

## Hybrid Alternative Digital-Native Media in Latin America during the Pandemic: Two Peruvian Cases of Entrepreneurial Journalism Hosted from Spain

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**Medios digitales híbridos alternativos en América Latina durante la pandemia: dos casos peruanos de periodismo emprendedor con servidor en España**

**Mídia digital híbrida alternativa na América Latina durante a pandemia: dois casos peruanos de jornalismo empreendedor com servidor na Espanha**

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes two digital-native journalistic shows created during the pandemic and hosted from Madrid by Peruvian journalists: La Encerrona [The Confinement] and Sálvese Quien Pueda [Every Man for Himself]. Through interviews with the creators/hosts of the shows and content analysis, this article examines how the context of national crises (in terms of public health, democracy, and information) demanded new voices to fill the gaps left by traditional media, while at the same time reconfiguring the relation with audiences in multiple platforms.

**Keywords:**

Digital media, digital journalism, Latin America, Peru, transnational media, alternative media, hybrid media

**Resumen:** Este artículo analiza dos programas periodísticos nativos digitales creados durante la pandemia y conducidos desde Madrid por periodistas peruanos: La Encerrona y Sálvese Quien Pueda. A través de entrevistas con los creadores/conductores de los programas y análisis de contenido, este artículo examina cómo el contexto de crisis nacional (en términos de salud pública, democracia e información) demandó nuevas voces para llenar los vacíos dejados por los medios tradicionales, mientras que al mismo tiempo reconfigurando al mismo tiempo la relación con las audiencias en múltiples plataformas.

**Palabras clave:**

Medios digitales, periodismo digital, América Latina, Perú, medios transnacionales, medios alternativos, medios híbridos

**Resumo:** Este artigo analisa dois programas jornalísticos nativos digitais criados durante a pandemia e apresentados em Madri por jornalistas peruanos: *La Encerrona* [O confinamento] e *Sálvese Quién Pueda* [Cada um por si]. Por meio de entrevistas com os realizadores /apresentadores dos programas e análise de conteúdo, este artigo examina como o contexto de crises nacionais (em termos de saúde pública, democracia e informação) exigia novas vozes para preencher as lacunas deixadas pela mídia tradicional, ao mesmo tempo em que ao mesmo tempo reconfigurando a relação com o público em múltiplas plataformas.

**Palavras-chave:**

Mídia digital, jornalismo digital, América Latina, Peru, mídia transnacional, mídia alternativa, mídia híbrida

## 1. Introduction

Over the past decades, an explosion of independent digital-native news sites has changed the global media landscape. Digitalization has caused profound and structural changes in the information systems and media industries as internet penetration increased (although unevenly) all around the world (Dragomir & Thompson, 2014). In Latin America, this phenomenon has opened opportunities for a variety of entrepreneurial journalists to create new start-up projects and challenge official discourses, offer alternative perspectives and contents, experiment with new business models, and fill the gaps left by traditional media (Harlow, 2021b; Higgins Joyce, 2018; Salaverría et al., 2019; Schmitz Weiss et al., 2018). The growing existence of new digital projects from Mexico to Patagonia has been referred to as the “boom of Latin American digital press” (Quesada, 2013), even though most of them still struggle to develop a successful business model. While the pandemic has worsened the economic outlook for many news publishers, it has also created opportunities for small new digital-native projects (Nalvarte, 2020; Oliver, 2021).

This article analyzes two digital-native journalistic shows created during the pandemic and hosted from Madrid by Peruvian journalists: *La Encerrona* [The Confinement] and *Sálvese Quien Pueda* [Every Man for Himself]. In a context of political instability (with four presidents within a year), social turmoil, a devastating public health crisis, and a highly polarized presidential election in the *Bicentenario* (the 200th anniversary of the independence

of the country), these digital projects counterbalanced the poor performance of mainstream media, which was accused of partisanship and polarization, of firing critical journalists, and of promoting disinformation and disseminating “fake news”. Contrastingly, these entrepreneurial journalistic operations offered alternative contents, perspectives, and sustainability practices within a hybrid alternative media model of production that combines professional experience with editorial and financial independence and a DIY mentality. Through interviews with the creators/hosts of the shows and content analysis, this article examines how the context of national crises (in terms of public health, democracy, and information) demanded new voices to fill the gaps left by traditional media, while at the same time reconfiguring the relation with audiences in multiple platforms. In other words, this article seeks to answer the following questions: How has the pandemic and the sociopolitical crisis in Peru affected the creation of new entrepreneurial news operations? What are the characteristics of these digital media outlets and how do they embrace hybridity as a defining feature? What is the critical relation of these digital media outlets with the national mainstream media? What can we learn about these startups in terms of new models of economic sustainability for independent media?

In relation to the methodological approach, the cases were selected because of their prominence, popularity and influence during the pandemic and the 2021 presidential elections, manifested in their access to candidates, analysts, and news protagonists. The interviews were conducted online and in person with the hosts of the shows during 2021. The questions of the interviews were organized thematically (organization of the media enterprise, mission statement, production routines, and funding). Content analysis of the shows was also conducted in order to identify patterns of coverage, recurrent topics of the news agenda, diversity of sources, and preferred journalistic approaches.

## **2. Hybrid Alternative Digital-Native Media in Latin America**

In Latin America, the history of digital native press— publications “that are born directly on the internet, without being the alter ego of any previous offline publication” (Salaverría et al., 2019, p. 232)—begins in 1995 with Nicaragua’s *Notifax*, a modest online news bulletin. A few years later, in 1998, *El Faro* from El Salvador, an investigative journalism publication, became the first truly relevant digital native medium of Latin America. Still active and consolidated as an essential journalistic referent of the region, *El Faro* opened the path for a variety of new digital reporting projects. Media entrepreneurship—defined as the “creation and ownership of an enterprise whose activity

adds an independent voice to the media marketplace” (Hoag, 2008, p. 74)—resulted in constant technological and editorial innovations in the news industry (Gonzalez Alba, 2020; Schmitz Weiss et al., 2018). In 2017, the *Observatorio de Nuevos Medios*, a comprehensive directory of Spanish-language digital native media, recorded 1,678 publications, of which 875 were distributed among the Spanish-speaking Latin American countries (Salaverría et al., 2019). Coinciding with a decline in newspaper readership and a perceived stagnation of legacy media, the burgeoning of independent digital natives was intensified in the 2010s. In Peru, the cases of *IDL Reporteros* (2010) and *Ojo Público* (2014) are two prevalent examples of this trend.

A 2017 report by SembraMedia, a nonprofit that supports entrepreneurial journalists, studied 100 independent digital media outlets across the region and considered them “generators of change, promoting better laws, defending human rights, exposing corruption, and fighting abuses of power. They are driven to produce independent news in countries that are highly politically polarized” (SembraMedia, 2017, p. 6). These independent outlets were also increasingly visible and professionally recognized: 66% of them have had their stories picked up by international press (such as *The New York Times*, *BBC*, *Al Jazeera*, and *The Guardian*) and 55% have won leading journalism or humanitarian awards. In economic sustainability terms, many of them are organized around a non-commercial approach, relying on non-profit funding and grant funding (Requejo-Alemán & Lugo-Ocando, 2014) and increasingly turning to crowdfunding and donor memberships (Harlow, 2021a) in an effort to diversify their sources of income (Gonzalez Alba, 2020). However, as many studies have shown, they have not yet found a sustainable business model (Deuze, 2017; Meléndez Yúdice, 2016).

In a region marked by clientelist relationships between mainstream media and the political and economic elites (Fox & Waisbord, 2002), these new independent, digital-native news sites—like the ones analyzed here—align with a new type of alternative media shaped by the emergence of new digital technologies. “Alternative media,” nevertheless, is a very ambiguous concept that has been used to refer to a variety of non-mainstream communication practices. Media scholars have noted that it is “a term so elastic as to be devoid of virtually any signification” (Abel, 1997, p. 79) or that alternative media is oxymoronic: “Everything is, at some point, alternative to something else” (Downing, 2001, p. ix). In a time when even the US alt-right has coopted the “alternative” label, scholars have used many terms to elaborate further on these non-hegemonic media practices, such as radical (Downing, 2001), citizens media (Rodriguez, 2001), advocacy journalism (Waisbord, 2009),

participatory/activist (Waltz, 2005), and grassroots autonomous media (Jeppesen & Petrick, 2018), among others.

Searching for common ground, Atton (2002) defined alternative media as much by its capacity to generate non-standard, often infractory methods of creation, production, and distribution as by its content. In the case of the alternative press, it developed its own construction of news based on alternative values and frameworks of newsgathering, sources, and access (Atton, 2002, p. 4). Similarly, Hájek and Carpentier (2015) identified some essential characteristics of alternative media: a capacity to amplify marginalized voices and fill informative needs not met by mainstream media; levels of participation and pluralism in their content and form; and non-corporate, horizontal, and non-commercial organization and funding. From a more activist perspective, O'Sullivan (1994) believed a primary goal of alternative media is to promote radical social change as they “avowedly reject or challenge established and institutionalized politics, in the sense that they all advocate change in society or at least a critical reassessment of traditional values” (O'Sullivan, 1994, p. 10).

While communication scholars in Latin America tended to discuss the potential of alternative media as a counterbalance to unequal flows of information and cultural imperialism (Dorfman & Mattelart, 1975; Reyes Matta, 1983), these debates placed alternative media as a rigid, marginal form that sought the “construction of a new hegemony” (Reyes Matta, 1983, p. 52), usually aligned with left wing, militant views. Rodriguez (2001) criticized this vision not only because of its narrow categories but also because “in this David versus Goliath scenario, alternative media is frequently declared a failure” (Rodriguez, 2001, p. 11). Understanding the need to democratize the media in countries with highly concentrated, family-owned media companies historically aligned with the business and political elites (Fox & Waisbord, 2002; Martin-Barbero, 1993), the debate about the role and characteristics about alternative media—further complicated by the digital revolution—has become more nuanced in recent years. As Harlow (2021b) noted, many of today’s digital native sites are produced by professional journalists (not amateurs), many of whom left traditional mainstream media to do a different, more independent journalism. They tend to cover social movements, disenfranchised groups, and often align themselves with causes such as anti-homophobia, pro-justice, and pro-freedom of expression, but don’t associate themselves with the region’s militant, activist press.

In today’s mediascape, very few independent native digital media projects meet all the revolutionary, counter-hegemonic ideals potentially expected from previous alternative militant media, and what is considered alternative at one point could be mainstream at

another (Alonso, 2019; Bailey et al., 2008). Atton (2002) advocated that an alternative publication might be interrogated as to its radical level in terms of a multidimensional character, a perspective that privileges the overlap and intersection of dimensions, evidencing that an alternative publication is, in the end, a hybrid product that includes mixed voices and discourses. This “crossover” might include “ideas, content, style, and not least, people between what might be termed the alternative and the mainstream” (Harcup, 2005). Hájek and Carpentier (2015) suggested viewing these outlets as “alternative mainstream media.” Alonso (2019) and Harlow (2021b) have used the terms “hybrid alternative media” and “hybrid popular media,” respectively, to refer to contemporary independent Latin American publications composed of a multilayered “mestizaje” (or blending) of professional practices, languages, and cultures.

Recent studies on Latin American digital-native media have focused on their historical evolution (Salaverría et al., 2019), their similarities and differences with mainstream media (Harlow, 2021b), their predominant business models and professional practices (Meléndez Yúdico, 2016; Schmitz Weiss et al., 2018; Tejedor et al., 2020), and their relation with economic and editorial independence (Higgins Joyce, 2018). Attention has also been paid to the readers of these hybrid alternative digital-native publications, who see these sites as different from the mainstream media. In a survey of readers in Latin America, Harlow (2021a) found they valued the sites’ independence, innovation, and capacity to cover untold stories, while making the readers feel part of a community. They also valued media that take a stance against injustices and corruption, and that actively participate in communities and protests, embracing an alternative definition of objectivity in relation to social justice issues. These are also the reasons why readers— usually young and educated, ideologically liberal and politically active, with a desire to have input in the political/social system and news processes— would become donors to these publications and contribute to their crowdfunding campaigns (Harlow, 2021a). For the case of transnational audiences, economic and network capital also predicts transnational digital-native use (Higgins Joyce & Harlow, 2020).

In addition to the characteristics mentioned, it is important to consider the sociopolitical and national media context in which hybrid alternative digital-native publications—like the ones analyzed here—appear. This research contends that these outlets are also born out of socio-political and informational crises and respond to specific chaotic moments from which they build credibility and community. In the case of *La Encerrona* and *Sálvese Quien Puede*, the Peruvian context of the pandemic, the political crisis, and the

biased role of TV and mainstream media, are essential to understanding the relation between the creation and success of new transnational digital-native news projects and multilayered national crises.

### **3. The Pandemic, the Media, and the Political Crisis in the Year of the *Bicentenario***

After two decades of political violence between the State and left-wing terrorist groups (1980-2000) and the fall of Alberto Fujimori's authoritarian regime in 2000, Peru restored a precarious democracy in a deeply divided society with fragile social institutions and a general crisis of political representation (Barrenechea & Sosa, 2014; Cotler, 2013; Crabtree, 2010; Dargent, 2009; Levitsky & Cameron, 2003; Tanaka & Vera, 2007; Vergara, 2013). Nevertheless, the democratic transition coincided with a boom in the economy. It was fueled by high commodity prices overseas, a growing mining sector and an expanding middle class of consumers (Zarate & Casey, 2019). The economic boom paralleled a celebratory discourse about Peruvian identity showed in ubiquitous media and marketing campaigns as part of the branding—*Marca Perú*—of the country (Cánepa & Lossio, 2019; Cuevas-Calderón, 2016; Hirsch, 2020). Between 2001 and 2016, Peru was successful in reducing poverty but failed to expand social programs to reach much of the population, evidencing the huge inequalities between social groups and geographical areas. The fissures of the so-called “Peruvian miracle” became more evident after the 2016 elections, when Pedro Pablo Kuczynski (a right-wing technocrat) defeated Keiko Fujimori (a right-wing populist and former dictator Alberto Fujimori's daughter) by a small margin. Since then, Peru has experienced an increasingly severe institutional crisis (Camacho & Sosa-Villagarcia, 2021; Medina, 2021; Zarate & Casey, 2019).

The government, divided between President Kuczynski and an obstructionist Congress controlled by Fujimori, developed continuous struggles for power. The Fujimorista majority in Congress boycotted the executive's initiatives and aimed to censor its ministers. It ultimately promoted Kuczynski's resignation based on his alleged links to the Lava Jato corruption scandal, an investigation that revealed bribery and money laundering across the region and has incriminated former Presidents and national leading politicians (Keiko Fujimori herself was detained for several months linked to the scandal; and ex-president Alan García killed himself to avoid being detained) (Zarate & Casey, 2019). Kuczynski resigned in 2018 after videos of vote-buying negotiations to avoid his first impeachment were made public. Martín Vizcarra, then vice-president, replaced Kuczynski.

Vizcarra was initially popular because of his anti-corruption and reformist agenda that led him to, using an institutional arrangement, close Congress in 2019 and call for early legislative elections. Although the measure was initially popular, it resulted in extended tensions after the new Congress was installed. A few months later, on March 6, 2020, the first Peruvian case of Covid-19 was reported. Decades of underinvestment in the health system and the unsustainability of pandemic lockdowns in a country where most people are employed in the informal economy led Peru to be among the countries with the highest Covid-19 per capita death tolls in the world, and to report the worst economic contraction in the region, pushing nearly 10 percent of the national population back into poverty (Angelo, 2021; Pighi, 2020).

Amid the public health and economic crisis, the political groups were focused on attacking one another (Medina, 2021). Congress' decision to vacate Vizcarra at the end of 2020 (just eight months before the 2021 election), accusing him of corruption in charges that many considered politically motivated, unleashed a scenario of popular revolt. Vizcarra's removal, promoted by congresspeople also accused of corruption, has been compared to the 2016 impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in Brazil. It was done under the weak and constitutionally controversial legal figure of "permanent moral incapacity" (a figure originally related to lacking the mental or psychological conditions to exercise power, and not for ethical reasons) (Medina, 2021).

Manuel Merino, the President of Congress, took power replacing Vizcarra, but he lasted less than five days in office. Popular revolts against the political usurper, mostly of young Peruvians organized on social media, became the largest demonstrations of the past two decades in the country. Police repression led to the killing of two young men, hundreds were injured, and others were reported missing. Merino was forced to resign, and Francisco Sagasti—one of the only nine Congresspeople without open criminal proceedings—was elected interim President until the elections of 2021, the *Bicentenario*, the year that marked the 200th anniversary of the Peruvian Republic.

The 2021 elections reflected a scenario of overall citizens' disaffection and distrust with the country's institutions and officials (Angelo, 2021; Pighi, 2021; Sosa & Gómez, 2013). A large percentage of voters chose populist, anti-system candidates from all sides of the spectrum, and blank votes were the second "most voted" option. The two candidates who made it to the presidential runoff barely got 33 percent of the vote combined during the first round. After a highly polarized electoral campaign, Pedro Castillo—a leftist schoolteacher from a rural area, with no governing experience—won by less than 1 percent against right-



wing Keiko Fujimori, who claimed electoral fraud without proof. While the Trump-inspired political move sought to delay and damage the credibility of the process, the U.S. State Department, the Organization of American States and the European Union all deemed the election free and fair (Tegel, 2021).

Although both candidates ran with populist and socially conservative discourses, they presented different views on the economy and the role of the state. For many analysts, the election was perceived as a contention about the neoliberal economic model that has dominated the country for the past three decades, and how the pandemic evidenced its failures (Cameron & Sosa-Villagarcia, 2021; Taj & Turkewitz, 2021). Castillo, campaigning as an outsider with some worrisome anti-democratic ideas and collaborators, channeled voters' anger over corruption, the economic crash, and the marginalization of rural Peruvians amid the crisis of the pandemic and focused his political program on a call for a new constitution to replace the one established by Alberto Fujimori in 1993. Keiko, inundated with corruption accusations and facing prison time, defended her father's Constitution and the economic model it protects (Cameron & Sosa-Villagarcia, 2021). Nevertheless, Vergara (2021) noted how this electoral campaign was not about confronting arguments or ideologies, but mainly guided by politics of fear. The Fujimorismo, allied with the upper classes, organized its campaign around the fear against communism and terrorism (both allegedly represented by Castillo). These often-irrational fears, as suggested by Vergara, were based on Lima's anxieties in relation to the remote, "incomprehensible" rural indigenous Peruvians, and their capacity to challenge the minority's privilege (Vergara, 2021).

The media took an essential and biased role in the polarizing campaign based on fear (Higuera, 2021; Salazar, 2021; Vergara, 2021). Most of national TV took side with Fujimori without exhibiting any tendency for balance nor following the electoral coverage regulations; they became part of veiled or evident propaganda. The partisanship of the media reminded how Alberto Fujimori coopted national TV and the popular press during his authoritarian regime in the 90s (Conaghan, 2002, 2005; Degregori, 2000; Fowks, 2000; Macassi, 2001; Wood, 2000). The biased coverage was clearly evidenced by how the news shows of the most influential TV stations chose their sources and analysts (Salazar, 2021). Most of them were interviewed mainly to support the Fujimori campaign. One of the most embarrassing cases was when *Cuarto Poder*, the most influential national TV news show, interviewed a former Marine who said that he had proof, based on a mathematical theory and his cryptology experience, that there was fraud against Fujimori in the run-off election. His absurd conspiracy theory, discredited later by many experts, was broadcast on national TV without

questioning from any of the experienced journalists interviewing him. This type of biased and partisan coverage had already led to the dismissal and resignation of many critical journalists and producers from the *América TV* and *Canal N* channels – of editorial groups *El Comercio* and *La República*—who refused to take a pro-Fujimori and anti-Castillo stand (Higuera, 2021; Mella & Prado, 2021).

Furthermore, the media had already become an amplifier and source of “fake news” about the pandemic (Livise, 2021; Ñaupas, 2021). The clearest example was the coverage of the right-wing TV station Willax TV, owned by businessman Erasmo Wong (also owner of a supermarket chain). Some of the most dangerous “fake news” spread by Willax TV’s political news shows aimed at discrediting the effectiveness of the vaccines (some of these shows actually said that the vaccines could make people become sicker with Covid, convert them into cellphones, or that getting the Chinese vaccine was like “injecting water” into the veins), promoting medicines (such as Ivermectin) without scientific evidence, and presenting fake polls and documents promoting the conservative presidential candidates and attacking the progressive ones. During the mass protests against Merino in 2020, a Willax TV show also presented fake evidence about alleged weapons used by protesters in order to justify the police repression.

The pandemic and the political instability affected independent journalism in Peru (Cueva Chacón, 2021). The subsequent economic crisis led to the closing of media outlets and to the layoffs of more than 500 journalists, and around 2000 media workers, according to the National Association of Peruvian Journalists. Covid-19 also took the lives of 135 journalists in 2020, while the attacks against the press in that year significantly increased. Nevertheless, during the mass protests, social media (visibly TikTok) played an increasingly important role for young people to get politically organized and share legal and medical information. In a country with a still relatively low Internet penetration (68%), social media networks became the most popular source of news (70%) and established native-digital outlets—such as *IDL-Reporteros* and *Ojo Público*—reaffirmed their relevance as independent journalism sources, according to the Reuters Institute. Furthermore, the context of the pandemic and the political crisis encouraged the creation of a variety of new alternative digital-native journalism projects. The cases analyzed here are emblematic examples of these circumstances.

#### 4. Case 1: *La Encerrona* [The Confinement]

The first episode of *La Encerrona*—a daily digital news show created by Marco Sifuentes, a Peruvian journalist based in Madrid—was released on March 16, 2020, the first day of the lockdown in Peru due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Sifuentes, a reporter with more than 20 years of experience in TV, radio, newspapers, and digital media outlets, was planning to create a political podcast about the 2021 Peruvian elections when the pandemic hit. He understood that the global health emergency would dominate the news agenda and that there would be a need for trustworthy information:

One of the reasons why I created *La Encerrona* was because I knew that Peru is fertile land for “fake news,” and what later the World Health Organization (WHO) called “infodemic.” All epidemics generate crisis and hysterias, but Peru seemed to me as a country poorly prepared not only for the health emergency, but also for the informational challenge related to the pandemic. (Sifuentes, Interview, May 2021)<sup>1</sup>

A pioneer of Peruvian digital journalism—he created the news blog *Utero.pe* in 2005, which is still active as an established alternative digital news portal, and was also a founder of *LaMula.pe*, a citizens media news portal—he initially planned *La Encerrona* as a podcast, but since YouTube is still the most popular social media platform in Peru, the show is also produced in video format ([its YouTube channel](#) has around 230K subscribers, and videos gather around 200K views). Designed as a daily brief news report of around 15-20 minutes about the pandemic, it is produced only with essential resources and a DIY mentality. “*La Encerrona* is a show produced only with a microphone, a laptop, and an Internet connection. I don’t have more resources than those” (Sifuentes, interview, 2021).

*La Encerrona* is released in a variety of digital platforms—YouTube, Instagram, Spotify, Facebook—and circulates as audios on WhatsApp and Telegram groups. It has three main sections: 1) an analysis of a main topic of the news agenda; 2) a compilation of the most important news of the day; and 3) a section focused on social activities and mental health—tips of things to do during quarantine, information about citizens’ entrepreneurial, activist and volunteer initiatives, among others. As part of project, Sifuentes also incorporated a section of interviews with politicians and analysts—called “Pequeñas Islas” [Small Islands]<sup>2</sup>— and published two books based on the shows’ contents.

*La Encerrona* provided essential information at the beginning of the pandemic (with episodes about [rapid tests](#), the [use of facemasks](#), [ways of infections](#), [development of vaccines](#),

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<sup>1</sup> This interview was conducted on May 17, 2021. All quotes were translated by the author from Spanish to English.

<sup>2</sup> In this section, Sifuentes interviewed online most of the Presidential candidates, such as [Pedro Castillo](#), César [Acuña](#), [Hernando de Soto](#), [Yhonny Lescano](#), and [Rafael López Aliaga](#).

[curfews](#) and the implementation of restrictions and the lockdown) and offered tips to navigate socially the pandemic (with episodes about [how to live with an infected person](#), [best practices to meet up with family](#), or [how to safely order delivery](#)). It has also covered socioeconomic issues rooted in structural problems, such as the scams performed by private clinics<sup>3</sup>, the [crisis to obtain oxygen](#) for patients, or the drama of [Venezuelan immigrants in Peru](#) during the pandemic, while critically evaluating the governments' measures and the political responsibilities during the health emergency<sup>4</sup>.

Nevertheless, one of the main goals of *La Encerrona* has been to dispel prevalent fake news. It offered extensive coverage to counterbalance the dangerous and extended misinformation about the use of Ivermectin (a pesticide for animals) and bleach to prevent or cure Covid-19 (these treatments were used without any scientific evidence and against international and national health institutions' advice)<sup>5</sup>.

The regional government of Junín [a region in the central highlands and westernmost Peruvian Amazon] began to produce Ivermectin. It became a political capital. All local majors and regional governments wanted to produce it and give it to the people... I think that was a factor for the peak spread of infections. Both right-wing and left-wing groups used 'fake news' with the intention to capitalize with the hope of the people. (Sifuentes, interview, 2021)

When a pseudo-scientist publicly stated that he was curing Covid-19 with bleach, the most important Sunday TV news show framed the issue as a debate (in favor or against the medicinal use of bleach). Sifuentes is against this flawed journalistic approach:

There cannot be balance between two positions when one side is completely out of reality.... This type of information is not refuted in Peru, because the press has a very traditional role of reporting that doesn't refute 'fake news.' *La Encerrona* was born with that mission: instead of being an echo chamber it seeks to be a filter. I think that should be the role of the press now. (Sifuentes, interview, 2021)

Another example of the poor job that the Peruvian media did during the pandemic was the case of Jorge Cuyubamba, an impostor who appeared in many news shows presented as a young Peruvian scientist working on the development of the Chinese vaccine. When someone finally googled him, it was found out that he was an emerging filmmaker living in China, where he produced some low-budgeted and low-quality videos that, nevertheless, tricked

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<sup>3</sup> *La Encerrona* devoted many episodes to this topic, focusing on the [high prices](#) and on the [extra irregular charges](#) that should have already been covered by the state, and the [tensions](#) between the [private clinics and the government](#).

<sup>4</sup> *La Encerrona* explained issues ranging from the [government's different strategies to deal](#) with the health emergency and how Peru ended up as the [country with the highest death toll](#) in the world to the [controversial cases of the State's reactivation program](#), the [millionaire purchases of useless drugs](#), the [social conflicts](#) generated by the pandemic, and the [historic economic crisis and recession](#).

<sup>5</sup> *La Encerrona* dismantled a variety of fake news related to [unscientific treatments](#) and [uses of alternative drugs](#) to treat Covid-19, and [conspiracy theories](#) about the origin of the disease.

most of the Peruvian outlets<sup>6</sup>. The media not only spread or validated fake news from politicians or citizens like Cuyubamba but was also a generator of them. Sifuentes considers that Willax TV, the right-wing station that has been called the “Peruvian Fox News,” has spread fake news based on the owner’s interests and political agenda. An example of this was when initially Willax TV recommended the use of Ivermectin to its audience. According to Sifuentes, this is because Erasmo Wong, the owner of Willax TV, is also the owner of a popular chain of supermarkets, and he wanted the restrictions lifted and people to feel safer to go out shopping in his stores. Similarly, the first week when the vaccination process finally began in Peru, Willax TV questioned with fake evidence the effectiveness of the vaccine. Its main source was a biologist who was also an assessor to the right-wing presidential candidate Keiko Fujimori. “In their efforts to oppose the government, Willax, aligned with the Fujimorismo, tried to bring down the vaccination process”, Sifuentes said. *La Encerrona* has devoted many episodes to refute the fake news of Willax TV and other media outlets<sup>7</sup>. “We trust the people and the idea that in the same way that ‘fake news’ are spread, the fight against them can also be spread”, said Sifuentes. This goal of refuting fake news virally guides the decision of keeping *La Encerrona* as a free, accessible content (for viewers/listeners and for media outlets interested in broadcasting the episodes):

I always repeat that information should be accessible and not private, and that you should share it with your community, with your people. And for this to work I need you to collaborate. For the show to keep being open and free, and your dad does not take chlorine dioxide, I need you to help fund my project. (Sifuentes, interview, 2021)

*La Encerrona* is economically sustainable because of a combination of followers’ donations and advertising. Readers contribute monthly fees through membership platforms, such as Patreon, or applications to donate money, such as Plin or Yape. While *La Encerrona*’s daily episodes are open and free, paid subscribers and donors receive other benefits—exclusive content, daily news bulletins, and the opportunity to participate in editorial meetings with Sifuentes and his producers. The pandemic context was essential for this component of the business model to work:

Our business/funding model would have not been so successful in other circumstances. Peru is a country with low banking practices, and few of those with bank accounts buy online. A big problem is distrust. People always think that they are going to be scammed. For a Peruvian, to write down his credit card number in a web page seems crazy. It’s like crossing

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<sup>6</sup> La Encerrona explained the case of Jorge Cuyubamba [here](#).

<sup>7</sup> La Encerrona has actively exposed fake news from Willax and other media outlets. Some examples are: “[Las mentiras de Willax \(y otros\) sobre las marchas](#)”; “[Milagros Leiva vs las noticias que sí importan](#)”; “[Facebook le pone sello de FALSO a Willax](#)”; “[Mi respuesta a las mentiras de Sociedad Nacional de Radio y Televisión](#)”; “[Ahora Willax miente sobre las vacunas](#),” among others. La Encerrona also offered advice to its audience [about how to complain and expose the coverage of biased TV stations](#).

the street without looking to the sides. And that has been a problem for me in previous projects because I have always sought direct funding from my audience. I prefer that to advertising. But it has not been possible. Now with the confinement, when people were forced to buy online and use new apps and delivery platforms, those worries decreased. Now most of the funding of the show comes from my Patreon account. In other circumstances people might not have been conscious of the need to pay for quality information. I don't want to say that I have found a business model for journalism, but the circumstances of the pandemic have made my project sustainable. (Sifuentes, interview, 2021)

In addition to the approximate 1500 Patreon subscribers (by 2021), *La Encerrona* is also funded through advertising, mainly from start-ups and entrepreneurs. For Sifuentes, working with donations/memberships from the audience and advertising from small companies without political agendas fits better his journalistic goals. He does not have to monetize only in relation to online views of the show. His commitment rather focuses on the quality and depth of content and cultivating a solidary community (the slogan of the show is “the only newscast that sends you a hug”). While *La Encerrona* has some conditions to be malleable and adapted to other platforms, it tries “to reach the wider possible audience without surrendering to the algorithm” (Sifuentes, interview, 2021). Nevertheless, alienation and recruitment of viewers might happen for other reasons. When the political crisis and polarization was intensified in 2020 (with the impeachment of the President and the mass protests on the streets), the audience of *La Encerrona* expanded. According to Facebook, Instagram and YouTube statistics, most of the audience is between 30-50 years old, but a significant block of younger people became regular viewers after [its coverage of the street marches](#) and the [state of emergency](#) due to the political crisis. Contrastingly, as the news agenda focused increasingly on the polarized election of April 2021<sup>8</sup> and *La Encerrona* maintained a critical perspective about the opposing political groups<sup>9</sup>, it alienated some of its more conservative or moderate followers:

With the polarization of the elections, there are a lot of people that leave our Patreon, and other new ones that arrive. I try not to have a biased perspective against any political option, and since they are so bad in Peru, that, at least, is easy. Since the global trend in media is towards extreme polarization, many people do not like critical coverage. They don't like to be taken out of their comfort zone, and do not want to pay when you report something that they

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<sup>8</sup> *La Encerrona* covered critically the tense political scenario before the elections, criticizing the demonization of [the left-wing through politics of fear \(the so-called “terruqueo”\)](#), and comparing the [similarities of the extreme left with the populist right-wing](#). It is also critically analyzed the [participation of both candidates in the Presidential debate and the biased coverage of the media](#) about the event.

<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, in the case of Fujimorismo, *La Encerrona* denounced repeatedly their attempt to consolidate a “slow coup” by accusing fraud without proofs and not accepting the electoral results: “[Keiko aplica la estrategia de Trump](#)”; “[Especial: El Golpe Lento](#)”; “[La carta del golpe de Estado en mesa de partes](#)”; “[Hasta aquí nomás](#).” On the other hand, in the case of left-wing Pedro Castillo, the show criticized the [divisiveness within Castillo’s party](#), its [authoritarian traits](#), [its improvisation](#), [links with criminal organizations](#), and [bad political decisions](#).

don't want to be reported. It's worrisome. There are people that only want to pay to be told what they want to hear. (Sifuentes, Interview, 2021)

After a year of producing the content solo from Madrid (where he lives since 2015), Sifuentes partnered with two young journalists based in Lima: Romina Badoino and Claudia Guevara. The first one became the news producer, and the second one manages the different virtual communities of the show. Coordinating through Zoom and WhatsApp, they have developed production routines that consider the time difference (six hours) between Madrid and Lima. The different time zone helps Sifuentes to develop the video podcast while Peruvians sleep and releases it early in the morning, responding to its ideal design as a breakfast/morning show. In relation to an alleged de-territorialization of journalism, Sifuentes acknowledges feeling "guilt" for not being "in the field." From Spain, he shapes the perspective of the show, but the new team members compensate with on-site coverage and viewpoints. This combination of perspectives (the critical distance offered by an experienced journalist living abroad and local producers and collaborators) is also present in *Sálvese Quien Pueda*.

##### **5. Case 2: *Sálvese Quien Pueda* [Every Man for Himself]**

The first episode of *Sálvese Quien Pueda (SQP)*, a news analysis digital video show about Peruvian sociopolitical affairs, was streamed on YouTube on February 1, 2021, and focused on the [collapsed Peruvian public health system](#) during the pandemic. Since then, *SQP* has produced three weekly one-hour long YouTube live streamed shows that include the top news of the day, and interviews with high-profile politicians, journalists, and other public figures, as well as with less publicly known analysts and experts.

*SQP* is hosted by two well-known Peruvian journalists with experience in national mainstream media—Renato Cisneros and Josefina Townsend. Both had worked for decades in print, radio, and television, and were in-between jobs at the beginning of 2021. Independent producer Pedro Acuña reached out to them with the idea of creating an independent native-digital journalistic show. None of them had significant experience producing digital media nor administrating a media outlet, but they all decided to work on the project between the electoral campaign until the run-off presidential election in April 2021. If they gather enough audience and influence in public debate, they will keep consolidating the project. If not, they would all part ways.

The show emerged in a circumstance of unemployment, of not knowing what to do, with a lot of uncertainty. Two other things were happening: first, it was a year of pandemic, political crisis, and failed celebration for the Bicentenario; and second, there was a deterioration of

traditional media's performance. These issues converge in favor of alternative media. (Cisneros, interview, 2021)<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to other digital news shows (like *La Encerrona*), *SQP* does not produce condensed and edited informative packages. The show—focused on the pandemic and national politics—is live streamed and seeks to be perceived as “interesting conversation” that offers lengthy analysis of complex and structural issues beyond the contextual news. It encourages audience participation, with live comments and questions, that are incorporated in the discussions. Nevertheless, in a context of extreme polarization, to create a space for non-partisan critical dialogue is challenging:

The electoral controversy created a social division. We are in a country where there is no dialogue; people seek the contents that echo their way of thinking. We try to explore [the controversial issues] at the risk of being accused of taking a political side. Sometimes alternative media is labeled as leftist. I have received attacks from both sides of the political spectrum, and I am proud of that, but I think it's reductionist to understand complex issues in black and white. If you do not think like me, you are on the other side. It's the Manicheism of limiting the discussion between the Left and the Right, when there are a lot of people that do not feel they belong to any of those sides. These people had to vote, but they also have different stances and opinions. (Cisneros, Interview, 2021)

In this quest to create a space for critical and informed analysis, editorial independence is essential for a project like *SQP*. In a context where most mainstream media outlets have become biased and partisan, few journalistic spaces are trying to go beyond reductionists political labels and prejudices to understand the national realities. Reporters are caught within the traditional media outlets' explicit and implicit restrictions.

I developed my career as a journalist in two media outlets with strong brands: *El Comercio* and *RPP*. And it's true that even if there is not an editor that tells you what not to talk about (or maybe there are editors that do tell you that), even if the censorship is not explicit, the brand is a form of censorship. The brand operates in your psychology as an employee. You know that if you want to write something that might be inconvenient, you might better not write about it. Or if you want to say something at the microphone that might bother the owners, you get inhibited. These are consolidated brands that work as chains. Here we are building a brand on the idea of independence. (Cisneros, Interview, 2021)

Nevertheless, those traditional media outlets with strong brands gave Cisneros and Townsend visibility and influence. Over the years they have also built a professional reputation based on credibility, which they consider the main capital of *SQP*, and the reason why people follow their contents (*SQP* had around 83K YouTube subscribers by the end of 2021). Their background also helps them have access to sources and information.

Additionally, *SQP* brings together transnational and local perspectives about the Peruvian

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<sup>10</sup> This interview was conducted in Madrid on July 8, 2021. All quotes were translated by the author from Spanish to English.



news. While Townsend and the producers are based in Lima, Cisneros lives in Madrid. For him, technology dissolves the transnational borders in terms of information, but makes it difficult to “measure the temperature of the country.”

Distance makes you compare all the time what happens in your country in relation to other countries, beginning with the country where you live in. I think there is an old tradition in Peru of not paying attention to what happens around us. Peruvians do not worry about the crises in Latin America until they start affecting us. We began to be interested on what happens in Venezuela since a million of Venezuelans came to live in the country. But I'm not sure if the average Peruvian knows what is happening in Colombia, Chile, or here in Spain, France, or Germany. Being abroad makes me want to counterbalance my absence from Peru by offering a critical perspective of what happens in other places. (Cisneros, Interview, 2021)

This transnational contrast—mainly between Spain and Peru—has been shown in the coverage of issues related to the pandemic, such as the [vaccination process](#) or children's education (in this last case, for example, *SQP* [interviewed Jaime Saavedra](#), the former Ministry of Education and Global Director of Education at the World Bank, but it also produced a whole [episode of conversations with actual school students](#) affected by the policies of school attendance). Similarly, the show has tackled the most relevant topics by contrasting sources—high profile interviewees with other representative citizens and professionals. It has also given voice to many recognized and respected journalists who have been out of the traditional media for a while but have solid opinions and interpretations to contribute. For example, the most watched episodes of *SQP* are its interviews with César Hildebrandt, an emblematic former TV journalist who is now the director of an alternative weekly magazine. While many people miss having Hildebrandt on national TV, *SQP* offered him a platform to analyze [the presidential candidates](#), the [run-off election](#) between Castillo and Fujimori, and to reflect on the anniversary of the [200th Independence Day](#). Other well-known national journalists that have been featured in *SQP* are [Gustavo Gorriti](#), [Rosa María Palacios](#), [Luis Jochamowitz](#), and [Mavila Huertas](#), all of them representative of different ideological perspectives, professional values, and journalistic trajectories. Similarly, varied cultural and media personalities have been interviewed about national issues, such as [actress Tatiana Astengo](#), writer [Alfredo Bryce Echenique](#), and [soccer player Renato Tapia](#). In terms of politicians, the variety of interviewees is also noteworthy. *SQP* has interviewed the respected interim [sitting President Francisco Sagasti](#), the [Mayor of Lima Jorge Muñoz](#), and the controversial [usurper Manuel Merino](#), who took power as President for a few days unleashing the national mass protests.

*SQP* is funded through a combination of YouTube monetization, crowdfunding/memberships (Patreo, Plin, Yape), and advertising/sponsors (mainly fintech

companies). While the subscribers' financial contributions are not yet enough to become the main source of funding, the show has been designed to create a community and engage the members. The producers and hosts meet monthly with the Patreon and YouTube subscribers, and many of their ideas are incorporated into the design of the show.

I perceive that people value media outlets directed by journalists who are trying to create an enterprise. It's the opposite model of traditional media, in which businessmen try to do journalism. Usually in family-owned companies, they subordinate the quality of journalism to privilege the business part. I think people appreciate projects born out of journalistic motivations, and they understand the need to make them sustainable to work. (Cisneros, interview, 2021)

*SQP* is part of an interconnected wave of native-digital media start-ups that combine political information, social analysis, and popular culture/entertainment. Instead of competing among them as most traditional and commercial media outlets, these new entrepreneurial sites coexist and collaborate with each other. An emblematic example was [La Liga Electoral](#) [The Electoral League], a collaborative coverage on election days among some of the prevalent alternative native-digital sites on news and entertainment, such as *SQP*, *La Encerrona*, *Utero.pe*, *Curwen*, *El Cacash*, and other digital journalists and influencers.

Cisneros believes that new native-digital journalism outlets do not only contribute with alternative and independent coverage, but that they have also “refreshed the contact books.” Young, or less publicly visible, analysts and experts brought in by these digital sites are offering new voices to the traditional pundits and commentators of national television. “They find a space to say really interesting things. Many of them are then called by national broadcast media. It's an opportunity for us to become a platform, a trampoline, for people who were not visible” (Cisneros, interview, 2021).

In terms of the future of digital media, Cisneros—who was an early blogstar for a newspaper in 2007—compares today's digital projects with what happened with the wave of blogs during the first decade of the century.

The very few blogs that survived were because they built a niche and gave it two fundamental things for a digital media outlet: first, discipline, in terms of getting their audience used to that some specific days they would find new content (if you don't, you betray a promise), and the second thing is to maintain the quality of that content. More than the platform, those are the values that allow [native digital projects] to survive over time. (Cisneros, Interview, 2021)

## 6. Conclusion

*La Encerrona* and *SQP* are two emblematic cases of a new wave of hybrid alternative digital-native journalism projects that appeared during the pandemic. Their success and influence in public debate are strongly related to a context of national crises (public health

emergency, political instability, and polarization) and the poor performance of the mainstream media. Operating in contrast to a mediascape colonized by sensationalism, partisanship, and misinformation, these native-digital shows were able to not only fill gaps left by traditional media, but also take important roles on refuting and dismantling “fake news” and developing independent critical analysis of the news agenda.

These entrepreneurial journalistic projects combined mainstream and alternative characteristics. While they offered alternative contents, perspectives, sources, and practices, they were also produced by experienced professional journalists with a background in the mainstream media. Sifuentes has been considered several times as the “most influential” digital journalist of the country, and Cisneros and Townsend had been TV news personalities for many years. Sifuentes and Cisneros are also established authors (the first one of non-fiction; the second one of novels). Their public visibility offered them access to sources, contacts, and followers based on previously established credibility. Nevertheless, they partnered with independent young producers, and began their digital projects with a DIY mentality, incorporating an informal and conversational style to explain and analyze complex issues, recording from their living rooms with a computer, a microphone, and an internet connection, keeping production costs to a minimum. These hybrid identities, practices and resources allowed them to consolidate independent native-digital news brands based on credibility in a context of decay and discredit of traditional media.

Editorial and financial independence have been essential traits of these hybrid alternative media enterprises. Their independent editorial stance is funded through a combination of YouTube monetization, memberships/crowdfunding/subscriptions, and niche advertising (mainly from fintech or other digital startups). The context of the pandemic also impacted the development of the new funding sources. In a country where online payments/banking has become more recurrent during the pandemic, the path to consolidate this type of revenue seems more accessible. Furthermore, creating a more participatory community of donors/followers becomes a key issue for the development of the digital news start-ups. By being a central part of the funding, the donors and members’ roles have increased from commenting, asking questions, and offering feedback to becoming producing partners that—through direct meetings with the hosts and producers—shape the design of the shows. This alternative business model also has challenges. While the new digital media outlets are not restricted by corporate interests, owners’ ideological guidelines, or big brands’ advertisement, their non-partisan and critical coverage in an extremely polarized environment has recurrently alienated a portion of their followers, members, and subscribers. This appears

as a problematic issue in terms of finding the balance between editorial independence and keeping a loyal community of donors sensitive to certain editorial decisions that might not align with their ideological beliefs.

The transnational aspect of these digital news projects is also noteworthy. Hosted by journalists based in Madrid, they incorporate a distinctive international perspective on the coverage of national issues, offering a much more cosmopolitan and comparative understanding of Peruvian reality. Nevertheless, in both cases, the hosts work with local producers based in Lima, acknowledging the need to also “be in the field” to “measure the temperature of the country”. This concerted approach is also shown in an increasing collaborative digital media environment among native-digital news and entertainment outlets. The example of *La Liga Electoral* is emblematic of their intention to create a new hybrid digital mediascape that establishes a solid network of digital voices that share audiences, contents, and sources, challenging the monolithic practices of commercial traditional media—their jealousy about crossovers with other TV stations, for example—and evidencing the blurring lines between news and entertainment genres.

The presence and permanence of new types of hybrid alternative digital media outlets suggest new fissures in today’s mediascape for startups to counterbalance and challenge mainstream media, particularly, in contexts of crisis and when it is perceived as doing a poor journalistic job. The findings of this article also suggest certain characteristics of the recent trend towards hybrid alternative digital media enterprises with implications for journalism studies. Their focus on dismantling fake news and deconstructing polarizing discourses, their editorial and financial independence sustained by a community of engaged members, their blending of professional and DIY practices, and their transnational approach in combination with local reporting, evidence new forms of political communication that should be considered when evaluating the opportunities and limitations of new independent journalism to fulfill its watchdog role in today’s democracies. As more examples of hybrid alternative digital media outlets emerge and consolidate, further research needs to incorporate more international cases to develop a comparative regional and global approach to study their characteristics and evolution. What sociopolitical and media environments favor the creation and consolidation of ethical independent journalism startups? What are the ethical and professional implications of these new types of political communication for democratic discourse? What are the opportunities for transnational collaboration and the creation of regional and global networks of producers?

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