

Active audiences in the mobile ecosystem: Analysis of the interaction options in Spanish cybermedia through websites, mobile telephones and tablets

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Abstract: Cybermedia are immersed into a paradigm change, going from an environment where the main device to connect online was the personal computer to another one wherein there is a strong and increasing integration of new devices such as smartphones or tablets. Thus, thanks to the advancement of IT and the gradual incorporation of objects with small computers inside. Also, the fast technological progression is changing the way in which users relate to Internet and interact with cybermedia.

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1. Presentation

Cybermedia are immersed into a paradigm change, going from an environment where the main device to connect online was the personal computer to another one wherein there is a strong and increasing integration of new devices such as smartphones or tablets. Thus, thanks to the advancement of IT and the gradual incorporation of objects with small computers inside them into our daily routines, ubiquitous computing (Hansmann, 2003) is becoming a daily reality for millions of users. In a world where there are as many mobile telephones (6,800 million) as people (7,100 million), the fast technological progression is changing the way in which users relate to Internet and interact with cybermedia.

In the Spanish case the use of mobile devices is particularly relevant. In 2010, 13% of the Spanish people connected online through their mobile telephones, compared to an 8% of Europeans. In 2013 these numbers have risen to 57% and 49%, respectively. In fact, according to data from the Eurobarometer, Spain is the country with the highest growth rate in connected mobile lines: it has become a 43 % (Fundación Telefónica, 2013: p. 14).

If the appearance of computers brought about important changes for media and also encouraged the appearance of digital editions, nowadays the sale of these devices has dropped 10.9% at a global level in favour of mobile telephones, which triple their sales volume. Undoubtedly, this change of tendency in the sale of devices is also affecting media, which once again must reinvent themselves to continue adapting to new channels to convey information.

After the adaptation of traditional analogue formats –press, radio and television- to the new interface dominated by the mobile web, the main challenge of media today is their adaptation, among others, to iOS and Android-type environments, which control the market due to the increase of sales in smartphones and tablets. Because, according to the *La Sociedad de la Información en España 2013* report, 77% of the searches with mobile telephones have been conducted in places where a computer was also available.

2. Theoretical framework

Mobile telephones and tablets have gained ground as web access platforms, so that they have been revealed as useful supports with great potential to disseminate online journalistic content. As these kinds of devices have increased their connectivity, the way of intercommunicating and to participate in journalism has been redesigning itself (Cebrián and Flores, 2012), both from the point of view of citizen users and the professionals of the sector, as shows the phenomenon known as MoJo (Mobile Journalism), which for the last years has been shaping specific professional profiles such as that of the “mobile journalist” (Quinn, 2009: p. 10).

Until the present the mobile ecosystem has experimented two evolutionary phases. From a first one characterised by simple content and basically oriented towards providing added value with respect to other versions, to a second phase marked by the launch of the Iphone in 2007 and the appearance of tablets. In the absence of perfecting and consolidation, in this phase content shows higher dynamism and is more adapted to the stylistic and design determinants of the mobile medium (Aguado and Martínez, 2008: p. 112). In this evolution of tactile devices, the initial interest of information producers for previous systems such as PDAs and information alerts services like SMS (*Short Message Service*) and MMS (*Multimedia Message Service*) should also be considered (Westlund, 2013).

The first online versions of media also showed a similar evolution, going from copy-paste or dump to an increasing adaptation to hypertextual, multimedia and interactive potentialities which the new channel promised by then. This allowed for the development of exclusive formats and narratives which have ended up coexisting with adapted and enriched formulas. In view of these changes, the mobile web has been considered a symptomatic tendency of the profound changes that the digitisation process has started to show, after the success and assimilation of web communication processes in the first phase (Larrondo, 2005), to which we might add the increasing hegemony of the collaborative *many-to-many* model (Scolari et al., 2009; Meso, 2013).

Towards 2008, the main information brands in the world already had mobile versions of their news portals (Westlund, 2012). The effort put for new screens is bearing fruit, and currently a significant volume of media web traffic is channelled through mobile devices, so that it sometimes reaches half of the total traffic. Given the potential for new devices to generate revenue, everything indicates that the improvement on mobile applications supply will be one of the medium-term or short-term main challenges at a business and corporate level (Valverde and Aguado, 2010). Further, some estimate a shift is already taking place in media interest, meaning that the most relevant issue would no longer be user-generated content (UGC), but user-distributed content (UDC) (Westlund, 2012). Already in 2006, Groebel, Noam and Feldmann (2006) glimpsed that the advancement of mobile communication would generate new kinds of content and new forms of interaction.

Indeed, this new channel known as the “fourth screen” appears marked by innovation and converging potential, thanks to its advantages in comparison with previous channels, and beyond its ubiquitous capacity. Among the advantages, experts highlight its multimedia character, the possibility it offers of double, non-exclusive consumption, and its interactive quality. Regarding this last aspect, Aguado, Feijóo and Martínez

(2013: p. 16) explain we are before a screen which is, first and foremost, “social, expansive and sweeping, able to penetrate into the alveoli of our daily interactions with a singular fusion of communication and content”. Because of all of the above, and beyond being mere supports to distribute traditional content, mobile devices situate journalistic communication before new challenges related to fundamental issues for the industry, such as the development of narrative formats and adapted genres, as well as of effective formulas for the participation of active and prosumer audiences.

In the specific case of the press, the rise of mobile devices is shown as a key element for survival in the future, which allows anticipating an increasing competition in this sector. Not for nothing, the applications for mobile devices favour brand consolidation and user loyalty, besides being an interesting way of acquiring more advertising revenue, which is however pending consolidation.



Image 1. Comparative between the homepages for PC, tablet and mobile telephone of *La Vanguardia.com*

Along with these advantages, data on the drop in advertising investment and the increasing proximity users have with their mobile telephones lead experts to claim that the future of media must involve the strategic bet on multiplatform content, which, in the words of Aguado and Castellet, generates an unprecedented paradox (2013: p. 199): "The crisis in the journalistic industry coincides with an explosion of content demand and diversity of areas and ways of information consumption". Also according to these authors, today it is possible to distinguish business models and paradigms, while waiting for mobile formats and social networks to show a potential which was announced a long time ago: a) solid paywall model which combines advertising, subscription and sales per issue, offering very similar content to the printed version, although sometimes providing additional services (e.g. *Kiosco y Más* or *Orbyt*); b) solid paywall model, subscription-based, and therefore offering quality without advertising; c) “porous” paywall model, which charges for accessing certain content (e.g. *New York Times*); d) open, free, model, whose strategies are increasingly similar to those of native online media, such as *The Huffington Post*.

In short, those who have recently analysed apps of Spanish media for mobile devices with dominant operating systems such as iOS and Android (Costa, 2012; Canavilhas, 2009, Nogal and González, 2012; Ferreras, 2012) admit that converging possibilities coexist with a certain degree of divergence: whereas newspapers, radio stations and television channels show common information models on the Internet, with text acting as a fundamental element, applications show that some television channels and all radios go back to their previous nature, by offering simple connections to the web broadcast: “By demanding an only sense (hearing), the radio might be able to compete with the more visual appeal of newspapers and televisions, by allowing the user to keep with their normal activities while listening to the radio on the smartphone. It is the return to a very successful relation with the user in the past” (Canavilhas, 2009). In this respect, and in contrast to the more extended use of audiovisual and multimedia features, a limited exploitation of hypertextuality, interactivity and customisation is established.

Thus, mobile communication is increasingly successful as a research topic where several questions become emphasized, as those focused on delving into the real communication advantages of native media applications, or the features which allow to talk about a different style of information consumption, supported by a “anywhere and anytime” philosophy. Thus, it is understood that, despite the newness of this area, today we have a growing academic production devoted to analysing the model that is being applied to journalistic companies to inform and connect with users through ubiquitous screens.

3. Methodology

Empirical research on the interactivity options offered by online media through their presence in several platforms is still incipient and the methodological approaches are diverse. According to the analysis goals, they tackle the study of the business strategies behind the participation options offered by conventional media through multiple channels, the content analysis of “journalistic” material produced by audiences through different supports, or the participation of audiences through several platforms, not only in technological terms but also as a cultural phenomenon. From a conceptual point of view, a specific terminology has also appeared which has favoured semantic approaches and reflections on the indiscriminate creation of new words.

Until the present day, most research has focused its efforts on analysing the multiplatform distribution of journalistic content (Cabrera, 2010) based on the idea that these new distribution forms increase the possibilities of dissemination and consumption of content, so that they generate profits. However, academic studies have overlooked other analysis aspects as the participation of audiences promoted by online media through different supports.

This context justifies the interest of the present study, which analyses the different participation options offered by online Spanish media through different platforms. To that end, a sample of the most representative online Spanish media has been selected according to their audience (OJD Interactiva, Estudio General de Medios and Google Traffic Rank). These media have been classified into six categories: newspapers with a written version (*El País*, *El Mundo*, *La Razón*, *ABC*, *20 Minutos* and *La Vanguardia*), online-only (*LaInformación.com*, *Diario.es*), sports press (*As*, *Sport*, *Marca* and *El*

Mundo Deportivo), economic newspapers (*Cinco Días*, *El Economista*, *Expansión* and *La Gaceta*), radio stations (*Cope*, *Onda Cero* and *Ser*) and television channels (*RTVE*, *Antena 3*, *Tele5*, *La Sexta* and *Cuatro*). All in all, 24 media have analysed, each in five different supports: through web sites –accessed through browsers-, and through the applications specifically developed for mobile telephones and tablets, which have been also doubled for iOS and Android operating systems.

In parallel, and considering the interactivity classification provided by Alejandro Rost (2006) –selective interactivity, communicative interactivity and participatory interactivity- a record has been created to detail which interaction possibilities are offered to audiences in the different platforms where each of the media analysed is present. The indicators used for each of the interactivity categories suggested can be revised through the results tables (Tables 1, 2 and 3).

Thus, the analysis methodology performs a distinction between selective interactivity, referring to the possibility the user has of interacting with content offered by the medium –typically through a hypertext-; communicative interactivity, which provides the users with the possibility of interacting among themselves, and productive interactivity, thanks to which users can create their own content and integrate it into the medium.

Within these three large sections, to measure the interactive potentialities of each medium and following the guidelines of cybermetrics (Codina, 2003; Alonso, Figuerola and Zazo, 2004), a record with 23 analysis units has been created with sections allowing for binary answers. The final results represent in percentages the fulfilment of potential of each interactive feature which is extracted from the analysis of the 24 media included in the sample.

4. Results

In the section of selective interactivity, the well-established web editions which are equally accessible through the browsers incorporated into smartphones and tablets – presented in “classic” or “mobile” versions- are more relevant than the native apps which offer more functions. Websites are more significant because they present links within the body of information pieces (83.3%), information alerts and print possibilities (62.5%). Content syndication through RSS (95.8%) might be understood here as a singularity, because it is difficult to translate this option into specific applications for each medium, which are incompatible with each other.

On the contrary, and in comparative terms, apps for smartphones and tablets do not significantly differ from websites regarding the graphic appearance of content and the customisation options, in what is a good example of how they have been primarily conceived as visual content adaptations to a tactile interface which presents a smaller surface. But typical desktop options in static work environments such as printing are disappearing in all cases, without exceptions.

	Web	iOS Tablet	Android Tablet	iOS Smartphone	Android Smartphone	Total average
RSS	95.8%	-	-	-	-	20.0 %

Links	83.3%	41.7%	62.5%	25.0%	66.7%	56.7 %
Print	62.5%	-	-	-	-	12.5 %
Save	8.3%	20.8%	4.2%	29.2%	-	12.5 %
Graphical interface*	29.2%	50.0%	29.2%	37.5%	29.2%	35.0 %
Information alerts	62.5%	16.7%	8.3%	12.5%	4.2%	21.7 %
Customisation**	25.0%	37.5%	8.3%	29.2%	8.3%	21.7 %

* Possibility of modifying the graphical interface of text and images (enlarge, reduce, change colour, etc)

** Possibility of adapting content to the thematic preferences of the user.

Table 1. Selective interactivity (**Source:** the authors)

Regarding communicative interactivity, it also corroborates the rise of cybermedia websites, which in the analysis of the 13 indicators of this section show their strength in interaction options with editorial content, compared to a weakness in direct participation opportunities for users: they reach a 58.3% in the case of forums, drop to a 25% in the case of chats, and to a 16.7% in the case of polls.

Meanwhile, apps for mobile devices keep up with websites regarding the dissemination of content with other users, both through e-mail and social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, but their direct participation possibilities for users (chats, polls, surveys and forums) are limited to symbolic options, if not completely nonexistent. Thus, the opinion of the readers is redirected to “classic” media websites, where the first step demanded is for the user to register.

		Web	iOS Tablet	Android Tablet	iOS Mobile	Android Mobile	Total average
Share	E-mail	75.0%	62.5%	50.0%	66.7%	37.5%	58.3 %
	Facebook	95.8%	66.7%	25.0%	70.8%	41.7%	60.8 %
	Twitter	95.8%	66.7%	25.0%	70.8%	41.7%	60.8 %
Chat		25.0%	-	-	-	-	5.0 %
Polls		16.7%	8.3%	-	8.3%	-	6.7 %
Surveys		66.7%	8.3%	-	8.3%	-	17.5 %
Comments		91.7%	20.8%	20.8%	20.8%	29.2%	37.5 %
Forums		58.3%	-	-	-	-	11.7 %
Community	Facebook	91.7%	20.8%	12.5%	16.7%	16.7%	32.5 %
	Twitter	91.7%	20.8%	16.7%	16.7%	20.8%	34.2 %
	Others	87.5%	4.2%	4.2%	4.2%	8.3%	21.7 %
Other links		87.5%	20.8%	4.2%	12.5%	4.2%	26.7 %
Authors' blogs		95.8%	12.5%	12.5%	12.5%	8.3%	29.2 %

Table 2. Communicative interactivity (**Source:** the authors)

Finally, the most significant differences in terms of interactivity in the mobile ecosystem are found in productive interactivity, which means the culmination of a decreasing scale in which the more advanced the participation options are, the more are limited to the users.

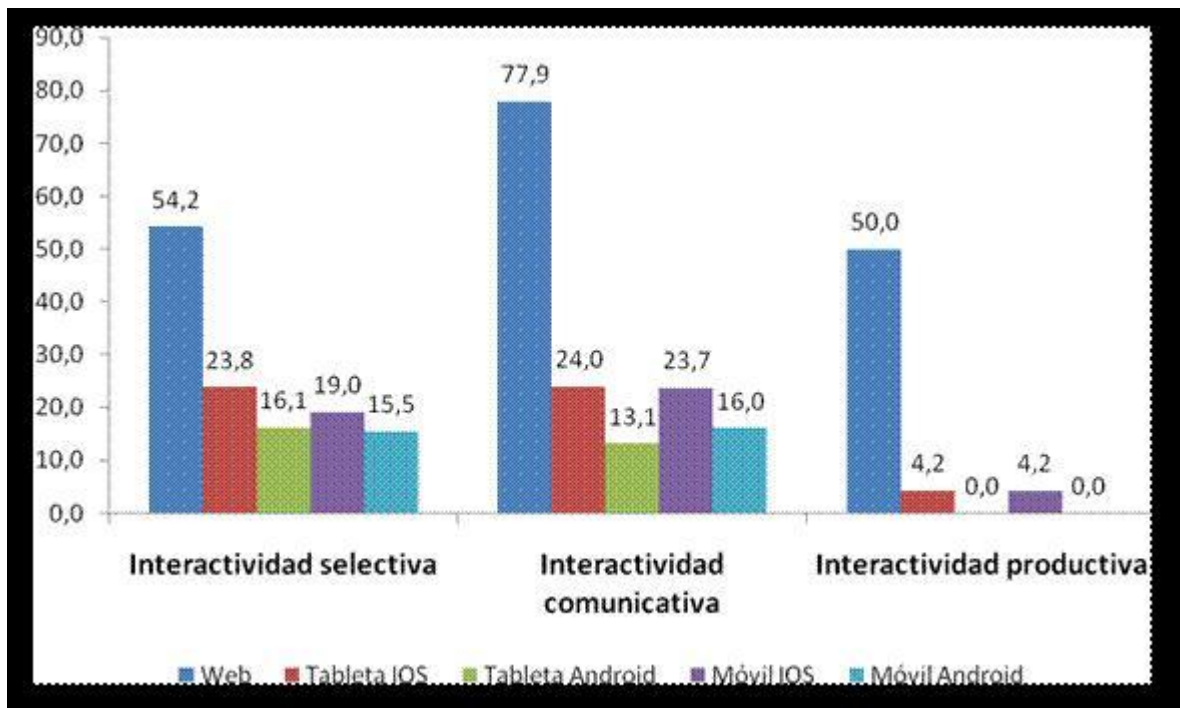
Already in web-based cybermedia, the spaces designed for users to incorporate their own content within the information flow distributed by the medium can be considered restrained: digital interviews are present in two out of three media, as against sending materials (45.8%) and the possibilities of users keeping their own weblogs, which has been offered in one out of three cases.

Following a similar line to what already happened with opinion, the applications specifically developed by cybermedia for mobile devices completely ignore co-creation possibilities, and are decidedly focused on the simple redistribution of editorial content. Besides, when there is the possibility of sending material user contributions are almost always limited to sending them blindly to the medium's newsroom, without a specific section or immediate publication, which reinforces the idea that, in digital media, the separation between the task of the journalists and their audiences tend to blur, but not to disappear completely (Peña and Lazkano, 2013: p. 9).

	Web	iOS Tablet	Android Tablet	iOS Mobile	Android Mobile	Total average
Send material	45.8%	12.5%	-	12.5%	-	14.2 %
Digital interviews	66.7%	-	-	-	-	14.2 %
Users' weblogs	33.3%	-	-	-	-	6.7 %

Table 3. Productive interactivity (**Source:** the authors)

In general terms, the comparative analysis of the three interaction dimensions offered by websites and applications in 24 Spanish media reveals the important limitation of participation options in mobile devices. In selective interactivity, the analysis of the selected indicators allows establishing that websites fulfil their potential possibilities in a 54.2%, a number which drops to a 20% in the case of tablets and to a 17.3% in the case of mobile telephones. As happens in the rest of cases, iOS devices seem to present a slight advantage over those equipped with an Android system in this section.



Cybermedia interactivity, by type of cybermedium and support (in %) (Source: the authors)

This difference increases even more in communicative interactivity, which is the most developed by cybermedia (77.9%). In this regard, they multiply by four the potential interaction possibilities which tablets (18.6%) and mobile telephones materialize.

Finally, and considering the previously explained progression, the most advanced user interaction and participation options, incorporated into this study in terms of productive interactivity, show the most striking differences: compared to the 50% of potential development reached in the “classic” version websites, the applications for mobile devices in both operating systems practically reduce them to nil.

5. Conclusions

The analysis of the three interaction dimensions distributed into 23 analytic categories in the websites and applications for mobile devices of 24 Spanish cybermedia allow drawing the following conclusions:

- Compared to the “classic” versions of websites, the mobile applications of Spanish cybermedia present very significant limitations to the participation and interaction options of the users. The analysis of the selected indicators allows concluding that the media conceived these applications, above other possibilities, as an adaptation of editorial content to a tactile interface and the screen format of mobile devices. There is not specific development of their expressive possibilities, but a simple transfer of already created content.
- In terms of product, mobile applications have their own “classic” websites as competition, because they can also be accessed through the browsers

incorporated into mobile devices. Because websites present much superior content depth and interactive options and versatility, they are only enhanced by the obligation to download a specific application for each medium; this application only marginally compensates for the disadvantage with a clearer content visualization, particularly in mobile telephones. The scarce number of visualizations of each news item in the applications of some media and how much content is redirected to websites corroborates their limited use.

- Likewise, a limited integration with social networks is perceived, which is detrimental to the socialization of news which is common in portals, and thus harmful to one of the main values of the mobile journalistic context (socialisation, customisation and immediacy). Generally, the short and superficial consumption promoted by these kinds of devices should not be incompatible with this socialization, although it is understood it could be against other tools as an excessive resort to hypertextuality to delve into information or an excessive load of audiovisual material.
- In view of the results obtained, it has to be concluded that the future of the Spanish media analysed requires a stronger articulation of interactive strategies to succeed, which go perfectly together with the higher ability to cultivate the loyalty of audience that mobile devices show.

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