The challenge facing the media:
INTERACT OR DIE

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123RF

Are traditional communications media ready to take on the challenges posed by users in this new age? What is the role of audiences in this game? Academics at the School of Human Sciences of the Universidad del Rosario have been working on a project aimed at a full understanding of the digital media of Colombia, Mexico, and Ecuador.

Requiem. Journalists, in the shape and form we are used to seeing them, are dying out. The occupation of the journalist, extolled by Albert Camus as "one of the finest professions I can think of", is currently undergoing a huge transformation, among other reasons because of the expectations of today's media audiences.

The multitude of challenges faced today by traditional communications media is incontestable. These include the high production costs of printing thousands of copies of a newspaper, audiences that without any loyalty jump from one medium to another, and an emerging and growing trend for fake news stories triggered by dark interests. We can add to this the need of many consumers to obtain information at any minute, regardless of the place or devices used.

This has led to user interactivity becoming the focal point of interest for big media firms and, naturally, scholars too, whereas this aspect had been scornfully ignored by the media until recent years because they were only concerned about publishing or broadcasting without any clear picture of what consumers would do with this content.

Spanish researcher, Daniel Barredo—from the Applied Ethics, Labor and Social Responsibility Research Group of the

Universidad del Rosario's School of Human Sciences—has been digging deep for greater understanding of many of these scenarios. So far, this has meant 13 months of work, with a further 23 months remaining before completion of the first stage of the research project: *Interactivity in Latin American digital journalism. An analysis of the main cybermedia in Colombia, Mexico, and Ecuador.* Its aim is to decipher interaction mechanisms in cybermedia, and to begin this task a sample of the main digital media was defined and looked at in the light of indicators of international standards. Through this method, the project aims to identify the model for boosting community participation in the digital environment's public sphere.

IF YOU KEEP ON DOING THE SAME THING, DON'T EXPECT DIFFERENT RESULTS

One early important finding is that the media continues to prioritize traditional communications routines. In other words, carrying on with what has always worked before is a drawback, with the media and journalists performing the same kind of journalism they learned years back but

which today clashes with a more challenging reality in which the figure of the journalist has toppled from the pedestal it occupied for decades; today's audiences demand different things from communications organs.

"If the media keeps on doing the same thing, users will tend to insist on getting information from other media. Interaction is one of the key elements," adds Barredo. Are journalists geared up for this? One of Barredo's primary observations is that they are not, or at least not all of them. This researcher, who has analyzed domestic digital media and corresponding digital data from conventional media, explains that "up to this point, our analysis has focused on content. We have submitted journalists to in-depth interviews, later applying tools using university students," he adds.

But are media audiences taking part in the co-creation of content published? So far, this research has recognized that 13 percent of Colombian media have indicators of audience-generated content; the figures for Mexico and Ecuador are respectively five and seven percent. This tendency could rise, since it is attractive for audiences to see themselves reflected. And there is a clear benefit for the media: content generated by audiences cost less. Barredo points out, however, that audiences still find it difficult to communicate with media, while spaces for audiences communicate very little between each other.

Daniel Barredo, of the Applied Ethics, Labor and Social Responsibility Research Group of the Universidad del Rosario, warns that if the media continues along the same lines, users might look for their information from other media. Interaction is one of the key elements.

In this new scenario, "the journalist is not the center of the dialogue, since there are now many centers of attention," the researcher comments. In this battle for attention, social network platforms (such as Facebook and Twitter, among others) have been able to capitalize on user communities because they mirror environments similar to families and groups of friends.

Nevertheless, it is the media that continues to provide spaces of social legitimacy, more than social networks. Conven-

tional media sustain themselves on advantages inherited over the years, the research reveals. In this context, the most trustworthy media are in print form, although the most used are social networks. Such are the paradoxes of our times.

This notwithstanding, conventional media do not enjoy overwhelming loyalty. Young people are definitely dropping conventional media, and they are now finding the content that interests them from many different information sources, in areas such as leisure and, within this specific field, in video games, for example.

Even though text articles are still the most highly-consumed type of journalism, audiences are looking for new formats based more on audiovisual or visual dynamics. Collective interview formats and twitter-interviews have opened up as hybrid styles in which the journalist acts as a moderator.

Finally, although the media is trying to merge entertainment and information, audiences today have many more opportunities to check information. All in all, the media faces the huge task of getting its human talent to meet the challenges of integrating attributes such as usability, updating, and interactivity, alongside the ever-indispensable seal of quality.

Infographic based on referenced communications media websites.