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Journalism and Economic Sustainability: An Analysis of Google News Showcase in Argentina, Brazil and Colombia

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at news publishers from Argentina, Brazil and Colombia that participate in Google News Showcase and aims to verify the relationship between the platformization process and the economic sustainability of journalism in the Global South. Given the recent nature of the study object, a qualitative methodology was used to collect information through primary sources. To accomplish this, we conducted a random sampling of media from the aforementioned countries participating in Showcase, followed by semi-structured interviews with 16 journalists from these media publishers. Based on the interviews, the participants expressed a sense of dissatisfaction regarding remuneration and the scope of the news, and criticized the platformization of the industry. The results show that Showcase has led to a complicated relationship between the media (in our study) and Google. What's more, platforms are now essential for the economic sustainability of news companies. This means Showcase is providing a new way to diversify media income rather than contributing to a fairer relationship between both parties in terms of the sustainability of journalism.

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Sustainability; business models; showcase; Google News; media; journalism; platformization; South America

Introduction

The impact digital platforms have had on the economic sustainability of South American news companies has been a topic of discussion for more than a decade, once the media began to demand compensation for content added by Google News (ANJ 2012). At the end of 2020, Google added a new element to this discussion by launching its News Showcase service that pays for journalistic content. By signing a contract and receiving a fixed monthly payment by Google, the media agrees to produce daily news content that is made available for access on computers and mobile devices, with links that direct readers to the respective media and websites. Showcase is currently accessible through Google News and Google Discover.

More than two thousand news companies from around the world have signed agreements with News Showcase. The New York Times is the most recent of these, announcing

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that it will receive \$11 million for a three-year contract. In Brazil, more than 150 national and regional media, including traditional press and digital natives, have joined this initiative. There are about 40 participants from Argentina and 24 participants from Colombia, which is also the third country in Latin America to be included in the project (Fornes 2021).

As Google's largest initiative to support the sustainability of journalism, with an investment of one billion dollars (Cox 2021), News Showcase has emerged at a challenging time for platforms, surrounded by criticism for economic and information reasons, and abuse of power since Google does not take responsibility for the reprocessing, meta-editing and hierarchy of information (Chartron and Rebillard 2004; Cobos 2021; Smyrniaios 2016).

As a result, the company has found itself at the center of the political scene by collaborating in the development, implementation and evaluation of public policies that force news platforms and organizations to negotiate in a fair and transparent way (GIBS Media Leadership Think Tank 2023).

Of note are the draft bills that aim to remunerate news companies in several countries, as demonstrated by the regulatory legislation approved in Canada in 2023 (Online News Act 2023), the Australian code (ACCC 2021) and the European Union Copyright directive (2019). These are in addition to bill PL 2,630 (Brazil 2020), which is still under debate in the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies and is a hot topic in public debates on the regulation of digital platforms in Latin America.

Showcase has emerged at a troublesome time for media companies dealing with the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially those in South America (Espada 2021). Taking this situation into account, this study focuses on Google's new product and how it can contribute to the sustainability of media in the face of a hegemonic actor: the most popular news aggregator and search engine in the world. The main argument in this case is that Google News (an initiative which News Showcase is a part of) represents a turning point for the production of online news as it has helped build a mass audience for the consumption of online information (Kalsnes 2001) and the inclusion of algorithms in the journalistic sector (Smyrniaios 2021).

In light of this, the main objective of this study is to analyze how News Showcase can contribute to the sustainability of these news companies. To address this, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1: In terms of sustainability, what are the main contributions of Showcase's information model?

RQ2: Could the increase in audience numbers be one of the economic incentives that have led the media to participate in this platform?

This research was also conducted based on the dual role that Google offers the media of being a generic search engine and a news aggregator. The platform is a true "access industry" (Miège 2020; Miguel, Bustos, and Izquierdo-Castillo 2019) and is a dominant infomediator as it combines fragmented demands with a diversified supply of information (Smyrniaios and Rebillard 2009). Although the challenges are global, researching the changes to journalism sustainability in South American media seems to be even more urgent because the standards for Latin American media have been less studied than for other regions of the world (Salaverría and De Lima Santos 2021).

This study explores how relevant News Showcase is for media financing in South America, noting how it is the first time that Google has systematically financially rewarded media outlets for producing news. As such, it is important to understand how this initiative collaborates with media sustainability in Argentina, Brazil and Colombia, especially in news deserts (Alonso 2022; Moreira and Deolindo 2023).

Theoretical Framework

Crisis in Journalism and Impacts on Media Sustainability

The Covid-19 pandemic has left its mark on news companies, it has forced the sector to face an unprecedented socioeconomic situation highlighted by several historical and structural crises in the area. The crises of profitability and credibility are accentuated here, particularly during Covid-19 misinformation that was characterized as an infodemic by the World Health Organization (Bechmann 2020), and have shed light on digital infrastructures and the monetization of disinformation practices (Dos Santos Júnior 2021), as well as the weakening of modern authorities and institutions of knowledge (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Oliveira 2020), one of which is journalism.

After years of news companies gradually losing income, 2020 was a year in which the economic sustainability of Latin American media suffered a serious blow (Espada 2021). The effects of the pandemic have accentuated changes that were already underway in Latin American countries, such as the decline in printed newspaper sales, the loss of consumers, massive layoffs (Christofoletti 2019), and the lack of trust in media. Situations of violence and crimes against journalists have also worsened in these countries, threatening their freedom of expression (Salaverría and De Lima Santos 2021).

Although the search for a sustainable business model in media is nothing new (Farias Battle and Roses 2009), it has become even more urgent as a result of the pandemic. The Digital News Report 2023 (Newman et al. 2023) has verified this challenging situation. The loss of readers, listeners, and viewers (especially young people) in news media is one of the most profound changes that this sector has been going through since the pandemic. Consumption of traditional news sources in these countries has decreased significantly over the last decade, ultimately leading to layoffs in newsrooms. The majority of people under the age of 35 consume their news on social networks or aggregators (Newman et al. 2023).

In fact, news consumption is fragmented in South America: media access in Argentina and Colombia occurs mainly via Facebook (48% and 58%, respectively), while 43% of media access in Brazil occurs via WhatsApp. Although several Brazilian newspapers have created information distribution channels in WhatsApp, news production is inconsistent and the relationship with the audience is limited (Carpes and Moreu 2023). At the same time, the constant decline in news consumption on the web is striking, especially in Brazil (Camargo 2021).

The keys to understanding the decline in and fragmentation of news consumption may lie both in the lack of social interest in news mediation and the distrust of journalism as an expert system (Miguel 1999). This is evident in Argentina where, in 2017, 77% of its citizens stated that they were very interested in consuming news, yet in 2023, this figure dropped to 43% (Newman et al. 2023). Similarly, the lack of news consumption by Brazilians is also striking. The growing number of attacks on journalists is also evident, mainly

in countries with intense political polarization, which led to major disruptions in work routines (Moretzsohn 2014).

Academic literature has pointed to the loss of journalistic centrality in the news as a result of the emergence of other forms of access to information (Carlson 2007; Rebillard 2006; Smyrniaios and Rebillard 2009) which have reshaped the professional identity of journalists (Deuze 2005; Deuze and Witschge 2018). Two other recent studies follow this same line: (1) they highlight the difficulty of differentiating between quality journalism and pseudo journalism, which has the intention of deceiving the audience (Trasel, Lisboa, and Vinciprova 2019); and (2) they highlight how influencers and bloggers purposely shape agendas and frame current issues (Recuero and Soares 2021).

In the face of this extremely competitive scenario, attracting and retaining an increasingly dispersed audience is essential for media sustainability. While prioritizing digital can help reduce expenses, it means that news companies need to guarantee that their news is consumed through their websites. To achieve this, the media has adopted a variety of economic income strategies: advertising, paywalls, more attractive subscription plans (including the creation of reading clubs), crowdfunding, different payment methods, production via collaborative projects with support from international organizations such as Unicef and UNESCO, and foundations or platforms such as Google and Facebook (Anderson 2006; Costa 2014; De Lima Santos and Mesquita 2021; Figaro, Nonato, and Kinoshita 2017; Hilsenbeck Filho, Maciel, and Belo de Oliveira 2016).

Although the diversity of income sources can represent an alternative business model, or even a certain innovation (Bittencourt 2018; De-Lima-Santos et al. 2023) and creativity (Huws 2015), this process must be seen as the result of at least two main factors: family media companies have become large media groups that expect high profits in the sector (Neveu 2010), and the platformization of journalism. These have a direct impact on quality journalism, especially in the three countries studied in this paper where the production of information is economically and geographically concentrated in large regions (Becerra and Mastrini 2017), generating news deserts (Abernathy 2018; Alonso 2022; Moreira and Deolindo 2023) which persist in the digital world (Alonso 2022).

Platforms, Media and Audiences

The platformization of journalism is a phenomenon that is transforming the production, distribution and consumption of information (Nielsen and Ganter 2022). This transformation, brought on by the rise of the internet, and the use of mobile devices and social networks, has led the media to produce content that feeds digital ecosystems in platform publishing (Poell, Nieborg, and Dijck 2020). Platformization is the penetration of online platforms into public infrastructures and economic processes; however, in this case, we are talking about penetration into the media (Poell, Nieborg, and Dijck 2020), which is related to platformization of cultural production. To briefly summarize, “platformization can be defined as the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems, fundamentally affecting the operations of the cultural industries” (Nieborg and Poell 2018, 2).

Additionally, platformization further fuels the metrics of journalism by imposing algorithms that produce automated data for platforms, and by doing so boost the monitoring and advertising technologies. What happens here is that social media contains applications

such as Facebook or Instagram, which advance platformization by creating computational and economic connections with different agents, such as content producers.

There is a latent concern in this regard between news organizations and digital platforms such as Facebook and Google. These companies have acquired a central and dominant position in the distribution of information content, capturing the attention of users and ultimately the sale of audience-merchandise, essentially confirming big tech's power over news companies (Bell and Owen 2017; Nielsen and Ganter 2022) and media's dependence on these platforms (García-Ramírez 2021). A result of the platformization of journalism is that their algorithms help the platforms control the distribution and consumption of digital content, imposing what we read and think (Pariser 2017), not to mention the possible risks of monitoring and losing control over content by news organizations (Nechushtai 2018).

The platform financial programs for platformization of journalism, known as financial intermediaries, are a strategy that platforms use to distribute money to the media (particularly those affected by a financial crisis) through a complex governance structure (Papaevangelou 2024).

Media do make use of platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Snapchat and TikTok (Colussi 2018; Colussi and Reis 2022), yet news aggregators, such as Google News, have been criticized and rejected by journalists in many countries as these aggregators disseminate their news pieces but do not pay out any compensation for doing so (CGI.br 2023). The news curation algorithms used by Google (which also apply editorial values such as relevance, proximity, or social impact when selecting and disseminating news to users) influence the availability and consumption of online information. This is often used with the "Top Stories" box in search results as it directs user attention toward certain news sources and topics (Trielli and Diakopoulos 2019).

A study conducted on Latin American media shows how Google News affects the visibility and traffic of media in this region (Cobos 2021), and concludes that traditional media are more likely to have their content added to Google News and receive more traffic than regional or local media. Similar to platformization of journalism, Instant Articles show how Facebook actively participates in this process by linking the logics of journalistic production with those that govern the platforms (Jurno and D'Andréa 2020).

These platform dynamics have led to an increase in click-bait journalism and viral content (Anderson 2011; Marín 2019). The media then produces content that generates a large number of interactions and shares on social networks which, in turn, generates more income through online advertising. Furthermore, audience metrics can have an impact on journalistic values and routines (Karlsson and Clerwall 2013) when the media is more interested in capturing the public's attention than providing truthful and complete information, when they give more priority to audience data and click culture (Anderson 2011; Karlsson and Clerwall 2013). However, audience-guided journalistic roles, which have the ability to increase the attention of news users and give meaning to their needs as citizens, can allow the evolution of the democratic role of journalism (Constanza, Meijer, and Domingo 2023).

It should be noted that media audience strategies are defined by groups made up of journalists, technical staff (developers) and business strategists, and involve other factors beyond news values (Kristensen 2021; Nielsen and Ganter 2022). It requires hiring SEO (Search Engine Optimization) experts (Lopezosa et al. 2021) and rethinking how universities train journalists, helping them to develop the skills they will need to optimize

news content for search engines and analyze search trends, as well as identify good SEO practices (Lopezosa et al. 2020, 73).

In short, the platformization of journalism has transformed the media landscape, creating opportunities and new challenges. Although digital platforms have enabled greater dissemination of information and new forms of financing, they have also raised questions about the quality and objectivity of news, as well as the concentration of power in the hands of a few technology companies (Nielsen and Ganter 2022; Russell 2017). Some studies draw attention to issues that occur with the media's dependence on digital platforms, both in terms of reaching audiences and generating income (García-Ramírez 2021; Siapera 2013), as well as the social and political influences of search engines (Sire and Rieder 2015; Trielli and Diakopoulos 2019). On the other hand, there are “negotiation spaces”, the opportunities that news companies have to decide how to produce, distribute and monetize content against the platforms, thus establishing nuances to said criticisms (Poell, Nieborg, and Erin Duffy 2023).

Methodology

As previously mentioned, the main objective of this research is to understand how Google News Showcase could contribute to the sustainability of news companies. To accomplish this, we conducted a random sample of media outlets from Argentina, Brazil and Colombia that participate with Showcase. Our sample took into consideration not only different formats such as radio or digital press, but also different levels of national and international reach and representation. The sample is not intended to be representative as this is only a preliminary study.

Once we had selected the media, we then conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 journalists, most of whom hold management positions in areas relating to digital content, such as digital directors or audience managers (see Table 1). The names of these professionals have been withheld in order to protect their personal data and avoid any kind of negative response toward them. Most of the interviews were conducted via video conferencing and were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. The only

Table 1. Interviews conducted with media managers in Argentina, Brazil and Colombia.

Media	Country	Interviewees	Date	Length
<i>El Espectador</i>	Colombia	Interviewee 1	03/03/2023	1:13:54
<i>La Nación</i>	Argentina	Interviewee 2	25/04/2023	53:26
<i>Bloomberg Línea</i>	Argentina, Brazil and Colombia	Interviewee 3	26/04/2023	1:23:19
<i>Caracol Radio/ W Radio</i>	Colombia	Interviewee 4	27/04/2023	40:39
<i>Revista Exame</i>	Brazil	Interviewee 5	27/04/2023	51:47
<i>El Heraldo</i>	Colombia	Interviewee 6	03/05/2023	27:07
<i>Revista Semana</i>	Colombia	Interviewee 7	08/05/2023	39:42
<i>Folha de Londrina</i>	Brazil	Interviewee 8	08/05/2023	1:10:00
<i>acritica.com</i>	Brazil	Interviewee 9	09/05/2023	56:49
<i>ocafezinho.com</i>	Brazil	Interviewee 10	09/05/2023	1:02:25
<i>Folha de São Paulo</i>	Brazil	Interviewee 11	11/05/2023	30:36
<i>Clarín</i>	Argentina	Interviewee 12	19/05/2023	23:17
<i>Jornal do Commercio - Pernambuco</i>	Brazil	Interviewee 13	19/05/2023	1:18:00
<i>Jornal O Tempo</i>	Brazil	Interviewee 14	26/05/2023	15:00
<i>UOL</i>	Brazil	Interviewee 15	03/06/2023	31:00
<i>Perfil</i>	Argentina	Interviewee 16	29/06/2023	45:22

exception to this was the Brazilian newspaper *O Tempo* as this interview was conducted via WhatsApp audio messaging. The average length of the interviews was 49 min.

We used a qualitative methodology for our research, starting with the interviews as a key method for collecting first-hand information about the study object. The statements from the journalists interviewed during the first half of 2023 underwent two types of analysis: a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) and a discourse analysis based on the argumentative framework defined by Amossy (2006).

We addressed the research questions (RQ1 and RQ2) by identifying the predominant and most relevant themes in the interviews, allowing us to develop an interpretive classification of those themes, thus generating conceptual categories (Braun and Clarke 2006). Three dependent categories are established through the inductive method:

- (1) Context: this category consists of topics such as the launch of News Showcase in the countries analyzed, media that participate with the initiative, contractual conditions, prospect of contract renewal with Google, and more.
- (2) Sustainability: this is a specific category on economic implications and profitability.
- (3) Audience: this category includes aspects associated with impact and reach (web traffic, visibility, positioning, etc.).

We classified the analysis corpus for the categories using an interpretive process, identifying the different units of analysis according to the topics addressed and their informative, semantic and argumentative value. To do this, we structured the interviewees' responses according to rhetorical aspects proposed by Amossy (2006).

Data processing consists of the following four stages, conducted after transcribing the interviews through the Reshape tool: (1) selecting significant textual units, (2) coding, (3) categorization, and (4) interpretation. No specific qualitative data analysis and processing software was used in any of these stages. To guarantee consistency in the analysis criteria, a triple independent coding was established with meetings held at fixed intervals to verify and check the classifications and interpretations of the selected segments.

Results. News Showcase: Inadequate Income and Decreasing Audiences

According to Google, News Showcase is an initiative mainly created to collaborate directly with media in order to generate new monetization possibilities. With this in mind, the results of the qualitative analysis obtained from cross referencing the data from 16 interviews conducted with digital and audience directors and managers from media outlets in Argentina, Brazil and Colombia are presented below. This was done in order to understand how Google News Showcase contributes to the sustainability of media and how it might influence the profitability of news companies. The results are arranged according to three dependent categories: context, sustainability and audience.

Relevant Context About News Showcase

The results from the interviews revealed certain characteristics of the media in the three countries in our study. We consider these characteristics to be of great relevance within the framework of this study. Google launched News Showcase in Brazil in 2020 (see

Table 2. News Showcase launch date per country.

Country	Month and Year of Launch
Argentina	February 2021
Brazil	October 2020
Colombia	August 2021

Source: Prepared by authors based on Google Blog queries.

Table 2), although various media outlets, such as the *Jornal do Commercio of Pernambuco*, have not joined the project as they distrust partnerships with large platforms and were warned by the National Newspaper Association (ANJ in Portuguese). The first media outlets that partnered with News Showcase did so as an experimental phase in accordance with *UOL*: “At first, the panels were not online. We only made them online so that they could review the processes. We did this for Google in the beginning” (Interviewee 15, June 3, 2023).

The media are allegedly in the process of renewing their three-year contracts, the *Folha de S.Paulo* newspaper being one. “They are expected to renew. You just have to know what is going to happen. In Brazil, we don’t know. But yes, the contract renewal is already in the process of being negotiated” (Interviewee 11, May 11, 2023). Brazil is the only one of the three above-mentioned countries where blogs were considered media. Of note is that the Globo group, which runs Brazil’s largest television network along with other influential media, does not integrate the platform.

Although Google writes up a specific contract proposal for each medium, which includes a confidentiality clause, the Argentine media united in an attempt to negotiate better payment terms to the companies. According to the interviewees, although this negotiation has not yet achieved better profitability for Argentine media, it has included regional and local media in this initiative. Specifically in the case of Colombia, the media have managed to negotiate with Google to include radio stations in News Showcase, and is the only one of the three countries that provides radio stations to the platform.

In short, Google News Showcase pays news companies monthly to feature their content – the number varies depending on the contract signed with each media. “It’s like Google is subscriber to the newspaper and we have to release two panels per day, the first news item is released from the paywall” (Interviewee 13, May 19, 2023). It is also worth noting that audience data regarding Showcase appears for the media in conjunction with Google News. In other words, it is not possible to break down the percentage of views that come specifically from Showcase.

Help for Media Sustainability

With the exception of local media and *Caracol Radio/W Radio*, from the Prisa Media Colombia group, media interviewees agree that compensation from Google News Showcase is low (see Table 3). For the majority of the news companies we consulted, although this payment somewhat helps the media financially, it is not enough to pay fixed expenses or consider it as an alternative business model. What it really does is act as an aid, a complementary profit, the value of which is based on a calculation “based on the audience we have and the market value of an editor’s salary” (Interviewee 13, May 19, 2023).

Table 3. Profitability and audience for Google News showcase.

Media	Profitability	Audience
<i>El Espectador</i>	Moderate	2%
<i>La Nación</i>	Moderate	2%
<i>Bloomberg Línea</i>	Moderate	Very low
<i>Caracol Radio/ W Radio</i>	Significant	1%
<i>Revista Exame</i>	No information	1%
<i>El Heraldó</i>	Moderate	11%
<i>Revista Semana</i>	Moderate	2%
<i>Folha de Londrina</i>	Moderate	No information
<i>acritica.com</i>	Moderate	Very low
<i>Ocafezinho.com</i>	Moderate	No information
<i>Folha de São Paulo</i>	Moderate	1%
<i>Clarín</i>	Moderate	Very low
<i>Jornal do Commercio - Pernambuco</i>	No information	1%
<i>O Tempo</i>	No information	15%
<i>UOL</i>	Moderate	1%
<i>Perfil</i>	Moderate	2%

Source: interviews conducted by researchers.

A professional from *Perfil* media points out that “in a country like Argentina, where the dollar is so devalued, this compensation is useful to all media. It is better than nothing” (Interviewee 16, June 29, 2023). Similarly, an interviewee from *Caracol Radio and W Radio* in Colombia stated that during the Covid-19 pandemic “the compensation was important, and came at an important time, but it definitely falls short of being a sustainable model for media” (Interviewee 4, April 27, 2023). The *Bloomberg Línea* journalist states that a journalist can receive Google’s monthly compensation, but “you are not going to live off Showcase” (Interviewee 3, April 26, 2023) On the other hand, the interviewee from *La Nación* understands that Showcase pays for this service: “But as a sustainable model, I believe that the sustainable model nowadays is subscriptions. Second would be advertising. Showcase is something else” (Interviewee 2, April 25, 2023).

Since the compensation offered by News Showcase is considered very low, and only covers a few expenses (which do not include maintenance of news companies), the media still rely on a business model of subscriptions, advertising sales, and other income sources, as Interviewee 4 indicates.

The *Folha de S.Paulo* professional (Interviewee 11, May 11, 2023) stated “this compensation helps sustain the journalistic ecosystem,” especially with regard to the development and maintenance of local and small media in the interior of Brazil: “There are small media outlets where this compensation from Google guarantees their existence. There is a news desert in the interior of Brazil, and Google grants guarantee that these newspapers exist” (Interviewee 11, May 11, 2023). According to Interviewee 16, in order to collaborate with the sustainability of local media in Argentina, the major newspapers joined together to request that Google include local newspapers in News Showcase.

To this point, the interviewee from *ocafezinho.com* believes the compensation is an aid that “pays some people”, although media operations are not sustained by this monthly compensation (Interviewee 10, May 9, 2023). Another local media outlet, *Folha de Londrina*, claims that the monthly compensation they receive “is not enough to maintain the sustainability of a news organization” (Interviewee 8, May 8, 2023), an opinion also shared by the professional from the *A Crítica* newspaper (Interviewed 9, May 9, 2023).

Google signs contracts with each media outlet individually, and each one contains a confidentiality clause, which makes any kind of joint negotiation between media outlets from the same country almost impossible. Furthermore, due to the low audience numbers from News Showcase, the possibility of Google paying news companies more for their content seems unlikely:

“These Google Showcase resources have helped us, but when you realize that it does not generate significant numbers, there’s nothing you can do about it. For example, let’s say Google gives us 10 pesos and those 10 pesos should fairly represent 8 people, but it turns out that we are reaching half a person. There is no way to tell Google that what you do actually costs more” (Interviewee 4, April 27, 2023).

Speaking to the influence that receiving compensation for content might have, the interviewees from the three countries in our research believe that this initiative does not have an impact on editorial decisions, not only because the profitability is low for these news companies but because they maintain (according to their directors) their editorial independence from the platforms.

Almost non-existent Audiences

We were surprised to find that Google Showcase generates very little media traffic. That is, the majority of the individuals we interviewed claimed that the audience numbers through News Showcase are quite low, and represent between 1% and 3% of the total media audience, the exception being the Colombian newspaper *El Heraldo* and the Brazilian newspaper *O Tempo* (see Table 3), both of which claim to have a reach of around 11% to 15% of the audience, respectively, on this platform. “There have been some months where we managed to get between 15% and 20% of the Google News audience” (Interviewee 14, May 26, 2023).

In the case of Argentina, which is very similar to that of Brazil and Colombia, Google News is not a significant source of traffic for media, representing around 2% of the total audience in the region. “It’s not like someone is leveraging 50% or 60% of Google News [audience]. Google News ends up being like an appendix to the entire Google world. For me, I don’t see that 2% has changed much since 2021 when we partnered with Showcase,” comments the *La Nación* professional (Interviewee 2, April 25, 2023). Many of these professionals see News Showcase as having almost no audience:

“As soon as News Showcase stops giving me a relevant audience, it means it’s not giving me more subscribers, which is what the platform promises, to diversify the public and attract new readers to the web ... this does not yet exist for us, it does not sustain the business” (Interviewee 11, May 11, 2023).

Even though the Showcase audience reach is low, the *Semana* interviewee believes it is still important to participate with the initiative. “They [Google] are the ones who hold the cards. At any moment they can say yes, we are going to give greater predominance, greater strength to Showcase and position it accordingly in their search engines” (Interviewee 7, May 8, 2023).

This underscores and recognizes the strong dependence that the journalism industry has on Google and other platforms, such as Facebook. “About three years ago, we began to feel a stronger dependence on the audience from Google ... we have become slaves of

Google,” says the professional from *Exame* magazine (Interview 5, April 27, 2023), reinforcing the concern about the power that platforms have over the media industry and the media’s dependence on them.

Concerned about this dependency and a visible “*pathetic effect*” (Puig 2011), some media outlets in Brazil have decided not to join this Google initiative. “We were advised by the National Newspaper Association, which was very critical of partnerships with large platforms. And it’s not just Google, it’s Facebook and Twitter as well [...] The large platforms have put an end to the traditional journalism financing model” (Interview 13, May 19, 2023).

From a more critical perspective there are those who claim that “the only way to achieve media sustainability is to once again demonstrate what makes them essential, that they are needed for democracy and the ultra-important value of information. Believable, verifiable, real, truthful information” (Interviewee 1, March 3, 2023).

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from this research demonstrate that News Showcase generates little profitability for media in the three countries under analysis. However, the compensation it does provide is significant to small media outlets that have a harder time maintaining their business models and generating sources of income, as is the case with Colombian radio stations during the pandemic or the local press in Argentina and Brazil (Alonso 2022; Moreira and Deolindo 2023). In these cases, the interviewees expressed their concern over the power that platforms, such as Google, can exert over journalism, which is also consistent with the critical perspective found in earlier studies (Bell and Owen 2017; García-Ramírez 2021; Nielsen and Ganter 2022). We must also think about the connection between the editorial identity of the news company and the Silicon Valley technology companies since the content must be adapted to the Showcase format, and thus ends up diluting the editorial piece (Rebillard and Smyrniaios 2019) and leads to the gradual loss of normative values of journalism (Russell 2017). Although in most interviews there is no explicit recognition of how this dependence on the infrastructure of platforms can interfere with editorial decisions, revealing a conflict between discourse and practice (Amossy 2006).

The criticisms expressed by the interviewees also have an impact on the social and political influence of search engines (Trielli and Diakopoulos 2019) and their impact on the profitability and credibility crisis which the media is facing (Christofoletti 2019). This makes it difficult for newspaper companies in these countries to successfully develop a sustainable business model, one which is built on the digital ecosystem of platform content (Poell, Nieborg, and Dijck 2020). A click domination is established here (Marín 2019), forcing news companies to optimize news for search engines and invest in search trend analysis (Lopezosa et al. 2020).

Despite these challenges, the reference media, by not financially depending on initiatives such as Showcase, could look to “negotiation spaces” to develop alternatives for the production, distribution and monetization of content (Poell, Nieborg, and Erin Duffy 2023), remaining in the system established by the platforms – which in some way control the metrics and criteria for the indexing of content in search engines – (Nieborg and Poell 2018). These “negotiation spaces” are evident in the major Argentine

newspapers that helped include local newspapers in News Showcase. This negotiation in Argentina is more a result of the sociopolitical characteristics of the country when, unlike Brazil and Colombia, the media sector in 2009 underwent a democratization, reshaping the actions of the dominant groups through a charitable act by Google.

Since traditional media has more room to negotiate with platforms than digital natives (Poell, Nieborg, and Erin Duffy 2023), news companies lose opportunities for collective bargaining. In Argentina, despite the attempt to include most local media in Showcase, they were left out, potentially increasing the news desert in some regions (Alonso 2022). Along the same lines, there were losses in terms of negotiations between Brazilian newspapers and platforms (ANJ 2012).

This corroborates with the perception of European media, which describes platforms as *frenemies*, a term meaning they function both as friends and enemies (Chua and Westlund 2022), or as actors with whom they cooperate and compete with (Rebillard and Smyrniotis 2019).

Considering that this media ecosystem of platformization is based on the culture of clicks and metrics (Anderson 2011; Karlsson and Clerwall 2013; Poell, Nieborg, and Dijck 2020), it is interesting to note that Google maintains an initiative like News Showcase with such low audience numbers. This may be related to pressure from governments, journalists, and media companies in countries such as Brazil, Spain, Australia and Canada that are in favor of regulating platforms (ACCC 2021; Brazil 2020; Jornal Oficial da União Europeia 2019; Online News Act 2023), or to Google's attempts to "repair" its image and consolidate a cultural imaginary to make sense of its services.

Conclusions

Despite this regular financial compensation, and with respect to RQ1, the interviews we conducted reveal a news production scenario that is mostly characterized by instability in terms of the media companies' search for economic sustainability. There is, in fact, a power imbalance between platforms and the media, which then raises some careful thought about the media and practices of the Argentinian, Brazilian and Colombian journalists we studied in this paper.

Platforms seem to play an increasingly decisive role in the news market as they now act in its production - the editorial decisions of media have come to rely on the strategies of large technology companies (as well as distribution) through search engines and Google News. In other words, platforms are becoming more and more prominent and hold more political and economic power. Technology companies like Google actively participate in guiding specific practices aimed at both reader loyalty and innovation in their forms of sustainability. The routine activities that journalists and editors used to have are now dictated by digital platforms. According to the journalists we interviewed for our research, they created the panels for Showcase according to its rules and did not have any knowledge of how indexing works on this platform.

Based on the results of this research, the power imbalances among the relationships between media companies in these three countries and Google are evident from two key findings: (1) the relationship between news deserts and how Showcase benefits small media organizations by taking advantage of media concentration in the three countries to "divide and conquer" and (2) Google seeks to negotiate and sign contracts

individually rather than collectively, taking into account the audience and financial return that it can achieve from each media outlet.

Although the media in Brazil and Colombia took a collective stance against Google News in 2012, the current scenario seems to have weaker relations between the media and the associations that defend the local media market. This dynamic could lay the foundations for a news production model that meets the economic interests of big tech (which are often inconsistent, even including the model that establishes the platformization of journalism) with respect to the democratic information model.

Lastly, it is worth noting the limited direct effect Showcase has on the visibility and reputation of media news pieces once they have been included in its daily news catalogue. The platform does not guarantee the media an increased reach or a higher level of audience; it only guarantees the opportunity to be part of a conglomerate of media companies published under the Google label (RQ2). This indicates that Google News is a dominant infomediator, but does not have exclusive access to information in the countries included in our analysis. Although the perspective of this study is limited to news production for the Showcase platform, there are other lines of research on news consumption and the use of this platform by users which can be explored.

Considering that there is no significant impact on the increase in audience or web traffic, a relationship could be established between this cause and the effect in terms of remuneration, considered insufficient or derisory. The dispute used to focus on compensation for published news, and now it lies in the value of the resource allocated to the media and the contractual terms, reinforcing the idea that the relationship between news companies and platforms is complex. Further studies of these disputes are needed to determine the editorial decisions and the organizational and commercial objectives of the media based on technological infrastructures. The question that remains for future research projects is: why does Google run Showcase?

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