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New products and services offered to brands by the main Spanish newspapers: branded content and native advertising

Nuevos productos y servicios ofertados a las marcas por las principales cabeceras españolas: branded content y publicidad nativa

Dates | Received: 23/04/2021 - Reviewed: 07/10/2021 - In press: 19/10/2021 - Published: 01/01/2022

Abstract

This research analyses the communication context arising from the digital revolution that has led brands to reconsider some of their strategies for reaching consumers effectively, prioritising creativity in relation to non-advertising products, particularly content generation. In this context, the media present themselves as strategic partners for brands, moving from being mere advertising spaces to acting as consultants and providers of high-added-value editorial products. Qualitative fieldwork was performed in two phases. The first consisted of in-depth interviews with a qualified sample – those responsible for branded content in the principal Spanish media. The second was content analysis of the websites of the same media, analysing the products and services they offer and how they are defined. The results explore the branded content departments and businesses of the main Spanish media, making it possible to provide a new catalogue and description of the products and services they offer to brands, which help them consolidate what is, for the moment, an unusual relationship. These conclusions show how the media business model is being transformed and generate knowledge with clear possibilities for transfer.

Keywords

Branded content; audience creation; advertising strategies; engagement; media; native advertising

Resumen

Esta investigación analiza el contexto comunicativo nacido de la revolución digital y que ha llevado a las marcas a replantear parte de sus estrategias para llegar al consumidor de forma eficaz, dando prioridad a la creación de productos creativos de aspecto no publicitario, entre los que destaca la generación de contenidos. Los medios de comunicación se erigen como un partner estratégico para las marcas pasando de ser un espacio publicitario, a convertirse en consultor y proveedor de productos editoriales de valor añadido. El trabajo de campo de corte cualitativo ha tenido dos fases: entrevistas en profundidad a una muestra cualificada como son los responsables de branded content de los principales medios españoles y el análisis de contenido de sus sedes web, analizando los productos y servicios ofertados y cómo los definen. Los resultados se adentran en los departamentos y empresas de branded content de las principales cabeceras españolas que aportan una novedosa catalogación y descripción de los productos y servicios que están ofreciendo a las marcas y que les ha llevado a consolidar una relación inusual hasta la fecha. Estas conclusiones evidencian la transformación de los modelos de negocio de los medios y generan un conocimiento con posibilidades de transferencia.

Palabras clave

Branded content; creación audiencias; estrategias publicitarias; engagement; medios de comunicación; publicidad nativa

1. Introduction

Content generation has become a great communication opportunity for brands, which have been seeing for some time that saturation advertising techniques using one-way, intrusive approaches make their actions less effective. There is a growing cooperation between the media and brands that have found a way of connecting with their audience using branded content (Miotto-Payne, 2019: 27-28). Meanwhile, because of their expertise in audience creation and management, and data analysis, the media have become their partners.

With the technological transformation of the communication ecosystem and changes in consumer behaviour, marketing and communication directors are increasingly turning to the media's branded content departments to create content that can be integrated organically into their conversations with their audience. This is a leap from the traditional advertising campaign to a brand action that provides valuable experiences through relevant content. Engagement, branded content and native advertising are clearly concepts related to user involvement and the way the message is presented (Papí-Gálvez, 2015: 301-309). The research conducted by Zamith et al. (2021: 14) shows that brands can get better results and more attention by non-intrusively integrating their branded content advertisements into editorial content.

The new sections in charge of responding to these demands from brands are known as branded content departments. And in recent years, the media have invested a great deal of resources in creating these departments within their main titles, following the lead of their international counterparts. These laboratories of innovation are beginning to permeate newsrooms and they provide a response to concerns and awareness at corporate and business level, driving changes in day-to-day routines emerging from below as a result of the inevitable transformation processes involved in digital competition (Trillo and Alberich, 2020: 368).

Although the process is still a recent one in Spain, all the communication groups and the main newspapers already have departments that are experimenting with new products and services for brands. These are the subject of study for this research, in which our main interest is to look at a phenomenon in the process of development. We also need to review of the concepts of branded content and native advertising, as their innovative nature means confusion over terms can create distortions about their true value. As in the early days of any new discipline, in this field we encounter terminological confusion, which means certain formats are identified with different names and vice versa (Regueira, 2012, 109). The industry's agreement on certain definitions and the detection of new products and services will be important in order to guarantee high quality standards. It is therefore essential to generate knowledge about how the main Spanish titles are currently developing them.

1.1. Change of advertising model

The shift from the dissemination model to the network model, typical of the digital era, has produced much more significant change in the social and cultural sphere than in the technological one (Jenkins, 2008). One of the changes with the greatest impact has been on the public, with the mutation occurring in their adaptation and interaction as a result of maximum connectivity, moving from the human-mass to human-speed not subject to any programmatic logic (Martínez-Sáez and García-Cubell, 2018: 314). The power of consumers via the internet allows them to be very selective with the content they consume and look only for what provides value and is relevant to them (Scolari, 2013). Also, by turning every web user into a content producer, the internet has entered into a process of exponential growth of information which, together with the fragmentation of audiences and the growth of multiscreen consumption, has made attention a scarce commodity (Selva and Caro, 2016: 644).

Tim Wu says we live in an "attention economy", where a plethora of channels give us more choices, which means content producers must work harder to secure the increasingly scarce resource of attention. As Giffard (2013) (quoted by Giraldo and Fernandez, 2020: 4) describes, in this context, time becomes a determining variable and this leads to a battle in the cultural industries to capture this free time. Meanwhile, social media are at an advantage in the attention market.

Commercial communication seeks to overcome the intrusiveness of traditional approaches by promoting the emergence of formats that do not interrupt the user (Selva and Caro, 2016: 643). In fact, digital display advertisement formats have not replaced the revenue lost from shrinking traditional forms of advertising. The data suggests that people do not see them and that many of their clicks are accidental. Audiences are irritated by pop-up adverts and auto-play videos, which has led to ad blocking technology becoming popular and effective (Sirrah, 2019).

Advertising needs to reach consumers who are more critical, proactive and professionalised in their relationship with brands, and credibility has become a scarce commodity (Castelló-Martínez, 2018: 85). Attracting consumers should no longer be the objective. Instead, brands need to retain them by

developing lasting relationships with users (Regueira, 2012: 66) in order to build a community and secure their loyalty with conversations that help to reinforce engagement. If it does not take account of the fact that audiences are active and social (Papí-Gálvez, 2015), advertising can be intrusive. The key lies in giving it the right form.

1.2. Change of model in the media

Technological changes have also brought about a radical transformation in the consumption of news content and in the ways the media operate. The shift from paper to the online format and the technological evolution of the media system itself open up a scenario moving towards more interactive and collaborative journalism. Content production, work routines, media and distribution strategies, and business models are undergoing major changes (Casero-Ripollés, 2010): 600). The intrusion of the internet and social media has radically changed the use and consumption of information and the emergence of new native digital media and networks as alternative information channels has coincided with this change in the business model (Villafañe *et al.*, 2020: 7) opening up a debate about media sustainability.

Media must listen to their audiences and learn from them if they are to enjoy long-term success (Jenkins *et al.*, 2013: 24). The combination of networks and digital technologies has allowed citizens to expand journalistic content or directly create new news stories (Scolari, 2013). In this process the media is trying to offer increasingly personalised content while audiences are increasingly filtering and selecting, although the criteria they use are not very clear. There is clearly an oversupply of information, and, to that contained in the media, we must add the content that reaches people via social networks, which seems to interest them more (Villafañe *et al.*, 2020: 7).

In terms of revenue, we find that despite the fact that audiences are more global these days, it is difficult to monetise them. One of the main causes of this has been the media's commitment from the very beginning to a digital business model advocating free online content. This is something their audiences quickly became accustomed to (Casero-Ripollés, 2010: 598 and Casero-Ripollés, 2014: 258). Most media companies operating in the digital world depend on online advertising revenues, as Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2017) point out. These have grown, but they are a long way from compensating for the fall in print advertising revenues, as large platforms such as Facebook and Google take the lion's share (cited by Valero and González, 2018: 559).

In this quest for monetisation, one of the most interesting alternatives to display advertising is native advertising, which allows news publishers to charge brands for work that has traditionally been done by PR companies. If native advertising proves to be a viable business model, it could help sustain a struggling industry by providing informative and entertaining advertising, which would also expand journalistic practice. If proves to be the case, the industry should expect an increase in the use of native advertising (Ferrer, 2016: 9).

1.3. Branded content, native advertising and opportunities for brands and media

Although the origins of content creation by brands date back to the late 19th century (Aguilera *et al.*, 2015: 524; Rodríguez-Ferrándiz, 2017), the exponential increase has been in recent years, as it has become an essential part of branding (Stalman, 2014). Brands have joined in with the phenomenon of branded content, which consists of creating relevant, entertaining or interesting content that does not look like advertising. This is used to create audiences and connect with them (Del Pino-Romero and Castelló-Martínez, 2015), as well as transmitting the values associated with the brand, which is kept in the background (IAB, 2019: 8).

The boom in native advertising has been considerable. In its article "The Ultimate Native Ads Guide for 2020" the Native Advertising Institute describes this as advertising that coincides with the content of the media outlet in which it appears in both form and function. The aim is not to interrupt readers, so it must be content that is perceived as organic, even if it is paid for by the brand. Native advertising can take a wide variety of forms, ranging from sponsored posts on social media platforms, sponsored articles and videos on sites that publish original content, and sponsored links and recommendation blocks in content providers and internet search engines (Wojdyski and Golan, 2016: 1,403).

Native advertising within media must rely on a newspaper's ability to transfer the narrative credibility of its newsroom to the branded content department (Sirah, 2019). These departments appeared for the first time in native digital media, such as BuzzFeed and the *Huffington Post*, which adopted native advertising. Its economic success was such (Chittum, 2014) that these were soon joined by big titles such as the *New York Times*, which created the T-Brand Studio, or *The Guardian* with Guardian Labs, taking this phenomenon to a higher level of professionalisation (cited by Ferrer, 2016: 3-9).

According to the *Native Advertising Institute*, native advertising generated 20% of total advertising revenue for news media in 2017, and the figure is expected to reach 36% for 2021. The percentages are

even higher for magazine publishers, who earned up to 31% of advertising revenue in this way in 2017, which is expected to increase to 46% in 2021. This is due to the fact that personalised content allows publishers to diversify their revenue stream, according to Lynch (2018). As Sirrah (2019) states, they are now actively involved in attracting and working with advertisers (cited by Apostol, 2020: 61).

Communication and marketing specialists work with publishers because they want to be associated with the trust people place in the media. The media have therefore begun to offer a series of products and services more typical of advertising agencies than media outlets, creating an intimate relationship between brands and publishers that deserves close examination (Sirrah, 2019).

2. Methodology

The general aim of this qualitative research is to generate knowledge about the new products and services linked to the creation of content for brands by the branded content departments of the main Spanish newspapers. The specific objectives are:

1. To define, catalogue and describe the products and services generated.
2. To open up a debate on terminology for editorial products, branded content and native advertising.
3. To detect new brand strategies in cooperation with the media.

In order to obtain the holistic knowledge required in qualitative research (Soler, 2011: 191) two pieces of fieldwork have been carried out:

1. Expert opinions (Lafuente and Marín, 2008: 16), in which finding out about the professional routine of the managers of the departments under study has been fundamental. This has been done using in-depth interviews carried out at the newspapers themselves.

2. A content analysis of the websites of the companies in the sample, with two units of analysis under study:

- The definition of the business unit itself.
- The presentation and definition of the products and services it offers.

The sample is selected from the study universe obtained from ComScore's June 2019 Ranking News. This ranking is a reference for industry professionals, as it measures media audiences on different digital platforms.

Figure 1. Ranking News ComScore Top 30 News, June 2019.

Media	Total Unique Visitors/Viewers (000)			% Reach		
	Total Digital Population	Desktop	Mobile	Total Digital Population	Desktop	Mobile
Total Internet - Total Audience	33,777	22,236	30,641	100.0	100.0	100.0
News/Information	33,243	21,784	30,396	98.4	98.0	99.2
1 Vocento	25,809	6,671	23,922	76.4	30.0	78.1
2 Prisa	25,768	7,733	23,500	76.3	34.8	76.7
3 RCS MediaGroup - Unidad Editorial	25,360	7,072	22,953	75.1	31.8	74.9
4 Prensa Ibérica	24,922	5,612	23,127	73.8	25.2	75.5
5 Grupo Godó	23,719	4,440	22,096	70.2	20.0	72.1
6 Heraldo	20,732	3,298	19,044	61.4	14.8	62.2
7 ELCONFIDENCIAL.COM	15,611	2,852	13,839	46.2	12.8	45.2
8 EIEspañol Sites	15,133	2,430	13,592	44.8	10.9	44.4
9 OKDIARIO.COM	10,775	1,151	9,936	31.9	5.2	32.4
10 Grupo Planeta Sites	10,681	1,921	9,319	31.6	8.6	30.4
11 Eldiario.es Sites	10,045	1,674	8,834	29.7	7.5	28.8
12 Microsoft News	9,591	8,863	2,202	28.4	39.9	7.2
13 EIEconomista	9,477	2,519	7,679	28.1	11.3	25.1
14 Yahoo-HuffPost News Network	9,380	1,510	8,308	27.8	6.8	27.1
15 La Voz De Galicia	7,940	909	7,217	23.5	4.1	23.6
16 Xataka	7,627	2,263	5,948	22.6	10.2	19.4
17 PUBLICO.ES Sites	7,349	993	6,572	21.8	4.5	21.4
18 Periodista Digital Sites	7,298	373	6,982	21.6	1.7	22.8
19 Agencia Europa Press	6,706	1,291	5,714	19.9	5.8	18.6
20 Pelmonex Corp.	6,372	1,557	5,184	18.9	7.0	16.9
21 Grupo ADSLZone	6,370	2,120	4,750	18.9	9.5	15.5
22 Libertad Digital	6,272	743	5,678	18.6	3.3	18.5
23 ElDiario Sites	5,539	142	5,397	16.4	0.6	17.6
24 AccuWeather Sites	5,370	230	5,165	15.9	1.0	16.9
25 Update (Mobile App)	4,570	N/A	4,570	13.5	N/A	14.9
26 Vozpopuli.com Sites	4,423	416	4,065	13.1	1.9	13.3
27 Weather.com.es, The	4,420	42	4,379	13.1	0.2	14.3
28 Grupo El Comercio	4,310	603	3,809	12.8	2.7	12.4
29 Elnacional.cat Sites	4,121	374	3,798	12.2	1.7	12.4
30 BBC Sites	4,035	895	3,313	11.9	4.0	10.8

This ranking confirmed the need to interview experts from four types of media to obtain knowledge of their different business models, as each of them has different experience and different technological development.

- News/information category. Selection of communication groups with the main traditional media titles.
- News/information category. Selection of native digital media.
- Niche content category. Selection of vertical media for specific consumption areas.
- Millennial media category. Selection of media aimed at millennial audiences who use social media as their main channel.

This categorisation of the media has resulted in a convenience sample (Gaitán and Piñuel, 1998): 90). The media represented are among the top-ranked media in the 2019 ComScore ranking. The interviewees were 16 executives from 15 media groups or media outlets. All of them are informed subjects who have deep knowledge of the issue we are researching (Gaitán and Piñuel, 1998: 90).

Figure 2. Sample of managers and groups/media.

News/Information Communication Teams	
	Fedra Valderrey Aldonza Branded Content Product Manager
	Alejandro Teodoro Brandslab Director
	Atala Martín Branded Content Director
	Leyre Rodríguez Branded Content Specialist
	Marta Gesto Content Factory Director
	Silvia González y Aurora Yáñez Heads of the department of contents and Branded Content
News/Information Digital Natives	
	Julián Povedano Head of Branded Content
	Alberto Guzmán Luna Director of CBrand - Content Agency
Niche Content	
	Jorge Madrid Director of the creative agency CNX
	Ana Multigner Digital Content Director
	Gema Jiménez Peral Branded Content Director
	Alex Ferrero Branded Content Director
Millennial Media with Social Media as main channel	
	Ángel Fernández Director
	Davit Miró Chief Revenue Officer
	Marcus Hurst Head of Branded Content

Source: own creation

These interviews were carried out between 20 November 2019 and 10 July 2020. 12 were face-to-face and they lasted an average of 120 minutes. Only three had to be carried out online because of the pandemic and lockdown. The in-depth interview followed a structured script (Vilches, 2011: 216-219) and the questions asked were organised into four thematic blocks. Conducting the interview in the workplace – in the environment where the activity is carried out – also meant we could prepare checklists in advance.

The interview included open-ended questions and some closed-ended questions with lists of options (Vilches, 2011: 216-219). A horizontal analysis was applied to the results, as the interest lies in the set of responses (Gaitán and Piñuel, 1998: 109). Only when the differences were substantial was the media category specified. Direct quotes from some interviewees will be given in the presentation of the results to illustrate ideas.

Participants in the fieldwork were very interested in the conclusions of the study, as the fact that these departments were set up only recently means they lack any real references. The observation and analysis of the websites was carried out using an analysis template.

This is a methodological approach that meets the fundamental requirements (Álvarez-Gayou 2003: 32-33) of validity, reliability and sample, with the criterion of qualitative representativeness (Wimmer and Dominick, 1996: 67). Finally, a discussion is opened to compare the results. This will help us to suggest critical reflection with practical implications for the future.

3. Results

3.1. The new branded content departments in the Spanish media

This phenomenon, which has its origins in the English-speaking journalistic world, has finally become established in Spain. This is shown in the sample drawn up for the study, in which all media of a certain size have a specific department for creating content for brands.

The traditional relationship between the media and brands was based on the purchase of advertising space. Special services could be offered, but it was not until the arrival of the digital revolution that a new demand from brands arose, as explained by the head of Prisa Brand Solution, Leyre Rodríguez:

"Brands were very interested in content and, although there was the possibility of advertorials, they started to ask us to write them because, unlike the agencies that write for brands, we write for our audience and we know what to talk about" (Verbatim 10/12/2019).

The exponential increase in recent years in the demand from brands for new editorial products has forced the media to respond with these new departments, as Jorge Madrid of Condé Nast tells us:

"This is a natural development of our business and our customers' requirements of us. With digital development this has been growing. It has become bigger, more complex, and more sophisticated" (Verbatim 9/07/2020).

This situation requires specialised staff, both in content generation and in marketing and communication strategies. The new departments now lead content projects with brands, achieving workflows that help streamline commissions and channel them via a dedicated team. This has relieved the newsroom of an extra workload that used to generate friction with the sales departments.

Among the features of this phenomenon is its recent creation, as more than two-thirds of the sample of branded content departments have been set up within the last five years and are still involved in a consolidation process. Secondly, there is the large increase in the volume of business and, consequently, the number of professionals who directly or indirectly end up linked to the department, as Ana Multigner, of Hearst, points out:

"Development was fairly gradual and calm during the first three years, but in the last two years it has been exponential and the structure has grown a lot – the number of workers has too. In the last two years, the work has tripled" (Verbatim 18/12/2019).

In general, we see that these branded content departments enjoy a degree of autonomy within the particular media outlet. Although some of them present themselves as departments or teams that are usually integrated into the business unit, most of them have their own identity projected via digital media, where they set out their value propositions, products and services.

This search for a differentiated identity tends to be especially visible in cases where the creation of content to be disseminated via the brand's own channels, and not in the media outlet itself, is on offer. In some cases, the department transcends the outlet and becomes an advertising agency with a distinct profile of its own.

3.2. New products offered to brands

3.2.1. Native advertising

This is undoubtedly the editorial product that best represents the transformation experienced by brands in relation to the media, as Marta Gesto of Vocento tells us:

"The brands were already there. They have historically been advertisers. What we are doing now is offering them a new way to reach our readers" (Verbatim 21/11/2019).

Based on the content analysis of the definition and presentation of products and services on websites, as well as from our interviews, it can be stated that a large part of the offer is based on the Branded/Native Content form included in the *Native Advertising Playbook 2.0*:

"Brand-paid content is published in the same editorial format used by the media outlet that hosts it. Generally, the content is produced by the publisher's own content teams. This branded content is represented on a page, hosted and served just like all editorial experiences. Scheduling, tracking and reporting are typically provided by the vendor" (IAB, 2019).

According to the IAB, this type of native advertising is also known as branded content, sponsored content or custom content. These terms are often used by the editorial media themselves in labelling such content to make it clear to readers that they are looking at something created by or for a brand.

According to Alejandro Teodoro of Brands Lab, one of the reasons brands are looking at this type of content is the difficulty they now have in getting free media coverage. They are also aware of the importance of native advertising in guaranteeing the impact of a news story and its visibility. The Brands Lab unit, which is responsible for the Godó group's content, describes it on its website as:

Journalistic-based content for brands that integrates organically into the medium and aligns with our audience's expectations. In this way we provide the content with maximum reach and visibility in an increasingly visual and interactive environment (<https://www.godostrategies.com/proyectos/branded-content/>, website consulted on 25/11/2020).

And as Sílvia González and Aurora Yañez, from UE Studio, remind us:

"The user is being given quality content, as the brand's objective is not to sell. Instead, such content is hosted in editorial spaces to generate engagement and allow brands to approach a segmented audience by offering them information that's interesting and useful" (Verbatim 17/12/2019).

Despite the favourable scenario for the development of native advertising, some managers of other media are more cautious and admit that 90% of the content they generate consists of advertorials and only 10% is native advertising. It seems quite common for projects that are originally intended to preserve the editorial value of the content to be altered at the client's request, as Atala Marín of Prensa Ibérica comments:

"I have a client from a big brand, whose CSR department understands perfectly well that what we are doing is branded content, but they want their brand to be featured, and the brand exposure is so high that in the end I have to say that it is an advertorial" (Verbatim 11/22/2019).

Fedra Valderrey, creative director of Bluemedia, admits that, although it depends on the brand, in general it is difficult to make branded content because it is often confused with advertorials. They are even sent press releases for publication which are referred to as branded content. Despite these nuances, the vast majority of the media interviewed recognise that this new product is increasingly in demand and that it is becoming well established.

3.2.2. Branded content

The media that have established an advertising agency relationship with brands create content that is designed to be distributed in the brand's own channels. Their editorial intelligence and knowledge of the complex distribution system, rather than the reputational component of the media outlet or its audience reach, are therefore determining factors. Some media have developed two lines of business, as in the case of Condé Nast, as Jorge Madrid explains:

"The natural evolution of the business was that our clients started doing native advertising and are now creating content for their own channels. So we've gone on to provide an agency service specialising in content creation" (Verbatim 9/07/2020).

This is how they define themselves on their website:

Condé Nast Creative Studio is a multidisciplinary team that creates effective, high-quality branded content by combining more than a century of editorial experience with the implementation of data analysis in our work process. We have precise, extensive knowledge of which topics and which formats connect best with each audience in each context (<http://www.condenaststories.es/adn/>, website accessed on: 10/12/2020).

One of the communication groups that best represents this revolution in the search for new business models is Webedia. Alex Ferrero explains that their projects are divided between content for brands located in the various Webedia Publishing titles, where brands pay to appear (paid media) and projects where the content is hosted on brand channels (own media). He is confident in his use of terminology and refers to all content created for brands as branded content, whereas native advertising refers to that hosted by any of the group's titles.

Another business model similar to a digital agency is that of Playground Studio, which began as a native digital media outlet with large audiences. Here, relationships with brands are classified depending on whether they use native advertising and are integrated into the editorial medium with sponsored content in its star formats, such as video news, or whether they turn to Playground to seek expertise in content creation and distribution, replicating successful formulas from the brand's own platforms. Playground's Chief Revenue Officer, Davit Miró says:

"We have a media outlet and we have an agency. The media outlet is the leader with millennial audiences on social media and for the agency it is very important that the media outlet is visible and has a leading position in the ranking for social video audiences or that it has viral hits. That's where the opportunities have come from, and some brands have asked us to do their content campaigns and take them to the networks" (Interview 13/10/2019).

At Yorokobu, it is curious to note that the branded content agency was born in parallel with the editorial project:

"We were clear from the beginning that we would generate branded content to provide a solution for brands that want to be integrated into the magazine's content. We create projects with a strategy to ensure that they work very well and do not deceive anyone, in order to have credibility. We need to have a content agency with a strategy and with creativity that gives value to companies, because otherwise the media outlet will not survive. That's the model and we feel quite comfortable with it, especially considering that we hardly have any display or programme advertising" (Interview 11/12/2019).

3.2.3. Other products

We found other approaches related to content creation, but which expand the business model beyond the publishing field. One of the most in-demand in recent years has been event organisation. Most media already offer the creation of events that help transfer the content strategy into the real world, as Marta Gesto explains:

"We can bring in a lot of people and we can help brands create industry-wide events all over Spain with the help of our titles" (Interview 21/11/2019).

The media have understood the need to carry out actions that transcend their titles, as Ana Multigner explains:

"We are already a very 360-degree medium. I can make you a transmedia campaign that goes from digital to paper to physical, in the form of an event" (Interview 18/12/2019).

This product is particularly important in the proposals designed in *El Confidencial*, as Alberto Guzmán tells us:

"An event is created either inside or outside *El Confidencial* and we bring the client in with four or five other stakeholders. A script is drawn up for this round table so that the subject matter does not go too far off track, and a moderator is appointed to ensure that the script pre-established with the client is followed and that the topics that are crucial to the client are discussed. A journalist covers what's going on and takes a few shots of each of the speakers. Photos are taken and we record a video. In the end, the client has an article with a photo and a video summary of everything that happened" (Interview 10/12/2019).

The creation of events is now well established, according to Jorge Madrid, and new opportunities are opening up with online events.

Another product is e-commerce and affiliation strategies and many brands go to the media to establish cooperation focused on sales. This requires its own strategies, however, which is something that is still not properly understood, as Ana Multigner warns:

"Now the new buzzword is e-commerce. But we are working hard to spread the word to clients. If you want, I can make you an e-commerce proposal, but that is not branded content. With branded content you are not going to sell" (Interview 18/12/2019).

For monetising content with affiliation models, media agreements with the online retail giant Amazon are the dominant trend. It should be noted that the media are generating deep knowledge of data management that has established new business models associated with the analytical aspect, extracting valuable information from big data, as Alejandro Teodoro tells us:

"We work on the market research part; that is, once a branded content action is finished, we provide you with information about the users who have consumed that information. We set up a panel to achieve a qualitative rather than a quantitative impact" (Interview 10/07/2020).

3.3. Services offered to brands

The service portfolio of branded content departments has also evolved and they have begun to offer a series of services typical of the marketing or corporate communication sectors, thanks to the diverse skill sets of their staff.

On Webedia's website we can see that they offer everything from strategic consultancy with SEO and digital asset audits to conversation analysis or studies of territories and competitors. This is in addition to designing immersive experiences, content and audiovisual productions, as well as content distribution and channel management. The way these services cut across boundaries allows the media to provide full coverage of the brands.

3.3.1. Consultancy and strategy

Media business units have been transformed from a commercial function aimed at selling space to become part of the process of creating branded content from a more strategic point of view, explains Jorge Madrid:

"We don't have advertising salespeople, we have consultants. You have some needs as a brand and I need to give you a solution that includes many tools. A true joint venture is set up and they allow us to give them advice. They are increasingly asking us for long-term strategies and campaigns to support them, to create audiences like the media do" (Interview 9/07/2020).

As Marta Gesto recognises, in the creation of branded content there is a very important element of strategy and this has been verified in the departments analysed. The vast majority have told us the great commitment that has been made both in training sales teams and in incorporating consultancy skills. Alberto Guzmán says:

"It was necessary to improve the reputation of *El Confidencial* as a serious company that advises you. Everyone knew that we write well, but what people didn't know is that we also do corporate communication strategies because there are consultants here as well as journalists" (Interview 10/12/2019).

This has taken the form of a communications agency that creates strategic proposals and press kits as well as training spokespeople. These services are presented on their website, where they explicitly state that they specialise in strategy, content and digital media, helping brands achieve their targets in terms of positioning, reputation and influence (<https://brands.elconfidencial.com>, website consulted on: 7/12/2020).

Others, like Webedia, are also clear examples of the importance this type of service has acquired when they explain that, thanks to their strategy department, they can offer market research as well as digital consultancy on the analytical side.

3.3.2 Creativity and production

One of the most disruptive consequences of media convergence was the pivot to video within the print media, which brought about restructuring, such as the incorporation of professionals specialising in technology, to cope with new formats and narratives. The search for a quality user experience with the development of multimedia articles, as well as the exploration of interactive formats to increase user engagement (Figure 5), has led the media to hire human resources from other industries.

These changes have become opportunities for media companies to explore new business avenues, such as digital product development and design. As Jorge Madrid explains:

"This department is essential because we can use the digital innovation we need to address our titles' redesign requirements for our customers when we create a website for them, for example" (Interview 9/07/2020).

The support the branded content department receives from the more technological departments enables it to develop a more elaborate creative product with greater value for clients. Julián Povedano says that *El Español* often uses the design and technology team when it comes to developing special content for brands.

Figure 5. Microsite with immersive experience by Condé Nast Creative Studio for Loewe



The creation of content platforms for brands is one of the most frequently demanded projects and it is a clear example of how the media have expanded their offer, as this type of assignment requires a series of processes ranging from the development and design of the content, to the creation of the container and development of the functionality of the website.

The importance of video at this new stage is crucial in order to understand the phenomenon of branded content generation and the new role of media outlets with brands. Ana Multigner makes it clear:

"All clients want video. In the past year it has been spectacular. Video is fundamental for our type of client because it allows you to have different elements for different channels. Video is at the heart of generating other formats for networks: to make a teaser, a small piece on Instagram or something longer on YouTube. We are on many channels, so in the end a video allows you to have a broader reach strategy. If you're looking for reach and engagement, do video" (Interview 18/12/2019).

The media have begun to market a very ambitious type of product associated with a series of services, particularly those focused on the world of fashion or lifestyle, as the creative director of *¡Hola!*, Gema Jiménez, tells us:

"We are selling more and more 360° actions, especially with audiovisual production. In a magazine like this, a fashion and production person is essential, because fashion productions are tedious, long and heavy. There are negotiations with representatives, with the teams of makeup artists, the hairdressers... We are talking about productions with teams of 20 people. One of the assets we have in here is that we have the audiovisual structure. That's one of the advantages brands see. You don't have to outsource anything" (Interview 18/12/2019).

The part involving creativity and content production requires the largest number of different types of staff, as well as the most resources invested. This commitment to provide a comprehensive response to

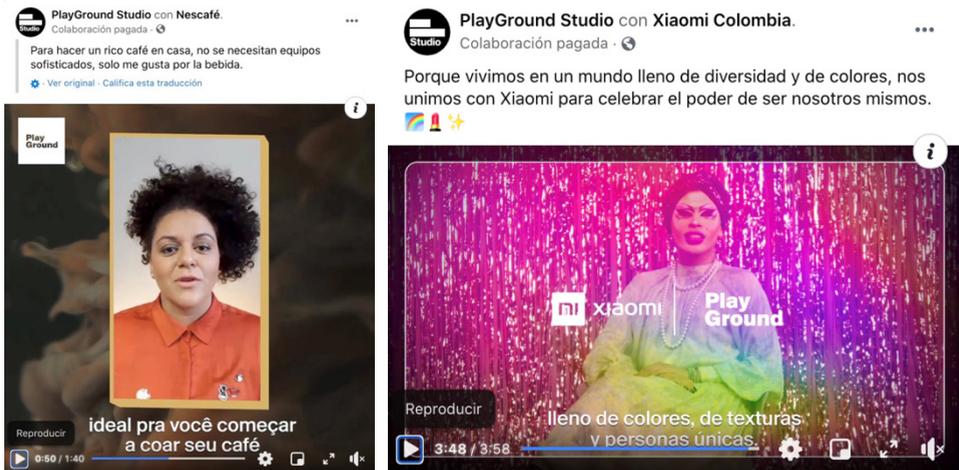
projects carried out with brands is a declaration of intent by the media, which are bidding to provide services traditionally reserved for agencies and production companies.

3.3.3. Distribution and analysis

Because of the many different channels, hyper-segmented audiences and non-captive consumers, it is important to have complex content distribution strategies. Once again, the incorporation of specialist staff has helped build up a great deal of knowledge about publication techniques in complex areas like social media (Figures 3 and 4). These departments also tend to use the full potential of the group's various titles so it is essential to master distribution, as Jorge Madrid confirms:

"When a client hires us to create a campaign, they hire us to offer them a good idea, but also a good distribution strategy, which is usually associated with social media. That's why we work with traffickers" (Interview 9/07/2020).

Figure 3 and 4 Playground Magazine Native Advertising for Nescafé and Xiaomi on Facebook



The audience strategist helps the content manager get the most out of the content across all platforms, distributes it and makes it comply with the platforms' rules and works on a traffic strategy to help expand the reach of the content. All this improves the effectiveness of native advertising. This knowledge also becomes an important asset when agency services are provided to third parties – in other words, when advice is given to brands on how to run their own social media accounts, as Davit Miró tells us:

"I don't see how advertising agencies can have the knowledge of the current distribution platforms and audiences – that deep knowledge which comes from A/B testing that we have thanks to the media outlet. That expertise really makes us stand out" (Interview 13/10/2019).

As a result, some of the biggest brands in Spain have hired Playground Studio so they can transfer all that knowledge into their channels.

Another essential aspect linked to distribution is the constant measurement by analytics managers. In many cases, this real-time monitoring makes it possible to completely rethink the creativity or the publishing strategy in order to meet the targets set.

Once the campaign is over, the data manager analyses the data and draws conclusions that are offered to the brands, as clients have begun to demand analysis and traceability of their actions. Closing projects with a detailed report of the main metrics and drawing the relevant conclusions is therefore an essential part of the service.

Data collection by analytics departments has given rise to a series of products and services using content creation which are proving to be a very important revenue source for Spanish media, as Leyre Rodríguez explains:

"With the data analytics team, we started selling branded content projects including a big data project, either because we collect data that we then use for impact or because we share it" (Interview 10/12/2019).

And, as several of the interviewees told us, all customers want products based on big data. The sale of clusters of highly qualified cookies, through DMPs (Data Management Platforms), is in great demand. The search for an increasingly qualitative impact by brands has made audience segmentation based on browsing patterns a common service. An example of this commitment by the media to monetising data is the Wemass audience marketing platform, the result of the association of major media groups such as Vocento, the Godó group and the Prisa group. This offers the opportunity to impact interest groups created from multiple quality user profiles by combining data from all the sites that are part of the project.

Table 1. Catalogue of services offered to brands

SERVICES	
Consulting and strategy phase	Digital audit Benchmarking Market surveys Search strategies (SEO/SEM) Communication strategies Content strategies
Creativity and production phase	Creative management Copywriting Art management Graphic design and layout Infographics and animation UX/UI design Front-end web development Photographic and audiovisual production Production, DoP, location, props, styling Hiring celebrities and influencers
Distribution and analysis phase	Social media strategies Social media management Real-time tracking and monitoring Drawing up reports Social listening Audience segmentation Browsing panels

Source: Self-created based on the results obtained from the interviews and the analysis of the sample websites.

3.4. Projects developed with brands

Two quite different lines of work can be seen in the types of assignments and projects usually carried out in branded content departments: one with a tactical approach and the other more strategic. Some professionals say they feel comfortable in both areas, but the vast majority are committed to long-term strategies as the paradigm of successful branded content.

3.4.1. One-offs for a tactical approach

One of the main motivations for brands is the need to generate notoriety as products are launched. Their targets are focused on conversion and the response tends to be more tactical and short-term actions, often aimed at e-commerce. As Gema Jiménez tells us:

"Brands sometimes have very specific needs, which may be marked by a highly seasonal launch campaign in the summer or at Christmas, and we help expand their reach with our content" (Interview 18/12/2019).

Marcus Hurst, of Yorokobu, tells us that the way to provide support from his media outlet is to generate a content framework that makes it possible to talk about the product, but with a cultural component that is the result of research and is much more like journalism. This is very different from the kind of work an advertising agency would do.

In some media, this type of project tends to be the dominant trend and their creative managers lament the fact that they do not receive more long-term projects. Some branded content departments even admit that they do not accept this type of one-off assignment. Instead, clients are referred directly to

the advertising sales department so they can work directly with the editorial section. According to them, this type of project will tend to disappear.

3.4.2. “Always on” for a strategic approach

At the other end of the scale, there are the projects known as “always on”, which correspond to a much more ambitious approach. This focuses on brand building, sometimes strengthening the brand's reputation due to a point of weakness, sometimes seeking a repositioning, and often trying to improve its strength in a particular territory, as Alberto Guzmán explains.

According to Alejandro Teodoro:

“We are increasingly moving towards medium- or long-term projects – long-term projects that really require big investments, big productions and cross-functional teams working specifically on them. All groups have to move towards these big projects and be able to take branded content to the level it deserves” (Interview 10/07/2020).

According to Teodoro, branded content is not the right formula for selling more, but rather for positioning and transmitting values, as it works on intangible factors that improve reputations. As a result, companies' communication departments are increasingly interested in this product.

Another media outlet with a very similar view is Playground Magazine, Davit Miró highlights the fact that it specialises in content focused on creating engagement and not so much on conversion, pointing out that what his team is good at is creating audiences and keeping them stimulated. The services offered consist of providing the content brands need to publish periodically on their social networks. Publication follows a long-term plan that takes the form of a schedule set out on a calendar. The aim is to master the different formats so the content creation process is streamlined and can be resolved with simple production.

The greatest exponent of this type of long-term agreement can be found at Webedia Publishing, specifically in its specialised technology media outlet, Xataka. As can be seen on the outlet's home page, there is a specific section entitled “Partners”, which is intended to house the content created for brands – a repository where the different publications created for the brand can be accumulated. Alex Ferrero refers to these spaces as “corners”:

“Brands increasingly want long-term actions – to buy a space within the media outlet where they can talk about their stuff. We make a 12-month plan and give them a section with their look and feel, all properly optimised with regularly posted content” (Interview 20/11/2019).

4. Discussion and conclusions

4.1. An emerging phenomenon

We can say that the creation of these branded content departments is an emerging phenomenon. The oldest one began in 2009 with the founding of *Yorokobu* magazine and the most recent is the department at *iHola!*, which is only a few months old. The emergence of these departments is due to the media's need to channel content creation requests from brands. This type of product used to be created in the newsroom itself, but as projects evolved and distribution strategies became more complex, it was decided to create specialised and professionalised structures.

Another key element that can help us understand the dimension of this phenomenon is its exponential growth, as we have seen in most of the departments analysed, which are constantly incorporating new profiles to cope with the strong demand.

4.2. New publishing products and terminology use

From these interviews, we can also determine that the trend is the rise in native advertising as one of the most frequently demanded editorial products, specifically in the form of branded or native content. Another very popular product, although it is by no means new, is still the advertorial. In fact, many assignments initially seek to develop content with the characteristics of native advertising, focusing on providing relevant content to meet an audience need rather than on the brand, but as the project progresses, the brand ends up prioritising its presence. This downgrades the editorial value of the content, which becomes an advertorial and ends up labelled as such.

Some of the professionals interviewed, such as Fedra Valderrey and Alejandro Teodoro, warn that the volume of advertorials created is still greater than native advertising, as brands find it difficult to stay in the background even though the results of engagement metrics obtained with native advertising

are much higher than those for advertorials. Media professionals call on clients to take notice of these figures. The deep knowledge they have and have generated over the years is the key to connecting users, allowing them to build and manage large audiences.

As for the epistemological question, several professionals detected a tendency to make inappropriate use of the term native advertising, using it to refer to content focusing on products. Professionals who wrongly use the term native advertising to refer to advertorials do so from a negative point of view, as they consider this to be content with little editorial value and an excessive commercial component. The term is also used to refer to promotional content that appears as related articles within a media outlet but which are actually hosted on third-party platforms.

Interestingly, "native advertising", which is the term that best defines the new editorial product offered by the media, tends to be either used incorrectly or omitted. Some of those interviewed even admitted that they have given up using the term altogether because they believe the market is not sufficiently mature for it and it can cause confusion among customers.

We find that the most widespread term used by professionals to refer to the content created for brands in the media is branded content. If we start from the premise that it is a non-advertising content intended to be relevant to the audience, whether informing, educating or entertaining them, it could be said that it partly meets the definition, and that it would actually be more accurate to use the term native advertising, which would not be misused in this context.

Thus, when the branded content department of a media outlet creates content for a brand that is published on that outlet and therefore follows its editorial line, we would be talking about native advertising. Whereas, if that same department creates content that is published on a brand's channels and therefore adopts the voice of that brand, we would be talking about branded content.

4.3. Expertise in content creation for brands

As we have seen when analysing the cases of Condé Nast, Webedia, Playground and Yorokobu, this differentiation is crucial to understanding the particular features of the media which, as well as offering native advertising, are incorporating digital agency functions with branded content creation services into their departments.

Concerning this duality that gives rise to business models with parallel but differentiated trajectories, it is curious to observe that the big media groups are focusing exclusively on offering brands the creation of content designed to be distributed in the group's different titles, thereby capitalising on the large audiences they have. With the exception of the PRISA group, which does have an agency called Factoría that produces content for third parties, we have no evidence that the other major groups are working in this direction. Some of the professionals interviewed are reluctant to do this because they cannot see that it has a place within the current business mindset and culture, or because the profit margins are infinitely lower than those for native advertising, while others see an opportunity for growth in this direction and believe that it is only a matter of time before it happens. Curiously, the digital native or niche media seem to be the most willing to explore this avenue, if they have not already done so, offering a series of services more typical of a digital advertising agency than conventional media.

4.4. Professionalisation, structure and agency services

To respond to these new needs, the departments responsible for business have had to undergo a major transformation. The new editorial product offered to brands is much more complex than the actions that could be carried out in the past, as it includes omnichannel strategies, transmedia narratives, business analysis and social media strategy. Considering that in many cases a range of services as broad as those offered by an advertising agency specialising in digital marketing is already on offer it is easy to understand the proliferation of branded content departments with their diverse profiles including everything from writers to audiovisual producers, SEO experts, e-commerce and data analysts.

On the other hand, the media forced into digital transformation by the moment of disruption more than ten years ago, have developed editorial intelligence that is great demand and this has given them the opportunity to monetise content via new business models. In many cases, branded content departments or agencies are becoming an essential source of revenue for them. At a time when many editorial projects are still struggling to find the formula to guarantee their survival, the growth in demand for this type of products and services is a hopeful trend for many of them.

4.5. The added value of the product created in the media

All indications are that this phenomenon will continue to grow. The value offered is considerable:

1. Capacity to reach large audiences that help to amplify messages, or segmentation possibilities with highly qualitative audiences.
2. Reputation and credibility transferred from the media to the brand. It is very important to be associated with specialised media that are important in certain fields and have strong brands.
3. Editorial intelligence that translates into a deep understanding of audiences, as well as which formats and types of content are working best. The media outlet itself serves as an R&D test bed.
4. Possibility of linking to current events.
5. Simplification of processes. A single contact person covers all the brand's needs. Everything from strategic consultancy, to creative proposals, production, distribution and reporting of results.
6. Content-derived products based on big data, which allow for the subsequent development of highly personalised activations.

4.6. Product knowledge, process improvement and maturity of the industry

Although the new scenario is promising, it requires both parties to improve their processes and their understanding of the products offered, especially native advertising. Some professionals who belong to international publishing groups observe that, in other countries, the market is more mature and the product is better understood. They conclude that in Spain there is a need for professionalisation and for the establishment of rules of the game.

The interviewees were not generally in favour of using branded content as a tactical action seeking direct conversion into sales, as this usually gives poor results in more qualitative metrics such as dwell time, and also generates a negative feeling among reader, which does not help anyone. Its function should be aimed at branding and trying to dominate territories related to the brand in terms of values and positioning.

The "always on" format is the most interesting formula: collaboration agreements lasting up to a year are concluded, which means more strategic projects can be developed. A series of pieces of content is generated around an idea and long-term planning is carried out with the teams set up for the project. The media outlet supports the brand and establishes dynamics very similar to those used by the outlet itself to create audiences. It seems that increasing numbers of clients are asking for strategies with continuity, and this is perhaps one of the most important indicators that the approach is on the way becoming fully established.

It seems clear that this is a new paradigm in the advertising industry, with a disruptive scenario in terms of the relationship between brands and the media, as the latter have always been the recipients of advertising, but they have never before intervened in it. This is changing the advertising business in a way that in some cases is being seen as interference by other traditional players, such as creative agencies or media centres. The speed with which the digital ecosystem is changing means we will have to continue to observe and analyse in detail the development of an emerging phenomenon that is becoming strongly established and promises good prospects for the future.

5. Acknowledgement

Translator: Simon Berrill.

The translation of this article was supported by the project UJIPR 00040 / UJI-B2018-27. Measuring the corporate reputation of the Spanish Red Cross: Creating a model for the third sector, led by Lorena López Font.

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