

From the capital to the neighborhood: The hyperlocal media model in the Spanish context

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Abstract. This research updates the study of media of proximity in Spain, addressing the in-depth study of hyperlocal digital media. The main objectives are to determine the motivations for their growth, the models they establish and the factors that condition their stability in the post-pandemic context. After mapping hyperlocal media in 2018 (n=62), a survey was conducted among their directors to discover the motivations for their creation, the characteristics of their professional teams and business models, the conditions of news production and their relationship with the audience. The map was updated in December 2021 and a new questionnaire was provided to directors to discover its adaptation to the post-pandemic context. The results show that hyperlocal media in Spain have established their own organizational, productive and economic model. The commitment of the directors to providing the community with the information they need from their own neighborhoods is evident, as well as the human and economic resource limitations they must face. The pandemic has strengthened the relationship with the audience, the news service mission, and the search for new financing models.

Keywords: hyperlocal media, hyperlocal journalism, local news, digital media, productive models, Spain

Introduction

The local media ecosystem has undergone a profound transformation in recent decades, especially since the economic crisis of the first decade of the 2000s (Franklin, 2006; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). In addition to the closure of numerous local media companies and the consequent growth of news deserts (Abernathy, 2020), there have been difficulties in adapting to the digital scenario (Jenkins & Kleis Nielsen, 2018) and transforming the productive and business model demanded by a new communicative and media reality (Jenkins & Kleis Nielsen, 2020).

In this context of crisis and transformation of the traditional local media, there has been a gradual growth of so-called hyperlocal media, a new model favored by the demand for proximity and truthful information, changes in audience behavior and the advantages of the Internet (Radcliffe, 2012; Schaffer, 2007). Its growth has been observed and studied in different countries and media contexts during the last decade (Negreira-Rey & López-García, 2021), finding mappings and research on its development in the United States (Horning, 2012; McLellan, 2010), the United Kingdom (Harte, 2013), the Netherlands (Kerkhoven & Bakker, 2014), Sweden (Jangdal, 2019; Leckner, Tenor & Nygren, 2019), Finland (Hujanen, Lehtisaari, Lindén & Grönlund, 2019), Norway (Halvorsen & Bjerke, 2019), Russia (Dovbysh, 2020), and Australia and New Zealand (Downman & Murray, 2017).

The Spanish context presents its own particularities, which makes it a relevant case for study. In the 1980s and 1990s, the media landscape was dominated by large regional and local press publishing groups. However, this changed with the transition to the digital scenario and the economic crisis experienced since 2008. These years led to a serious destruction of employment among professionals in the sector – more than 12,000 journalists became unemployed (Asociación de la Prensa de Madrid, 2015) – and the closure of media outlets and local offices. At the same time, the constant and important growth of digital media in Spain was observed, mapping 1,247 digital media in 2005 (Salaverría, 2008), which grew to a total of 3,065 active digital media outlets in 2018 (Salaverría, Martínez-Costa & Breiner, 2018). The overall number of digital-native media experienced a significant growth following the worst years of the financial crisis (Negredo, Martínez-Costa, Breiner & Salaverría, 2020), which relates to a trend towards self-employment of journalists with the creation of novel news projects. It was from that point of profound transformation that the emergence of hyperlocal digital media began to be observed (Flores Vivar, 2014). This media resurgence has not yet been studied in depth in Spain, despite the fact that in previous decades there has been important research work on regional and local media.

The research presented in this article arises from interest in developing the study of hyperlocal media in Spain and determining the motivations for their growth, the models they establish and the factors that condition their stability in the post-pandemic context. This work has an exploratory and descriptive purpose that seeks to discover the current reality of hyperlocal digital media in Spain – all the news media in the sample have digital editions, although they are not exclusively

digital natives – and the particularities of its development. The research questions posed are as follows:

RQ1. What are the objectives and motivations behind the growth of hyperlocal digital media as a new media model in the areas of proximity in Spain?

RQ2. What is the organizational, productive and business model of the Spanish hyperlocal media?

RQ3. Have hyperlocal media managed to maintain their news provision in the post-pandemic context and fulfill their mission of service to the audience?

Hyperlocal media as a new proximity information model

Hyperlocal media have been considered to be a subculture of the 'excessively local' (Hess & Waller, 2016), in which the link to geographical place and the relationship with the community and professional practice differ from the parent culture of mainstream local media (Arnold & Blackman, 2021). Hyperlocal information is intrinsically linked to a place (Rodgers, 2018), a liquid and relational concept in which new spaces of connection and communication between journalists and neighbors emerge (Schmitz Weiss, 2020).

The definition of hyperlocal media is still a debated topic, due to the diversity of news projects labeled with this term and the diverse interests of those who contribute to its characterization (Harte, Howells & Williams, 2019). Metzgar, Kurpius and Rowley (2011) proposed a definition of hyperlocal media that has been taken as a reference, characterizing them as "geographically-based, community-oriented, original-news reporting organizations indigenous to the web and intended to fill perceived gaps in coverage of an issue or region and to promote civic engagement" (p.774). Kerkhoven and Bakker (2014) point out that this definition presents elements that make it difficult to categorize hyperlocals, such as their community orientation, promotion of civic engagement or coverage of news gaps. D'Heer and Paulussen (2013) point out that other media with hyperlocal reach that are not digital natives are excluded. Nygren, Leckner and Tenor (2018) apply a broader definition and include digital media, free and subscription newspapers, community radio or TV stations. Another definition used as a reference is that proposed by Radcliffe (2012, p.6), which focuses on its geographical dimension and defines hyperlocal media as "online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, single postcode or other small, geographically defined community."

The community service orientation that usually characterizes hyperlocal media responds to the motivations of their creators. Previous research indicates that the founders of these media seek to make neighbors better informed to make decisions and offer an alternative to traditional media, to support or initiate local campaigns, to build community cohesion and reinforce local identity, to open new channels for local advertisers, to create jobs, or to obtain economic benefits (Nygren et al., 2018; Radcliffe, 2012; Williams & Harte, 2016). Given their goal of filling gaps in local news coverage, Nygren and colleagues (2018) acknowledge that it is difficult to assess whether the proliferation of hyperlocal media counterbalances, in terms of their democratic role, the crisis of traditional local media. Despite this, hyperlocals exert the role of proactively representing citizens, being promoters of public interest campaigns, serving communities, and being inclusive in the face of ethnic and social diversity (Barnett & Townend, 2015; Zhang, 2020).

The promoters of hyperlocal media associate their professional work with providing a service to the community: since they consider themselves a member of it, they are involved in its development and aim to offer accurate, objective and transparent information (Chadha, 2016). The producers of hyperlocal information include journalists, professionals with diverse backgrounds and experiences, readers and audience members or local organizations of different types (Barnett & Townend, 2015; Nygren et al., 2018). They conceive their own roles depending on their media model and the media ecosystem in each country, varying between those who consider themselves journalists, fans, community activists, civic leaders or entrepreneurs (Hujanen et al., 2020).

Hyperlocal media founders are often entrepreneurs of their own start-ups and prioritize informational service to the community over economic profitability (Harte, Turner & Williams,

2016; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021). This leads them to situations of precariousness, self-exploitation, a high level of voluntarism and a lack of financial security in the medium and long term (Harte et al., 2019; Van Kerkhoven, 2020). They must also combine their journalistic work with the economic and business management of the media (Chadha, 2016). Research on the business model of hyperlocal media indicates that this type of project usually has multiple sources of income (Cook, Geels & Bakker, 2016; Kurpius, Metzgar & Rowley, 2010; Leckner et al., 2019). However, it is a highly unstable sector in which the scalability of projects is possible through collaboration with other hyperlocal and local media (Jenkins & Graves, 2019; Radcliffe, 2012). Their organizational and productive model is determined by their for-profit or non-profit character, as well as by the journalistic or non-journalistic profile of their producers (Tenor, 2018). The funding model also influences their role in the community, with those that depend less on advertising revenue maintaining a more activist position (Harlow & Chadha, 2021).

The informative production of hyperlocal media is characterized by a predominance of the topics that most interest citizens and that are most useful for their daily lives. Hyperlocals prioritize information from their geographic area and report on a diverse range of topics, seeking to highlight the democratic function they defend (Jangdal, 2021). Local politics, social issues, culture and entertainment, sports, economics or urbanism usually occupy a preferential place in their media agenda (D'Heer & Paulussen, 2013; Kerkhoven & Bakker, 2014; Leckner et al., 2019; Radcliffe, 2015; Thurman, Pascal & Bradshaw, 2012).

The closeness to the hyperlocal community favors professionals maintaining a relationship of participation and reciprocity with citizens (Harte, Williams & Turner, 2017). Neighbors can take part as producers, contributors, sources or participants (Firmstone & Coleman, 2014) and it is common for hyperlocal media to have networks of regular collaborators (Zamenopoulos et al., 2016).

In the rhythms and spaces of hyperlocal information consumption, different and complementary times, routines and platforms – physical and virtual – converge (Örnebring & Hellekant Rowe, 2021). Social networks constitute a space for the dissemination of content produced by the media, but also for the exchange of information with the community in the hyperlocal sphere (Page-Tan, 2021). Citizens employ networks to share news from the web with their contacts, but information also circulates through other channels such as email and in unmediated spaces – such as word of mouth among community members (Bobkowski, Jiang, Peterlin & Rodriguez, 2019). Facebook pages and groups are also established as places in which to share and comment on current events and topics of interest in the neighborhood (Turner, 2021), without necessarily following journalistic standards or the mediation of professionals (De Meulenaere, Courtois & Ponnet, 2020).

Hyperlocal media in the Spanish context

The presence and development of hyperlocal digital media in Spain has not been studied in depth. Research into this subject should be based on the evolution of local media in the country, the characteristics of its media ecosystem, and studies previously carried out in the area.

Spanish media in context

The Spanish media ecosystem is conditioned by its sociodemographic, territorial, administrative, and political contexts. Since the democratic transition that began in 1975, Spain has been a state with a central government, which is in turn divided into 17 autonomous communities that have their own regional governments, as well as other provincial and local government entities. These institutions generate relevant information for the citizenry, which must be reported and explained through local media. The territorial and administrative division of the state also has a cultural dimension, since some of the autonomous communities have their own co-official languages, such as Catalan, Galician, Basque, Aranese or Valencian, which coexist with Spanish and are the motive for the creation of news media in their own languages. On a social level, Spain is a country with more than 47 million inhabitants, but with a very unequal demographic distribution in the different autonomous communities, due to the concentration of populations in the capitals and regions with greater economic activity. The problem of depopulation in some areas of the country has become visible in recent years, as it generates political and media neglect in these zones.

This political-administrative organization of the country has favored the coexistence of national media – mainly concentrated in large capitals such as Madrid and Barcelona – with the regional and local press, which began to grow from the 1980s onwards. In the Spanish media ecosystem, national newspapers, radio, television and digital media – many of them belonging to the same media groups – coexist with national public broadcasting media and the public broadcasting services of the autonomous communities, as well as local media of diverse scope and platforms – including outlets integrated with important publishing groups and other independent projects. Regional and local newspapers occupy sixth place in online media consumption and the first position in the ranking of the most trusted media by Spanish citizens (Newman et al., 2021), which shows their relevance to news consumption.

Local media and the first hyperlocals

Political and social transformation in Spain has favored strong growth in the regional and local press from 1975 onwards. New titles appeared in local areas, while national newspapers launched regional, local or provincial editions (Guillamet, 2002). During the 1980s and 1990s, regional and local press publishing groups dominated the media landscape in the country, and in 1990, 95 regional or local newspapers, 427 local radio stations and 113 local television stations were mapped (Macià Mercadé, 1993).

Precedents for hyperlocal digital media can also be found in this period. During the 1970s and 1980s, the neighborhood press emerged as a response of local associations and organizations, offering an alternative to the mainstream media (López García & Macià Mercadé, 2007). This movement was later taken up by the city councils, which decided to promote their own bulletins. Community television and radio stations also grew during this period (Fleischman & Sáez, 2009).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the hegemonic publishing groups tried to adapt their strategy to the online scenario and optimize their online media, while digital-native media grew. The economic crisis and the crisis of the industry itself, suffered in Spain since 2008, accelerated the process of change and media renovation in the areas of proximity. In 2008 and 2009 the first hyperlocal digital media created by independent journalists appeared – such as *A Voces de Carabanchel*, *Hortaleza en Red*, *OMC Radio Villaverde*, or *Zona Retiro* (Flores Vivar, 2014) – while large groups such as Vocento experimented with their own hyperlocal editions (Izquierdo Labella, 2012). The rise of these new local and hyperlocal digital media was related to the closure of media outlets and job losses in the journalism sector. A study by the Asociación de la Prensa de Madrid (2017) noted that between 2008 and 2015 as many as 579 new media had been launched, of which 124 were local and hyperlocal media.

Categorization of hyperlocal digital media

The categorization of hyperlocal digital media takes as a reference the definition of communication spaces proposed by López García (2004) for the territorial and administrative context of Spain. The author identifies the local space with municipalities – the smallest entity of local government – and *comarcas* – an entity composed of several municipalities identified by common geographical and cultural characteristics. Based on Radcliffe's (2012) definition, we prioritize the geographic dimension and understand that hyperlocal media are those that cover the smallest geographical areas and occupy a space smaller than that of local media. Therefore, in the Spanish context and for this research, hyperlocal media are considered to be those that cover a smaller space than a municipality, which can be a neighborhood or parish – or a group of them.

In this study, hyperlocal digital media are categorized as those that are journalistic in scope, publish original content – excluding corporate media and those that operate as directories of news from other outlets – and have a generalist agenda (Salaverría-Aliaga, 2017). Native and non-native digital media are considered, which can combine their digital edition with other platforms – radio, press, television or apps. They can present different periodicity and volume of publication. Their reach in terms of audience is highly variable and is not considered as a criteria for their cataloging in this context – in terms of population, a neighborhood in the city of Madrid is not comparable to a neighborhood in a small city.

Methods

Active hyperlocal digital media in Spain were mapped in a previous phase of the research: a total of 62 were registered in August 2018. The media were discovered using official communication agendas, reports and other directories, as well as through a systematized manual search on Google. These media were then subjected to a content analysis to determine their general characteristics, specifically the platforms on which they were edited, their digital native character, their update rate, their ownership, and their editing language (Negreira-Rey, López-García & Vázquez-Herrero, 2020).

The in-depth study of hyperlocal media models in Spain was carried out through a survey sent to their directors in two rounds. The survey took as an object the mapped hyperlocal media census in two moments: 2019 and 2022.

The first stage of the survey addressed 52 directors, who ran the 62 hyperlocal media outlets. It was carried out through a questionnaire, which was designed to combine quantitative and qualitative variables to find out about aspects related to their founding and mission, professional team and collaborators, their business model and sustainability, news production for digital platforms, and user participation (RQ1, RQ2), as shown in Table 1. After a pre-test, this first questionnaire was implemented in Google Forms, distributed via email, and answered in a self-administered manner. The questionnaire, completed in December 2019, was responded to by 32 directors, who managed 42 hyperlocal outlets.

Table 1. Design scheme of the first questionnaire addressed to hyperlocal media directors

Section	Topics
Presentation	Purpose of the questionnaire; instructions.
Introduction	Date of foundation; geographical scope; area of news coverage; main objectives.
Professional team and collaborators	No. of regular workers; higher degree in communication of the workers; professional tasks and profiles; temporary dedication; presence and no. of collaborators; frequency of collaboration; economic remuneration of the collaborators.
Business model and economic sustainability	Type of initiative (profit, non-profit); legal organization; offer of alternative services; free access to content; sources of income; expenditure items; profitability objectives; conditions for economic sustainability.
Production on digital platforms	Frequency of updating; volume of publication; priority of topics on the agenda; presence and types of sources; experimentation with new formats and narratives; web strategy and mobile app; production of content for social networks.
User participation	Invitation to users to produce content; conditions for user participation; publication of user-generated content; presence and objectives in social media.

The map was revised in December 2021 to check the continuity of the hyperlocal media previously identified and to locate new projects. To discover the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on these media projects (RQ3), the second questionnaire was sent to the 50 directors who managed the 60 hyperlocal media that were still active. As shown in Table 2, it addressed the potential impact of the pandemic on the information and economic model of hyperlocals. The questionnaire was

responded to between January and February 2022 – sent by e-mail and answered in a self-administered way. We obtained 13 responses from the directors of 23 hyperlocal outlets.

Table 2. Design scheme of the second questionnaire addressed to hyperlocal media directors

Section	Topics
Presentation	Purpose of the questionnaire; instructions.
Organization, informative purpose and relationship with the audience	Transformations in the organization and productive structure; changes in the informative purpose; relationship with the audience; positive and negative effects of the pandemic on the development of journalistic operations.
Economic situation and sustainability	Business model transformation; positive and negative effects of the pandemic on the financial situation of the project; strategies to improve economic viability; economic forecast in the medium term; measures for economic stability.

In the results section, the data about creation and growth of hyperlocal news media in Spain (RQ1) and their characteristics (RQ2) – professional team, business model, news production and user participation – are those obtained from the first questionnaire conducted in 2019. The data describing the adaptation and situation of hyperlocal media in the post-pandemic context (RQ3) are those obtained from the second questionnaire completed in 2022.

Results

A total of 62 hyperlocal digital media were mapped in Spain in 2018 (Negreira-Rey et al., 2020): 26 (42%) were digital natives, while 20 (32%) combined their web edition with a print edition, and 13 (21%) with radio. Only two (3%) hyperlocals had a television channel and mobile app. The mapped hyperlocal media were mainly concentrated in the autonomous community of Madrid (20), where the capital of the state is located, and Barcelona (22), which stands out together with Madrid as a large city in Spain (Figure 1).

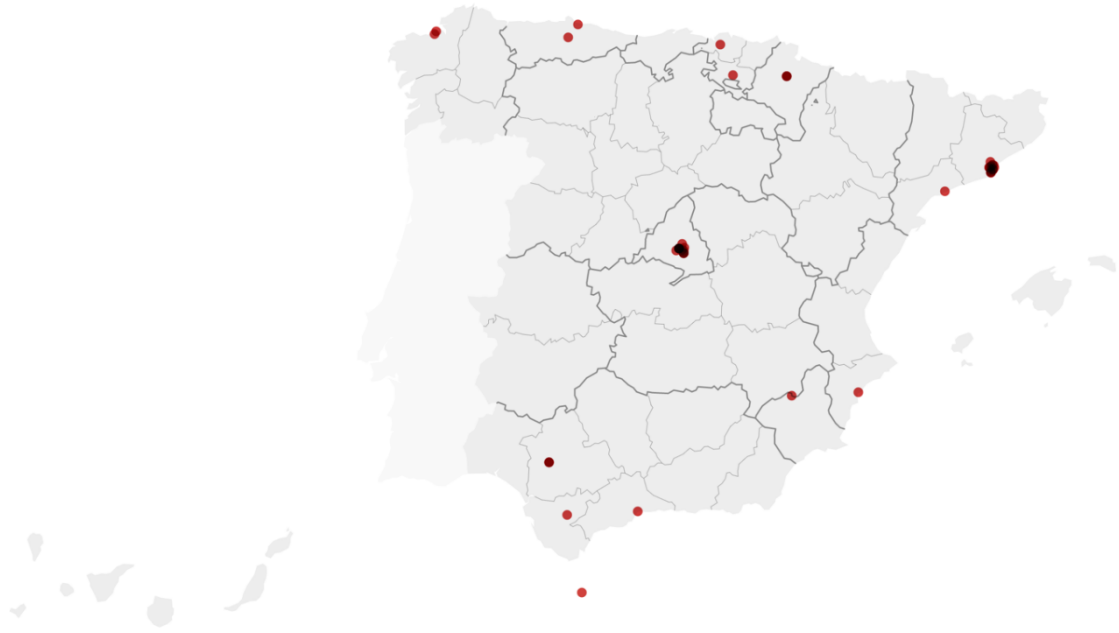


Figure 1. Location of mapped hyperlocal digital media in Spain in 2018 (n=62). Source: own elaboration.

Establishment of hyperlocal digital media

The growth of hyperlocal digital media in Spain coincided with their expansion at the international level, intensifying from 2008 and being especially relevant between 2011 and 2013 (Figure 2). It coincided with the worst stage of the economic crisis in Spain and the highest unemployment among journalists.

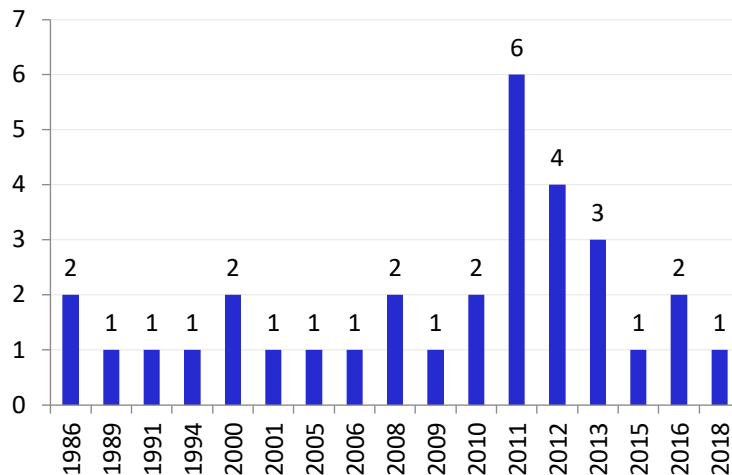


Figure 2. Foundation of Spanish hyperlocal media by year (n=32)

Regarding the objectives and motivations for their creation (RQ1), three-quarters of the directors stated that their main objective was to inform neighbors about what was happening in the area. Specifically, they stated that they wanted to carry out journalism on issues that interested and affected the citizens, to become the informative reference point for the hyperlocal area, to tell the reality firsthand, and to offer truthful information. They also wanted to disseminate news that did not appear in other media and to give visibility to the neighborhood. Finally, they stated that they had a social motivation and sought social cohesion of the community and citizen debate, promoting participatory communication and giving space to citizen projects.

Professional team and collaborators

The professional teams of the hyperlocal digital media (RQ2) were, in general, small (Table 3). 27 (84%) of the directors stated that they had between zero and five regular workers. Those with a large staff were exceptional, with only one media outlet boasting 15 workers, one having 20 and another with 30.

Table 3. Number of regular workers in hyperlocal digital media (n=32)

Workers	Frequency
0 – 5	27
6 – 15	3
16 – 25	1
26 – 35	1

Regular workers in 26 (84%) hyperlocal outlets had a part-time dedication of less than 40 hours per week (Table 4). This data reflects that their work in the hyperlocal media was not their main professional activity or that they combined it with other work. Only five of the hyperlocals had workers who were full-time employees.

Table 4. Working hours per week of regular workers in hyperlocal digital media (n=31)

Dedication	Frequency
Less than 20 hours	8
Part-time (approx. 20 hours)	5
20 – 40 hours	13
Full time (approx. 40 hours)	3
More than 40 hours	2

From the total number of workers for whom data were obtained – 31 directors reported data for a total of 149 professionals working in their media outlets – only 69 (46%) had a higher degree in communication. The data revealed that only eight hyperlocals had a team in which all their workers had some specific degree in the field of communication. Despite this lack of educational background, the small size of the teams forced their workers to perform different professional profiles simultaneously (Figure 3). Most identified with the profile of the multi-skilled journalist, understood as one who does the work of a journalist, reporter and multimedia editor all at the same time. They also pointed out the role of the community manager, the mobile journalist, the transmedia journalist and the data journalist.

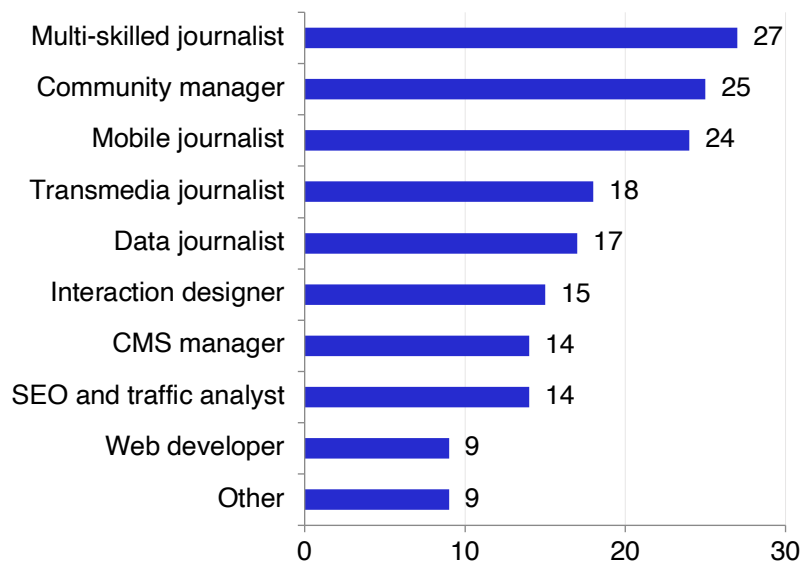


Figure 3. Professional profiles performed most frequently by workers in hyperlocal media (n=31)

Due to the reduced number of regular workers in the hyperlocal media, 21 (66%) had collaborators who contributed to maintaining their level of content production. The data show that such collaborators were essential to the media's functioning, as there were cases with up to 10, 15, 30 or even 45 regular collaborators, often more than the number of regular workers (Table 5). 22.0% of the collaborators contributed content on a daily basis, 37.0% once or several times a week, 29.6% once or several times a month and 11.1% less than once a month. Of those surveyed, nine (43%) said that contributors never received financial compensation, six (29%) said that they did in some cases, and six (29%) said that they always did.

Table 5. Number of collaborators of hyperlocal media (n=32)

Collaborators	Frequency
0	11
1 – 5	10
6 – 10	6
11 – 15	2
16 – 25	0
26 – 30	2
31 – 40	0
41 – 45	1

Business model and economic sustainability

Regarding the business model and economic situation of the hyperlocals (RQ2), directors stated that the motivations that encouraged them to create their projects were not always linked to the search for economic profitability. Thirteen (41%) of those surveyed said that their initiatives were not-for-profit, while the remaining 19 (59%) had a profit orientation. All chose to maintain completely free access to the content of their digital media. The economic nature of the projects was related to the legal forms of organization behind the hyperlocal news outlets. Nine were constituted as limited companies (a common form in the media business structure), another nine were sole-proprietorship projects (based on personal entrepreneurship and self-employment), one was a civil society (private partnership contract between persons who jointly perform a

lucrative activity) and another was a cooperative. It is noteworthy that 11 (34%) were legally established as associations – a group of people who work together in a single organization, which operates as a legal entity – something that is very rare in the traditional media, since they are not set up as businesses. This type of legal organization is observed in non-profit projects – only one was for-profit – which we have already pointed out are frequent among Spanish hyperlocals.

Twenty-two (69%) of the hyperlocal directors admitted to providing other types of service in addition to news. They pointed out the addition of printed works, local advertising, promotional design, digital marketing, communication consultancy services, organization of events, and training workshops. They thus sought new revenue streams and other ways to strengthen links with the community.

The sources of funding for Spanish hyperlocal digital media proved to be diverse (Figure 4). Advertising and sponsored content were the most frequent, with 23 (72%) and 22 (9%) of the media resorting to them, respectively. Self-financing was in third place (17; 53%). Less common was payment for special content (9; 28%), subscription fees (8; 25%), financial donations (7; 6%), or payment for special editions (1; 3%).

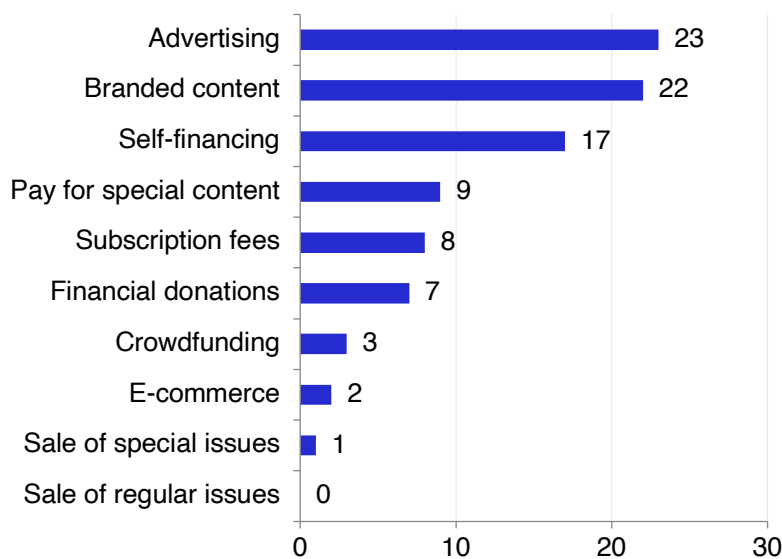


Figure 4. Most frequent sources of income in hyperlocal media (n=32)

Hyperlocal media organizations spent their finances on reinvestment in the project and other daily operations, such as production costs and administration costs (Figure 5). These were followed by the payment of regular workers' salaries and collaborations. Less important was the contracting of external services or the purchase of content from third parties, while the payment of dividends for profits obtained was rare.

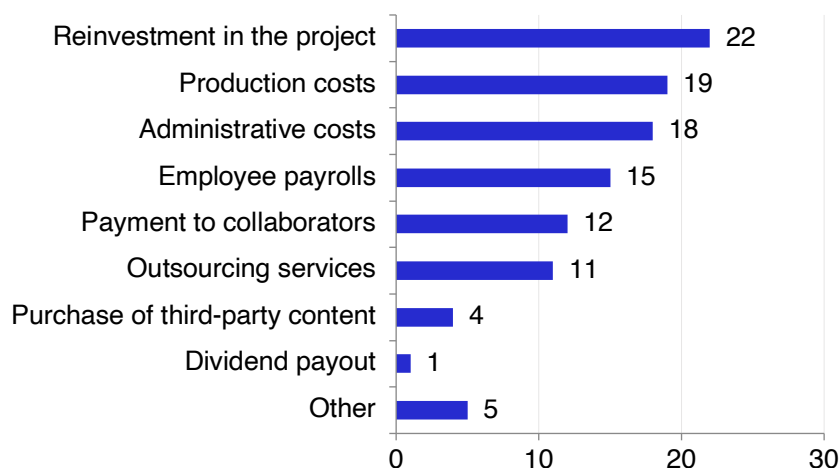


Figure 5. Most frequent investment and expenditure items in hyperlocal media (n=27)

Despite the diversification of services provided and sources of income, hyperlocal media directors recognized difficulties in achieving sustainability and the economic profitability of their projects. The results show that only five (20%) of the respondents said they made a profit. Although the directors prioritized maintaining the activity and content production of their media, only 13 (63%) managed to cover production costs, 10 (37%) covered the salaries of their regular workers and six (23%) the payment of collaborators. Given the important weight of self-financing, it should be taken into account that one third of the projects did not even manage to cover production costs.

The apparently difficult economic situation of a large proportion of the hyperlocal media contrasts with the perception that the directors maintained about their activity. Eighteen (60%) affirmed that their media was sustainable if they had the resources to maintain their news service over time, regardless of the economic results it achieved. Only four (13%) considered it essential for the medium to generate economic benefits. Regarding the time needed to achieve the economic viability of their projects, 16 (67%) of those surveyed said that it was possible to achieve sustainability within a period of four years, while nine (33%) indicated a longer term. Regardless of their current stage of growth, 17 (55%) said they had a clear forecast that their project would be sustainable, 11 (36%) said they were not sure they could achieve this goal, and three (10%) foresaw that it would not be able to sustain itself financially.

News production for digital platforms

The news production of hyperlocal media (RQ2) is conditioned by their community service orientation, their informative objectives, and their limited economic and human resources. The small size of their professional teams does not prevent these media from maintaining a constant rate of production (Table 6). When the directors described the volume of news they produced, nine (28%) stated that they published between 1 and 5 news items per day, seven (22%) between 1 and 5 news items per week, and 11 (34%) more than 20 items per week (Table 7).

Table 6. Frequency of updating of hyperlocal media (n=32)

Updating	Frequency
Daily	20
Once or several times per week	9
At least monthly	1
Less than once per month	1
Other	1

Table 7. Volume of news production of hyperlocal media (n=32)

Updating	Published news items	Frequency
Daily	1 – 5	9
	6 – 10	1
	> 10	2
Weekly	1 – 5	7
	10 – 20	1
	> 20	11
Monthly	10 – 15	1

When selecting the topics that made up their media agendas, the directors of hyperlocals indicated that they prioritized those that would most interest and affect their readers. Respondents pointed to social issues, culture, education, the environment, politics, lifestyle and leisure topics as the most relevant. Among those valued as less relevant were topics related to science and technology, justice, meteorology, riots or religion (Table 8).

Table 8. News topics according to their degree of relevance for the directors of hyperlocal media (scale 0-5) (n=31)

News topics	Avg.
Social issues	4.4
Arts, culture and entertainment	3.7
Education	3.4
Environment	3.1
Politics	3.1
Lifestyle and leisure	3.1
Health	2.5
Sports	2.4
Disasters and accidents	2.4
Police and justice	2.0
Science and technology	1.9
Economy	1.8
Riots and conflicts	1.6
Meteorology	1.4
Religion	1.0

In addition to focusing their news coverage on topics of social interest to users, the information produced by hyperlocal digital media tended to be characterized by giving voice to a greater variety of sources and to social groups that normally would not have a voice in the traditional media. For the surveyed directors, citizens and sources belonging to associations and other social organizations were the most relevant, closely followed by official sources. Comparatively, the news media or sources belonging to the business sphere were the least relevant (Table 9).

Table 9. Information sources according to their degree of relevance for hyperlocal media (scale 0-5) (n=31)

News sources	Avg.
Associations and social organizations	4.2
Citizens	4.2
Official sources	3.9
Media	2.9
Companies	2.7

Apart from updating their news content, 14 (45%) respondents said they experimented with new formats in their digital media. When describing this type of content, three hyperlocal media directors referred to data and investigative journalism, three others complemented their information with infographics, interactive maps, surveys and other multimedia products, while another two experimented with 360° video. Occasionally, some of the respondents reported making transmedia products, broadcasting live events, managing neighborhood groups on the instant messaging network Telegram, or producing audio formats such as podcasts or radio series.

Regarding the production of specific content for each platform, only four (13%) respondents said that they regularly produced exclusive content adapted to the characteristics of web and mobile applications, while another 10 (32%) said that they did so occasionally.

More common was the production of specific content for social networks, which 19 (61%) of the directors claimed to do. Most produced various adapted multimedia materials – photos, photo galleries, stories and videos for Instagram, videos and threads for Twitter. Almost half created live streaming – via Facebook Live or Instagram – of events or their own programs. A quarter said they published posts to encourage user interaction on the networks, generally through surveys.

User participation and management of user-generated content

Hyperlocals are frequently open to citizen participation in the news production process (RQ2). Twenty-two (69%) of those surveyed stated that their media expressly invited citizens to collaborate in the coverage of events and in the production of news pieces, although eight (32%) admitted that they restricted this collaboration to certain topics and events – generally issues occurring in their own neighborhood or related to social issues or neighborhood associations. Others pointed out that they channeled this collaboration through photo and video sections to complain about community issues, or by only admitting opinion pieces.

Twenty-five (78%) of the directors affirmed that the material sent in by citizens was reviewed and edited before being published. Sixteen (50%) maintained specific spaces or sections in their editions for the publication of user-generated content, and 17 (53%) stated that they expressly indicated when the content had been submitted by citizens.

Social networks are a fundamental tool for hyperlocals since they are a virtual space in which the social relations established between the media and citizens are extended. In these spaces, the news is shared, and social debate is promoted. All respondents said that they maintained an active presence within social networks, with all of them (32) maintaining an active profile on Facebook, 30 (94%) on Twitter, 15 (47%) on Instagram, 13 (41%) on YouTube, six (19%) on

WhatsApp, and three (9%) on Telegram. There was a minority presence on the professional social network LinkedIn (3; 9%) and on Vimeo (1; 3%).

In addition to serving as channels of communication and participation with the audience, hyperlocal media pursued other objectives on social networks (Table 10).

Table 10. Objectives pursued in social networks according to their degree of relevance for hyperlocal media (scale 0–5) (n=30)

Objectives	Avg.
Diffusion for web traffic attraction	4.5
Reach new audiences	4.4
Call for participation	4.0
Reminder of the day's agenda	3.1
Advertise services or spaces of the media	2.9
Position the media as a company	2.9
Publicize the media outlet's point of view	2.6
Publicize external events	2.4
Publish advertising content	2.1
Clarify possible errors	1.8

Mostly, the networks were used to disseminate content and attract traffic to the media's website, to try to reach new audiences and an increasing number of users, as well as to call for audience participation. Less importantly, they were also used as a reminder of the daily agenda, to promote programs and corporate information, publicize external events, publish advertising content or clarify any mistakes.

Hyperlocals in the post-pandemic context

After reviewing the map in 2021, we found that six of the hyperlocals identified in 2018 had ceased their activity during this period. However, four new media projects were found. Two of these new media appeared between 2020 and 2021, as an expansion of the Grupo Somos project, which concentrates five hyperlocal media in the city of Madrid: *Somos Malasaña*, *Somos Chueca*, *Somos Chamberí*, *Somos Tetuán* and *Somos Lavapiés*. Therefore, up to 60 hyperlocal media outlets are still active in the country.

The results of the questionnaire conducted with the directors of the active hyperlocal media in 2021 (n=13) allow us to identify the challenges their projects have undergone in the context of the pandemic (RQ3). Six respondents recognized that the organizational and production models of the media have been adjusted. They pointed out changes in content, with a lower volume of publication and a greater weight of public service and entertainment information (especially during lockdown); the reduction of the distribution of the printed edition, also during lockdown; the strengthening of the digital edition, with adapted production and dissemination strategies, as well as the hiring of specialized technicians; and a team organization that integrated teleworking and suffered temporary lay-offs of some workers. Even so, most maintained that the informative mission of their project had not been changed.

The pandemic has indeed transformed the relationship with the audience, as reported by six respondents. They pointed to an increase in digital audience, especially during the first weeks of the pandemic, and a greater recognition of the news media in their geographic area. Although one of the respondents noted a certain distancing from the public due to the lack of physical

contact, most pointed out that interaction with the audience had increased. This was reinforced through social networks, instant messaging apps, and e-mail, in order to obtain feedback on content and to cover the topics requested by readers.

Regarding the economic management of the projects, nine of the respondents said they were implementing new strategies for greater economic security, by diversifying their sources of income. They established alliances with other media, experimenting with membership and donation systems – not very successfully – or subscriptions. One of the projects was promoting the creation of a physical space for community meetings where neighbors could organize events and which would be financed through the sponsorship of companies and institutions.

The directors were optimistic about the economic viability of their projects – 11 (84.6%) believed that they would continue to be sustainable in the medium term. As advantages, they pointed out the growth and strengthening of digital media, the trust of citizens in local media, the support of neighbors – with whom they sought to increase the number of members – and local commerce, as well as cooperative management and group alliances with other hyperlocal media. However, most coincided in claiming economic support from public administration through subsidies to local media or through institutional advertising. In addition, they believed that economic and job security depended on the creation of strong and professionalized media networks.

The directors of the hyperlocal media believed that their activity in the post-pandemic period had strengthened their news service with relevant topics for citizens, which translated into a greater approach and appreciation by the audience, and greater attention to local issues and capacity for impact in the territory. The stronger commitment with their neighbors also strengthened the cohesion of the editorial teams, which have explored new communication channels – social networks, digital tools – for production, dissemination and dialogue with audiences. As a negative counterpoint, they pointed out that social distancing made it difficult to participate in the editorial staff meetings, aggravating the physical and mental fatigue of the journalists and distancing them from the reality and direct contact with the neighborhood.

Conclusion

The mapping and study of Spanish hyperlocal digital media updates the field of research on the media of proximity in the country, taking them as an object for specific and in-depth study. After locating the active hyperlocal media on the Spanish map and observing their general characteristics (Negreira-Rey et al., 2020), the questionnaires carried out with their directors allowed for in-depth consideration of their informative service mission, their organizational and economic models, and their adaptation to the post-pandemic context.

In response to RQ1, we observe that hyperlocal media seek to establish themselves as an informative service in the neighborhood, being close to the communities and claiming the value of their information offer against the national or local information produced from the big capitals. They emerged as a result of the crisis in the traditional media sector in the early 2000s and the economic crisis of 2008, which led to the closure of media outlets, local editorial offices and the layoff of journalists. The growth of hyperlocal media since then has brought about a renewal of the media model in the areas of proximity in Spain.

The directors of the Spanish hyperlocal media prioritize the objectives of offering truthful information to the community about what is happening in their nearest environment, maintaining a highly personal and professional commitment. This clear vocation of service to the community has been observed in previous studies (Nygren et al., 2018; Williams & Harte, 2016), contrasting with a highly personal and professional sacrifice, and a form of entrepreneurship often linked to precariousness (Van Kerkhoven, 2020; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021).

The results of the questionnaire provide insight into the organizational, productive and business models of the Spanish hyperlocal media (RQ2). In general, it is observed that their professional teams had a reduced number of regular workers – most with a workforce of fewer than five employees – and that more than 80% worked only part-time. This forces the workers to develop a multi-skilled profile and to make frequent use of collaborators, who are necessary to keep up the content production. As found in other research (Hujanen et al., 2020), the profiles and roles

of the directors prove to be diverse and not all of them have an educational background in communication – in the analyzed media, only 46.3% did.

In hyperlocal media teams, high degrees of voluntarism and self-exploitation of professionals were observed, explained by the limited economic and human resources or the non-profit nature of many of these initiatives (Harte et al., 2019; Tenor, 2018). In the Spanish case, more than 40% of respondents identified their media as non-profit, which is exceptional in the traditional media industry. They still do not have a profitable and secure economic model in the medium-term – a reality found in other European countries (Cook et al., 2016) – and combine advertising revenues with self-financing and other complementary forms of monetization – offering other services, payment for content, or subscriptions. Another strategy to build scalable and more financially stable projects is the development of collaborative and partnership networks of hyperlocal media (Jenkins & Graves, 2019), although in Spain it is not yet a widespread practice. The overall economic results are not very favorable, with only 63.3% of the media managing to cover production costs or 20.0% making a profit. This is compounded by the lack of subsidies to these media by public administrations – they only have access to some financial aid for the use of co-official languages, in some cases – the exclusion from the distribution of institutional advertising, or the lack of development of associations and management networks for these projects.

For the directors, maintaining the informative activity was the most important focus, and 60% said that their media was sustainable if it managed to continue informing, even if the economic balance was negative. This can be justified by the non-profit nature of most of the media and the fact that professionals often combine their work for a news outlet with other jobs.

Despite this delicate economic and professional situation, the teams managed to maintain a constant update rate in their web editions, with 28% publishing new information pieces every day and 21% every week. Their agendas are mainly focused on social issues and of greater utility for the day-to-day life of the community. Citizens and local associations are also prominent sources of information, although official sources maintain a relevant weight. Hyperlocal media enable the information coverage of their geographic areas that they would not otherwise have – due to the lack of regional media covering that area, or because they only focus on the information of the governing entities, major events, or the big capitals, ignoring the stories of smaller or rural areas. They thus contribute to making the local area visible, reinforcing social cohesion, mediating the relationship with power and promoting community development.

Spanish hyperlocal media establish a close and participatory link with citizens, although not all manage to establish a reciprocal relationship (Harte et al., 2017). In general, they are open to the participation of community members in the news production process, although in a controlled manner – revising content or limiting the topics in which they participate. Social networks remain as platforms to disseminate and share news content, but also as spaces for dialogue with citizens to encourage their participation.

Regarding RQ3, it is observed that most of the hyperlocal media managed to maintain their activity in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (out of the 62 identified in 2018, only six ceased their activity and four new ones were registered). In general, the projects maintained their informative mission of serving the audience. This was reinforced by the pandemic, as most pointed out a greater engagement, closeness and interaction with the citizens of the neighborhood, and an even greater commitment to proximity and useful and public service information. In the adverse context of the pandemic, they worked on boosting digital editions, diversifying revenue streams – seeking greater support from readers – and creating collaborative networks. They continue to believe in medium-term stability but require financial support from public institutions. They argue that this is necessary for greater job security, to create more stable teams and to be able to improve their information offer.

This research allows us to conclude that hyperlocal digital media have entered and are establishing themselves in the Spanish context as a new media model close to the citizens, which maintains the informative focus within neighborhoods, despite scarce economic and human resources. This study adapts the categorization of hyperlocal media to a peculiar territorial and social context, different from other countries where specific studies have been carried out. This contributes to the construction of the definition of this media model and deepens the analysis of its characteristics. In an ecosystem with a strong tradition of legacy local media, this research

shows the strategies developed by hyperlocal outlets towards sustainability, going beyond the classic media model with non-profit and digital native projects, with scarce resources or free access to their contents.

The study of hyperlocal media has limitations, since it is difficult to complete the census of these media in a large territory and an unstable market. Therefore, this work opens several lines for future research. It will be necessary to review which organizational and economic models allow a greater stability of these projects and their informative mission. It will be of interest to deepen the study of audiences, discovering the consumption and perception of hyperlocal information, analyzing the links that the media establish with neighbors or how these relationships develop on social platforms, where citizens themselves participate in their own forms of local communication.

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