http://blog.rtve.es/interactivos/2015/03/huesca-2015-innovar-a-trav%C3%A9s-de-la-mirada.html.

[9] Retrieved from http://links.uv.es/TAL8zcX

[10] Retrieved from http://links.uv.es/lIRwPc9

whether appealing to humour, emotion or the classic bait like sex. In fact, a resource widely exploited by the tabloid press, which some digital natives have capitalised on (Cassidy, 2015).

4. Methodology

The study combined qualitative and quantitative methodology to analyse the characteristics of four new sections built by *Elpais.com* in the past two years: *SModa* (SM), *Icon* (IC), *Verne* (VER) and *BuenaVida* (BV)[11], to which the publication largely attributed its increasing audience. The objective of the study was to determine how this strategy has affected the quality of the contents, both in the choice of topics and how they were developed. To this end four criteria were selected, set by different authors, as indicators of quality: relevance of the issues, information sources, narrative structure and textual sources (Gómez Mompart, Gutiérrez Lozano & Palau Sampio, 2013).

The corpus includes 151 items published in *Elpais.com* between June 1 and June 30 in 2015. For the selection, a morning and night search was done each day in the analysed sections. This enabled the location of 300 items, reduced to a half after the removal of repeats present in different editions. It should be noted that these sections are usually updated once daily.

To conduct the study a content analysis was firstly designed to determine the most common issues. Although these sections have axes of specific interest, it was found that contents of health, in its broadest sense, may appear not only in *BuenaVida*, but also in *Icon* or *SModa*. The contents are divided into the following topics:

Table 1. Analysis of content

Topics included	**1. Health:** Medicine, nutrition, hygiene, physical exercise
	2. Beauty: Fashion and trends, style, aesthetics
	3. Lifestyles: Partners, psychology, family
	4. Cinema, media and publicity
	5. **Anecdotes and curiosities**: Little/no informative relevance, distant from being newsworthy and of general interest
	6. Celebrities: Featuring celebrity news, but on aspects of their private lives, rather than their professional ones.
	7. Rights: Women, homosexuality
	8. Politics
	9. Language: Sexist use, new words, games
	10. Other: Topics not covered in the above list

Secondly, through qualitative analysis the endeavour was to establish the most important linguistic aspects, from the structure of the texts to the headline strategies or plurality and the type of sources cited (Table 2).

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[11] While sharing the thematic and stylistic features of the analysed sections, in addition to being placed beside them on the web, it was decided to exclude the *Huffington Post* because it is an independent publication whose audience has no effect on the audience metrics of *Elpais.com*; the audience is instead diverted to its own URL.

Table 2. Qualitative analysis

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Points to consider	**1. Headline:** Expressive features
	2. Sources: Type, identification and relevance to the development of the topic
	3. Structure and content development: listed, fragmented, interview, narrative
	4. Interaction between textual and audio-visual elements (photography, videos, animated gifs, screen captures from social media).

5. Results

5.1. *Topics*

The contents analysed reveal a clear tendency to emphasize anecdotal aspects and curiosities, particularly the *current news* generated on the network. If these issues are grouped together, they represent more than a quarter of the texts (27.2%), and if this is then added to news with famous people as protagonists (10%), the sum far exceeds one third of the corpus. The group of anecdotal themes include issues of little importance, which are limited to personal testimonies and insignificant stories, such as *I'm from New York, I lived 8 months in Extremadura and my life changed* (VER) or *Corners of Madrid where summer seems to be spring* (BV). They have been labelled *Curiosities*, peculiar issues that focus on rarities, often supported by photographic material. This is so in *Sometimes I see faces* (VER), *The strange case of the foot-rear-vision-mirror of the new lady mayor of Jerez* (SM) or *'The Galician Spiderman' who cleans blinds outside on the façade itself* (VER) issues that, in most cases, are no more than the joke category circulating on social networks. Most items included as curiosities and anecdotes (85%) come from the *Verne* section.

The texts labelled as *Celebrities* are dedicated to popular individuals; however, rather than being about their professional side, the focus is on the marginal and striking aspects in their lives, from relationships and family problems to their personal wardrobe style. The *Icon* and *SModa* sections mostly concentrate on such content. Nevertheless, so-called celebrities do not have as specific a weight or importance as in the popular or tabloid press. In the analysed items we can observe a sort of *democratised attention*, including stories of unknown individuals able to show some special skill or condition, written in a spontaneous or anecdotal style.

Figure 1. Published contents by topics
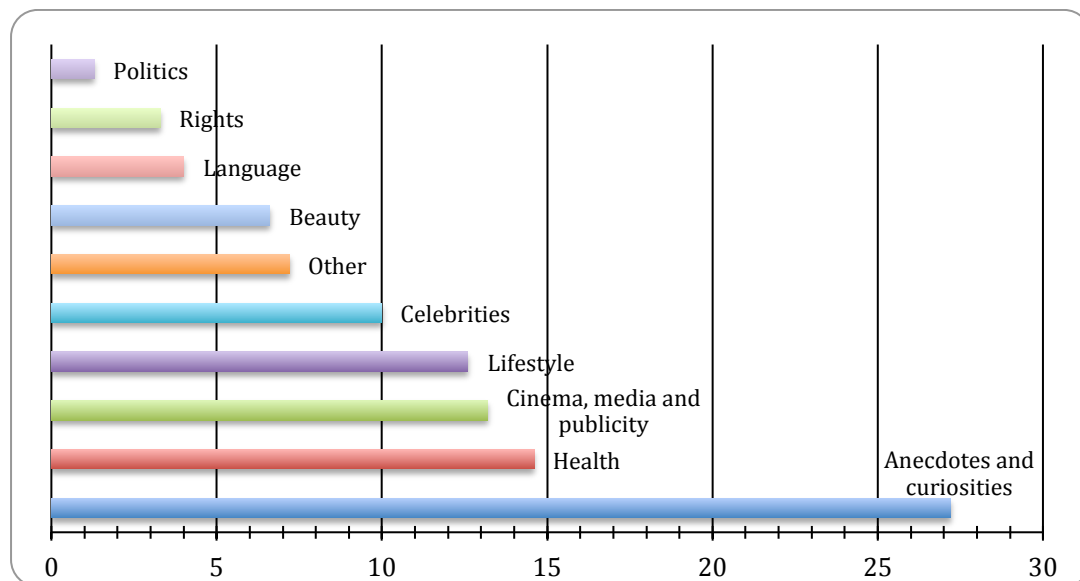
Secondly, the issues related to welfare and lifestyles are expanded (33.8%) and include: health, nutrition, exercise, information for consumers, beauty, psychology or fashion. Half of these articles are in *BuenaVida,* while *SModa* and *Icon* comprise the remainder. Texts related to the media, films and publicity represent 13.2% of the contents. Despite its secondary nature (4%), it is surprising that in six articles, language is the main theme, but always by highlighting a striking component in the headline, either to emphasise sexist language (*Why being a bitch is bad while being a fox is good*), catchphrases *("Make nextazo" and 41 more of your child's expressions you don't understand*) or errors *("A horny greeting" (and other blunders in e-mails at work).*

The selection of topics presented in these sections emphasise the so-called *soft news*, with a preponderance of content that direct attention to the emotional and personal, while the substantive issues, preferred in the informative sections, have a marginal character. Politics represents only 1.3%, slightly below those pieces with allegations of discrimination against the rights of women and homosexuals (3.3%).

5.2. *Headlines*

A headline represents the first point of connection with the reader, and in its formulation lies much of the appeal that can stimulate and capture the reader's attention (Gómez Mompart, 1982; López Hidalgo, 2001). Far from being a random exercise, the writing of these text sequences is a reflection of the register of the news and hence the importance of analysing the linguistic strategies. To establish the relationship between formulas for writing these headlines and the rhetorical patterns used by the tabloid press (Conboy, 2006), an evaluation sheet[12] has been developed. The main resources related to orality – which constitute the tabloid press DNA – are specified in the table below (Ong, 1982; Salvador, 1989; Payrató, 1996; Bassols & Torrent, 1996; Mancera, 2014):

Table 3. Headline resources

Orality markers and interaction with the reader	- Punctuation and expressiveness: questions, exclamations, parentheses/brackets, inverted commas - Direct appeal to the reader: rhetorical questions, vocatives, cataphoric elements (*this* ...) and the presence of deictics
Vocabulary and word games	- Proverbs, set phrases, idioms, and that with an amusing content - Colloquial or informal language, generic or buzz words - Intensifiers
Morphosyntax	- Simple structures and noun phrases

5.2.1. *Markers of orality and interaction with the reader*

The *Stylebook* of El País explicitly states that the use of questions should be limited to those opinion or analysis articles signed by external collaborators (1996: 67). However, 12% of the texts revised are headed by this punctuation mark. This aspect is linked to a conversational style that opts for reader interaction through rhetorical questions, habitual in the popular press:

- *Billion, trillion, quadrillion. What's the highest number you know?*
- *Why does everyone talk about the heels in 'Jurassic Park'?*

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[12] In the examples given, the relevant aspects are in cursive, in accordance with the author's line of argument.

At other times the dialogue is established through the use of vocatives to draw the attention of a section of readers, addressed to famous people or including imperatives to prompt an action:

- *Attention runners:* your socks do not work
- *Tremble Messi*: Six stars of the FIFA Women's World Cup
- *Save* a forest from the supermarket queue
- *Meet* the DIY guru who has revolutionised the Internet

Although the style manual restricts the use of the colon in headline statements, this study shows that they appear in 12% of the cases analysed. This punctuation mark is used to establish a link between the two sequences of what should be a complex sentence, and cause a dramatic effect:

- *The most amazing thing* about the biography of Lee: It's all true
- *#Payforyourporn*: porn also fights against piracy
- My knees *hurt*: what sport I *can* do and what is forbidden

Parenthesis or brackets are only justified in *El País* headlines to publish sports results or for geographical identification (1996: 37-38). However, 6.6% of that analysed exhibited the use of these signs, in a wink to the reader in order to highlight and empathise, or to respond to a supposed previous response:

- Do you love your dog (*almost*) as much as your child?
- Guide to the good use of a microwave (*in fact, you do it badly*)
- If your child has failed five exams, punish him (*but not as you think*)

Nor has the categorical ban on the use of ellipses and punctuation marks been met, as in the following examples:

- How many contraceptive methods do you know? There are more than 15...
- Hooray for the shorter workday! (*and last but not least, it makes you slimmer!*)

Together with these resources, the use of deictic formulas appears in 8% of the headlines. This procedure serves to indicate, through certain linguistic elements, a person, a place or a particular time, replaced in-person by an indicative gesture. Blom & Hansen (2015) stressed the presence of this procedure (*forward-reference*) in the Danish press as an example of *tabloidization*, linked to headline-hooks that arouse the reader's curiosity enough to click on them. In the analysed corpus the use of space deixis is striking, both neutral formulas (*this/that*) and demonstrative plus substantive combinations, located beside a photograph alluded to. In the first case, *this* refers to the content of the article, while the remainder is intended to convey a sense of presence to the reader:

- *This is what* actresses charge to wear a dress on the red carpet
- *This is what* happens when you do not change your sheets
- *This guru* leads an 'army' in search of the perfect body
- *This is the man* most desired on television
- *This exercise* is worth ten abdominals
- *In this fridge* you can take and leave what you want

The modal deixis is associated with headlines that do not advance any information, but invite you to discover the outcome of the subject by throwing a hook, with the adverb *so/thus*. A personal deixis is manifested through continuous calls to the reader. This reference, prohibited in informative and interpretative texts –even more so those formulas involving the familiar use of "*tú*"– is not however an exception in the texts analysed: 25% of them shows headlines use the first person singular, inclusive forms or interpellations:

- *This* has been the wedding of Charles Philip of Sweden and Sofia Hellqvist
- *Thus* changes a man's body after childbirth
- *Your child* wastes his time in dance class
- *Your life* improves if you set the alarm clock for one hour later
- 11 key ideas in order *not to be ripped off* on the Internet, according to hackers
- *My* advice to Americans for organising a gay wedding
- 23 words you *can* incorporate into *your* vocabulary right now

The deployment of the actions described above is not unintentional in the style of headline that, in the case of digital media, works not only as a gateway to information, but also as an essential source of audience and revenue every time a reader clicks on it. A question, a direct appeal or a deictic form invites the reader to respond by clicking.

5.2.2. *Vocabulary and word games*

Puns from proverbs, idioms and popular expressions represent a key element in the headlines analysed. Again this criterion clashes with the style manual, which condemns the lack of imagination, even though there is some retouching.

- 5 fillings that are *better than the bread itself*
- *The child that* lets his hair grow to donate it to the sick
- *Sometimes I see* faces
- *Revolution in* the elderly: goodbye to the stereotypes of old age
- *Tell me how* you sit and *I'll tell you* how much sex you have
- *Tell us* where you bathe and *we'll tell* you how to wash your bikini

Additionally, some examples of generic word use (*do/make…*) stand out with language that emphasizes the emotional aspect. Intensification is channelled by way of neologisms – introduced by *super* – and adverbs and adjectives used as prefixes, especially those formulas with the word *more*. All of them are repeated in almost one in ten headlines:

- Boredom is one of the best *things* you can do
- The *curse* of 'Eight Is Enough'
- A *strange* green lunar-beam captured in the Canary Islands
- The *amazing* and *controversial* life of Hope Solo in six points
- 5 reasons why this is the *most envied life* on the Internet
- The *longest* race and other *incredible* running stories
- From *super* boss to *super* villain of fashion?

Essentially, these expressions collide with any will to inform so that the anecdotal or playful prevails. This fact has a connection with the contents themselves, which can hardly provide a strong headline, being weak and insignificant stories and curiosities.

5.2.3. *Morphosyntax*

Even though nominalisation is a characteristic of formal registers, in the headlines studied it was particularly frequent and used in formulas lacking a conjugated verb. More than half of the analysed headlines (53%) respond to a nominal scheme in creating more or less complex structures, ranging from words connected by a conjunction to prepositional phrases. In these compositions, shocking and dramatic constructions are devised to induce a click, which contrasts with the function of informative headlines:

- Rajoy, Sarkozy, Russian salad *and* Twitter
- Smiles, tears *and* memes
- Cold poo *or* the birth of the modern fable

- *Rebellion of* the legs in Algeria
- The *fashion of* vertical videos

Depending on the attachments that go with a noun phrase, there are also frequent headlines with non-personal forms of the verb, especially those introduced by "*para*" (*in order to, to* and *for*), which are linked to lists.

- 18 conspiracy theories *in order to* watch TV with different eyes
- 6 tips from 'A penguin' *in case* you get stuck in the lift
- My advice to Americans *to* organise a gay wedding
- Easy tricks *to* get a flat stomach
- Sexual challenges *for* discouraged couples

Along with those cited above, there are a large group of headlines consisting of noun phrases with subordinate clauses:

- 8 Murphy's laws *that* have no scientific basis
- Nine mistakes *that* a man should not commit in an 'app' for flirting
- 20 images *that* summarise half a century of beauty
- 10 cartoons *that* were censored
- Fifteen films *that* make summer seem more summery
- The Spanish company *that* triumphed with handmade sex toys
- 10 community managers *who* went above and beyond the call of duty

Sometimes they constitute a chain of prepositional phrases:

- The strange case *of* the foot-rear-vision-mirror *of* the new lady mayor *of* Jerez
- Ten epic videos *of* accidents *of pop* stars *on* stage
- Murphy's laws *that* have no scientific basis
- The 'crest' *of* Alves and other hairstyles *of* character *in* the final *of* the Champions
- The daily life *of* Swedish fathers *during* their paternity leave

In the above cases, the headline, far from reporting the contents in order to advance the storyline, reflects the desire to draw readers' attention through elements of surprise, contradiction, or to the intensifying adjectives (*strange case, epic crashes...*). In the same vein, it is possible to find examples of nominalisation linked to the use of commas that replace an elided verb, or thematic information placed before an interrogative clause:

- National Geographic, star of Instagram
- Juliette Binoche and Kristen Steward, two stars that do not follow the script
- King Fury, the Hitler film that is sweeping through Youtube
- Hellin's image of Christ in sawdust, a new Ecce Homo?
- "Ignorant men and women": the hoax of the Professor′s letter

5.3. *Types of sources*

The presence of identified sources adds strength and credibility to a news story, and the fact that they may be own sources or exclusive is one of the distinguishing features of any medium. The selection and suitability of sources is a fundamental aspect when analysing journalistic texts.

One of the most important trends clearly indicated in the analysed texts is the use of indirect or second-hand sources, taken from websites, other media or social net-works. This feature is present in 42.3% of the texts, especially those from *Icon* and *Verne*, which are often restricted to a brief introduction and a series of screen-shots, as in *What happens if you ask Siri to divide zero by zero?, De Pedroche to Delavigne: seven declarations of love on*

Instagram, or *Rajoy, Sarkozy, the Russian salad and Twitter*, among others, as examples whose theme fails to go beyond the anecdotal or curious. Among the 64 publications without first-hand sources, trivial matters or repeat information from other media clearly stand out.

Table 4. Sources used

		Number of texts	Presence
Only indirect sources or those without citation/identification		64	42.3%
Own and indirect sources	A single, own source of information	20	13.2%
	More than one source of information	49	32.5%
Other (interviews, opinion articles, image galleries)		18	12%

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Less than half of the analysed texts are based on interviewed sources (47.7%) and of these, one-third depends on a single personal source, while all other accounts are second hand. This situation is common in *Verne,* but less pronounced in *BuenaVida* section, which includes issues of health, psychology or lifestyle. However, in the text entitled *The lies about vaccines* not a single source is identified, despite the significance. In addition, certain information was not supported by independent sources, but rather derived from laboratories and clinics, such as in the case of *Cellulite strikes back: there are two new causes that provoke it* or *Tell us where you bathe and we'll tell you how to wash your bikini*

In those texts which identify sources, it should be noted that they are often a showcase for indirect promotions: the article *32 things a man must do alone (at least once in his life)* (IC) includes a dozen companies and establishments among its suggestions. Furthermore, *This exercise is worth ten abdominal*s (BV) and *14 easy tricks to get a flat stomach* (BV), incorporate direct links to nutrition clinics, sport centres and personal trainers, suggesting surreptitious advertising. Unlike clearly identified advertisements, these formulas reflect a dangerous hybridisation, by establishing a direct link, connecting the information to commercial interest (Rolfsen, 2014).

The scarcity of own sources, which are limited to 55% of the texts, is an important alarum call about content quality. Especially when combined with unimportant topics, or the meagre expertise to give an alternative approach – not just limited to anecdotal testimonials or protagonists as sources –, especially in *Verne,* which included topics such as *Hellín's image of Christ in sawdust, a new Ecce Homo?*, *What most makes the bridegroom cry*? or *Do DIA pizzas only have ingredients in the visible area?*

5.4. *Structure and content development*

Most texts analysed (53%) are characterised by little cohesive structure, in which the narrative or expository development is replaced by lists or juxtaposed fragments; an organisation designed for a superficial *scan*, rather than an in-depth reading. To this fragmentary option should be added the distribution throughout the text of numerous multi-media elements (videos, captured images from social networks or photographs), causing constant disruption to the reader's attention. Given the structure and development of the texts, they have been grouped into four categories:

Table 5. Structure

	Description	Number of texts	Presence
Listed	Include a list of characteristics more or less extensive	59	39%
Fragmented	Fragmented distribution is used with headings and/or questions	21	14%
Expository-narrative development	Organized into paragraphs, following a traditional format	64	42%
Interview	Follows the conventional model of question/answer	7	5%

Lists are present in 39% of the texts analysed, suggesting willingness to provide timely data, in small doses of information that do not require much time or concentration. The organisation by list offers the advantage of permitting certain data to be processed and thereafter retained more easily; however, this raises serious doubts about such treatment being suitable for contents that require further development and nuance (Konnikova, 2013), or more qualitative information in order to facilitate greater understanding of some complex issues (Vehkoo, 2010). This structure facilitates consumption via mobile telephones of a content that can be shared on social networks, with which an audience of digital natives are familiar (Lawlor, 2013).

The previous data connects to the fact that 18.5% of headlines include a numerical reference, especially the *Verne* and *Icon* sections. To these may be added other headings that indirectly target the lists through keywords (*Advice, The most common mistakes, Guide to, So/Thus* or *Why*). This type of content structure represents one of the most characteristic features of new media that have achieved a very significant intensity of traffic, such as *Buzzfeed*. The most common lists vary between 10, 15, 21 and 25 entries (O'Donovan, 2013). In *Elpais.com* there is no a reference number, the most repeated are 6, 10 and 15.

The second structure, labelled fragmented, represents 14% of the corpus and also involves dispersal, but rather than being introduced by numbers or points, it is achieved by the use of bold headings or questions, accompanied by a paragraph that reflects or explains that reported. This mode is characteristic of the *Icon* section.

Common formats in traditional media, such as the interview and expository texts, number less than half of the corpus: 5% of interviews which follow the question–answer pattern, and 42% of texts that meet the requirements of narrative coherence and cohesion to be found in conventional news.

6. Conclusions

The contents structured in lists and the headline-hook are far from being an innovation of the digital press. What is new, however, is that their presence has been extended to a reference informative media such as *Elpais.com.* The article emphasise the emergence of

characteristic features from the tabloid press, in a clear correlation between news-values that overvalues the curious and anecdotal, headlines that appeal to the reader, lack or absence of sources, and a reporting style that disperses the contents.

These results highlight the perverse effect on the quality of a medium when the main objective is audience acquirement, and which arises by establishing a business model that relies heavily on advertising revenue, within a communication group subjected to financial sector pressures, in order to address the debt. In this regard, the sections analysed presented as innovative initiatives, not only deviated from high standards of quality journalism, but opened a dangerous gap, to *contaminate* all the content published beneath the *Elpais.com*. This implies a devaluation of a journalistic brand that, for years, has enjoyed significant international prestige.

This study shows worrying trends derived from the mimicry of successful digital natives biased towards entertainment, on the part of conventional news media. First, along with irrelevant content, the multiplication of lists and atomisation of content questions the ability of this journalism to be able to account for complexity, for relating the causes and consequences of major issues and to answer those key questions distinctive to interpretative journalism. Secondly, it forces us to reflect on the social responsibility that derives from the use of headlines framed for impact and spectacle, as well as the effects of information with unidentified sources, neither contrasted nor verified. Thirdly, the type of content fostered by some sections of *Elpais.com* raises serious questions about the future of the quality press as a democratic guarantee, in the sense of a real commitment to research and the due reporting of relevant issues, with rigorous treatment.

The route chosen by the incorporation of the analysed sections seems, in addition to being a way of harming brand value, to be a dynamic difficult to reverse; this in turn conditions the possibility of opting for another business model that requires payment for contents clearly devalued. These circumstances contrast with innovation and feasibility strategies suggested by experts, which are presented as a combination of quality, research and ethical commitment (Pavlik, 2013).

In future research, it would be interesting to see how the strategies thus far observed may contaminate, or otherwise, the so-called serious content (hard news), as a result of its increasing assimilation and profitability in terms of audience. In spite of the fact that, in this case, a cross analysis has been carried out, a long-term study would allow a greater understanding of the effect's evolution. It would also be sensible to extend research to other media to appreciate the phenomenon's dimensions.

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