

Transformation of the post-covid media ecosystem. Teleworking and the hybrid model as organisational innovation in newsrooms

Transformación del ecosistema mediático post-covid. El teletrabajo y el modelo híbrido como innovación organizacional en las redacciones



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Abstract:

The covid-19 pandemic accelerated the media's efforts to survive in an unprecedented crisis. In this context, teleworking, despite having existed for decades, stood out as an efficient solution to sustain organisational processes. This exploratory study analyses the impact of teleworking and the introduction of hybrid formulas in two newspaper companies in the Spanish market (*eldiario.es* and *Heraldo de Aragón*), once the toughest stage of the pandemic was overcome. Through participant observation and in-depth interviews with experts and media professionals, we investigate whether the new teleworking formulas are innovative and if they could be adopted in the future. The results reveal that the impact of telework on news organisations has been decisive, especially to reshape the way in which ideas are shared and workflows are established. The adaptability of the case studies to the new organisational models has been found to be high; however, there are some factors limiting their full adoption. The hybrid telework model has brought unprecedented organisational change to many newsrooms and has accelerated digital transformation. However, there is still some uncertainty, because even in those newspapers that are committed to the model, implementation is still being developed.

Keywords:

Telework; innovation; journalism; media organisation; hybrid model.

Resumen:

La pandemia de covid-19 aceleró los esfuerzos de los medios de comunicación por sobrevivir en una situación de crisis sin precedentes. En este contexto, el teletrabajo, a pesar de existir desde hace décadas, destacó como una solución eficiente para sustentar los procesos organizativos. Este estudio exploratorio analiza el impacto del teletrabajo y la introducción de fórmulas híbridas en dos cabeceras del mercado español (eldiario.es y Heraldo de Aragón), una vez superada la etapa más dura de la crisis. A través de la observación participante y entrevistas en profundidad a expertos y profesionales de los medios, se investiga si las nuevas fórmulas de teletrabajo son innovadoras y se adoptarán en el futuro. Los resultados revelan que el teletrabajo ha tenido un impacto decisivo en las empresas periodísticas, especialmente para remodelar la forma en la que se comparten ideas y se establecen los flujos de trabajo. Se ha constatado una alta adaptabilidad de los casos de estudio a los nuevos modelos, aunque algunos factores limitan su adopción total.

Palabras clave:

Teletrabajo; innovación; periodismo; organización de los medios; modelo híbrido.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak was declared an international health emergency by the World Health Organization in January 2020. This unprecedented situation forced the change in people's consumption habits (Park et al. Al, 2022) or education (Akhrami, 2021), and had a significant impact on the way companies organise and perform their work (Okubo, 2022). Journalistic routines had to change due to the restrictions imposed (Greene González et al.; García-Avilés et al., 2022). In addition, digital tools played an important role in ensuring virtual connection and teleworking (Vyas and Butakhieo, 2021), having an impact on content, audiences (González-Neira et al., 2023) and the audiovisual industry (Martínez and Díaz, 2021).

The pandemic accelerated the effort of media outlets to transform themselves in a context of high complexity, and made companies and professionals face the difficulties in work management and, at the same time, meet the demands of a society susceptible to misinformation (Noain, 2021) and in need of high-quality journalism (Cherubini et al., 2021). These circumstances accelerated processes which, in normal situations, would have taken years or months but were adopted in days or weeks instead (Olsen, Pickard and Westlund 2020). Innovation in processes includes aspects related to organisations,

activities and processes of exploration and productive development, which implies considering changes in work organisation (Bleyen et al., 2014).

The responsiveness of the media industry shows the existence of a high degree of flexibility to react to unforeseen events (Baumann, 2013). Some papers on innovation in times of crisis have shown that innovation can arise from a disruptive conjunction (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2020). According to Kung (2013), innovation is related to change, and, when it occurs in a context of crisis, the result can be either destructive or creative for innovation (Archibugi et al., 2013; Banina et al. 2020). There is evidence that the driver for innovation in the media industry did not stop during lockdown (Meier et al., 2022).

The review of the concept of journalistic innovation by Belair-Gagnon and Steinke (2020) concludes that research has approached journalism as an isolated object of study, without addressing social trends and external actors and how these can stimulate such innovation. This paper addresses journalistic innovation conditioned by the environment, and offers a perspective on how the pandemic context accelerated the implementation of hybrid work models in newsrooms. It focuses on two cases to investigate if remote work and hybrid formulas -understood as innovation in the organisation of a media outlet- are a plausible alternative for Spanish newsrooms once the crisis is over.

1.1. Crisis and organisational innovation

The literature on how a crisis affects innovation processes focuses on the economic level and points in two directions: the loss of productivity (Hall, 2015) and the opportunity to focus innovation efforts towards more efficient organisations. But, to understand the impact of a crisis, it is crucial to examine the effect on the innovation ecosystem in general terms, not only by looking at purely economic results, but also by analysing the consequences on organisation, models and structures (Babina et al., 2020).

Innovation in the area of organisation consists in the “application of a new organisational method in companies’ business practices, workplace organisation, or companies’ external relationships” (OECD, 2005: 51). Organisational innovations are enablers of technological innovations, an immediate source of competitive advantage and a prerequisite for the development of knowledge (Armbruster et al., 2007). Sapprasert and Clausen (2012) argue that organisational innovations are related to improving business performance based on six effects: reducing response time to customer needs, improving the quality of goods and services, reducing unit costs, improving employee satisfaction, improving capacity, and increasing company productivity.

After the pandemic, the focus has been placed on the need to innovate in order to adapt to the new media ecosystem (García-Avilés et al., 2022; Cerezo, 2022: 7-8). Ebersberger and Kuckertz (2021) suggest that new companies are the ones that react most quickly to a changing landscape. This capacity for organisational adaptation of young companies is attributed to their flexibility, which represents a competitive advantage (Nagy et al., 2014), and enables them to respond in advance to changes and modify products and processes in order to meet the stakeholders’ demands (Feldman and Pentland 2003; Nadkarni and Herrmann 2010).

In the post-COVID ecosystem, workflows and journalistic practices are undergoing a process of flexibilisation (García-Avilés et al., 2022; Valero-Pastor et al., 2021). Such flexibility and constant learning are prerequisites for the success of media organisations

(Baumann, 2013: 79; Porcu, 2020). As Salaverría and Martínez-Costa (2021) point out, organisations reinvent themselves through distributed newsrooms and liquid production processes, diversity of voices and new types of leadership that tend to be horizontal. Flexibility, which is largely based on structures with not very rigid hierarchies, becomes a relevant aspect when analysing the adaptations of certain innovations affecting organisation. All these are aspects in which organisational context and culture are decisive, since innovation is conditioned to a large extent by internal culture (Porcu, 2020).

In fact, organisational culture is one of the mechanisms that enable companies to face the environment with some adaptive success (Olaz and Ortíz, 2022). However, once the culture has been established, it tends to be fixed and perpetuated, so it can also be an obstacle to adaptation to changes in the environment (Gómez-Díaz and Rodríguez-Ortíz, 2001).

In the current state of the pandemic, numerous organisations have made adaptive changes and have culminated their return to in-office work. But COVID-19 “posed a litmus test for organisational leaders around the world” (Dirani et al., 2020: 381). The role of organisational leaders and the impact of their decisions and actions are magnified in times of crisis, especially during its initial phases (Fink et al., 1971). Balasubramanian and Fernandes (2022) show that effective leadership in crisis situations improves organisational results and encourages employees to respond to the trust their bosses place in them when the staff are working from home. During a crisis, leaders must ensure their employees’ well-being, which promotes engagement on behalf of the organisation (Dirani et al., 2020). Balasubramanian and Fernandes (2022) stress the importance of other aspects of leadership during the crisis: communication with the teams, the ability to delegate in decision-making, and a flexible attitude to embrace new ideas. In addition, the need to invest in human resources and technology has become evident (Valero-Pastor et al., 2021).

The literature on journalistic work during lockdown and de-escalation agrees that professionals adapted to remote work quickly. Teleworking was a learning challenge (González Alba, 2021), but there are not many studies on the adoption of hybrid models¹ in Spanish journalism from the perspective of the months following de-escalation. Hence, this research, with interviews conducted two years after the beginning of the pandemic, is valuable to advance in the investigation of how the employment situation of Spanish journalists has evolved, and to shed light on the possible consolidation of a mix of in-office and remote work models.

1.2. Evolution of teleworking and hybrid formulas in newsrooms

The Labour force survey of the National Statistics Office (2019) estimates that 60% of the jobs of the groups of qualified occupations in Spain could be carried out remotely. Likewise, the percentage of employed people who worked more than half of the days from their homes went in Spain from 4.8% in 2019 to 10.8%. In 2021, it fell to 9.5%, although the percentage still remains higher than in 2019 (INE, 2022).

Teleworking in the media industry is not a new phenomenon. Two decades ago, De Pablos et al. (2002) analysed it from the organisational perspective, considering it as “pure technological magic”. Other previous studies, such as that of Iturbe (1995:

1 The term “hybrid” refers to the working model in which one part of the professionals work in newsrooms while the other does so remotely.

19), made a critical approach of the negative aspects of teleworking, and pointed out that it could become “a formula for precarious and poorly-paid work which would favour exploitation”.

Working from home entails certain limitations, such as the impossibility of interacting face to face. The lack of physical presence can reduce the possibility to learn through informal interaction with peers (Allen et al., 2015). In addition, the implementation of teleworking involves greater investment in equipment and software (video-conferencing systems, portable devices, cybersecurity controls, storage solutions, etc.), and also in workers’ training (Bunce, Wright and Scott, 2018). In addition, there is a risk of “proximity bias” arising, i.e. when employees at the office are favoured over those working remotely.

Benefits include the capacity to increase autonomy in task management (Allen et al., 2015). Teleworking has even proven to be beneficial in limiting interruptions of peers and supervisors, allowing workers to improve concentration (Valero-Pastor, 2021: 463). Increased productivity may also depend on the type of tasks: being positive for creative work and negative for more urgent and complex tasks (Battiston et al., 2017).

For the media in Spain, coverage of the COVID-19 crisis with a national state of emergency was a major challenge. In addition to the difficulty of managers coordinating work in a crisis, the need to do it remotely was added. A study on the teleworking of Belgian journalists during COVID-19 found that many of them had experienced social isolation (Libert, Le Cam and Domingo, 2021). The flexibility that comes with teleworking can also cause frustration due to the difficulties to separate time spent on work and family (Henderson et al., 2022).

Teleworking from home was an exceptional situation to limit the effects of the reduction of productive activity derived from the measures imposed by the health authorities in each country (Belzunegui-Eraso and Erro-Garcés, 2020). Media companies reacted in record time to ensure the safety of their employees and to continue their essential activity as information providers, although concerned to maintain the quality of contents, as pointed out by Henderson et al. (2022). These authors add that teleworking can become the prevailing organisational system for some employees, but that the possible negative effects –such as the lack of boundaries between work and personal life and, ultimately, workers’ well-being– must be addressed.

In this context, it is appropriate to consider the changes that the concept of teleworking itself has undergone in the field of labour law. Law 10/2021, of 01 October 2021, states that, in order to be considered teleworking, at least 30% of the working day must be carried out remotely with the same rights and conditions. Experts endorse the recognised advantages of this modality and its possible risks (Fernández, 2021). “Smart working” is highlighted. This goes beyond understanding teleworking as a remote task to conceive it as “an adaptive organisational development and reinforcement of management capabilities to overcome the inevitable barriers and challenges” (Rimbau-Gilabert et al., 2022: 2). This approach gives workers space and time flexibility, supported by technological tools and the conditions which enable them to perform their tasks efficiently (Raguseo, Gastaldi and Neirotti, 2016).

Several newsrooms are implementing some changes to increase flexibility at work. In this vein, it stands out the concept of hot desking, defined as a system in which employees “do not have specific desks assigned, but work from any free seat” (Millward et al., 2007). Although it is not a novel practice –already in the 1990s some studies addressed this model (Kleeman, 1992)– the pandemic has challenged existing organisational processes (Alam, 2020) and has led to the adoption of flexible workspaces (Chua et al., 2022).

The Reuters Institute at Oxford University (2021) surveyed 132 media leaders in 42 countries to address the impact of forced teleworking in the industry. It focused on measuring the impact of hybrid work and the possibilities of its long-term implementation. A large majority of respondents are so much in favour of these formulas, while a third of the media outlets already implement hybrid work, and half are thinking about doing so. However, 10% prefer to return to the same work system that existed before the pandemic.

After returning to the office, the challenge is to find the optimal model to maintain productivity, creativity and communication. 89% of executives surveyed by Reuters commit to moving towards more flexible working formulas, but the majority (64%) want their staff to come to the newsroom in person some days a week. A fifth even want to return to total in-office work, which indicates that there is also reluctance to the hybrid model.

There is, therefore, an interest in investigating the evolution of teleworking in the post-COVID media ecosystem. This study aims to analyse the implementation of teleworking in the media industry and, as a result of the learning obtained, the possible adoption after the pandemic of hybrid models that combine the attendance of workers to the newsroom together with teleworking. To do so, the following objectives are proposed:

To analyse the perception of professionals and experts on teleworking in the media industry, as well as the adaptability of media outlets to this formula.

To explore the strategies followed by media outlets once the severity of the pandemic and the obligation to resort to the teleworking formula have been eased.

These research questions are thus asked:

- RQ.1. What perception do professionals and experts in the journalistic field have about hybrid working models in the media?
- RQ.2. How have case studies been adapted to teleworking and hybrid formulas after the first two years of the pandemic?
- RQ.3. What strategy in terms of teleworking have media outlets followed once the severity of the pandemic has been eased?

2. Methodology

To collect the points of view of the impact of teleworking on the media, semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts from journalists' organisations, consultancies, media outlets and universities (n=22). It was based on a proposal of 50 experts chosen through a purposive sampling (Koerber and McMichael, 2008), relying on the criteria of knowledge of the subject, professional profile, geographical diversity, and parity, since previous studies have found that there may be differences in the way in which gender affects the experience of workers (Matthews et al., 2022). The interviews with the experts were conducted electronically between January and March 2021, and their responses were subsequently anonymised. The sample also looked for diversity in other areas: statements were collected from professionals of digital native and printed media outlets, and from experts from both private and public universities.

The interviewees were asked to identify the most relevant journalistic innovations in recent years, as part of a larger project, and teleworking was identified among them. Thus, their perceptions about teleworking emerged as an indirect consequence, which enabled to contextualise its importance and the potential of the teleworking introduced after the pandemic.

Table 1. Anonymised list of experts

Title	Area	Location	Genre	Age
Design manager	The media	Madrid	Man	38
Editor in chief	The media	Madrid	Woman	40
Journalism teacher	University	Pamplona	Man	50
Journalism teacher	University	Seville	Man	45
Journalism teacher	University	Madrid	Man	45
Journalism teacher	University	Murcia	Man	45
Journalism teacher	University	Madrid	Woman	35
Innovation manager	The media	Madrid	Man	40
Chief content officer	The media	Madrid	Man	60
Audience consultant	Consultancies	Madrid	Man	38
Audience consultant	Consultancies	Madrid	Man	55
CEO	Consultancies	Madrid	Man	58
CEO	Startups	Madrid	Man	42
Analyst	Startups	Madrid	Woman	42
Head of communications	Associations	London	Man	40

Head of communications	Associations	Madrid	Man	35
President	Associations	Valencia	Woman	35
Product manager	The media	Madrid	Woman	44
Deputy director	The media	Madrid	Man	44
Founder	Startups	Barcelona	Woman	49
CEO	The media	Madrid	Woman	54
Head of innovation	The media	Barcelona	Man	53

Source: prepared by the authors

In a second stage, it was applied the case-study methodology, which is considered a valid tool in qualitative research which enables to understand the phenomenon studied in its own context (Yin, 2003: 13). The case study makes available to researchers numerous sources of information, such as interviews, direct observation, records and other documents (García-Avilés and Carvajal, 2008: 226). The selection of journalistic organisations also followed a method of purposive sampling of two case studies which, despite facing the same challenge, opted for different strategies on teleworking.

The cases of *eldiario.es* and *Heraldo de Aragón* were selected according to different factors. Firstly, both media outlets are based in two of the four autonomous communities with the highest incidence of teleworking in Spain: the Community of Madrid and Aragón (INE, 2022). The Community of Madrid is the region with most people teleworking (19.9%), while Aragón is the fourth (7.3%). The natural differences between both media outlets were also considered. On the one hand, *eldiario.es* is a digital native media outlet based in Madrid, which has only existed for a decade, and has growing technological foundations. On the other hand, *Heraldo de Aragón* is a leading regional newspaper which has implemented a deep digital transformation. Another relevant factor was the diversity in its business structure and being part of a media group (Artero-Muñoz et al., 2021). *Heraldo de Aragón* exemplifies the high media concentration in the Spanish market, as it is part of a national conglomerate. In contrast, according to these authors, *eldiario.es* falls under the category of “sector group” and is not considered a group, but a media company.

The researchers developed a participant observation in the newsrooms of both media outlets in the week of 14 March 2022, which included attending meetings, interviews with professionals and informal conversations with employees at the nerve centre of work organisation. Two online interviews were also held with journalists who were teleworking. Participant observation is essential in the analysis of a topic such as teleworking, which affects in-office work, workflows and the physical

layout of newsrooms, since it enables to reconstruct an empirical and theoretical reality and reflect its problems (Rivas de Milano y Morales, 2006: 237).

Between March and September 2022, two professionals with positions of responsibility in each media outlet were interviewed in depth. From *eldiario.es*, Rosalía Lloret –CEO– and Marcos García –from the podcast section– were interviewed; from *Heraldo de Aragón*, Mikel Iturbe –general manager– and Elena de la Riva –head of SEO– were interviewed. The interviews addressed five key elements: their view of teleworking and its continuity, the level of adaptation to go without in-office work, the workflow during the pandemic, the use of computer equipment and spaces, and the organisational characteristics that favoured or impaired adaptation to teleworking.

3. Results

We present the results of the research grouped into two sections, according to the origin of the data: interviews with experts from the professional and academic field, and the analysis of each case study.

3.1. Analysis on the perception of teleworking according to experts

Seven interviewees emphasise that the sudden introduction of systems that favoured teleworking changed the view that managers of many media outlets had had so far. The deputy director of a national media outlet claims that before 2020 it would have been “inconceivable” to create a journalistic product remotely the way it was during the pandemic. However, given the obligation to adapt to the situation, it was shown that many of the routine functions of newsrooms could be performed remotely without damaging the journalistic product excessively. In the words of another interviewee, the health crisis broke the “taboo” of believing that a newspaper could not be made without anyone at the newsroom, and reopened a debate on future organisational formulas. “To what extent is it necessary to work in person if you can do so remotely?,” says the general manager of a digital native media outlet, who predicts a paradigm shift that will put an end to working in-office all the time in most newsrooms.

According to these experts, teleworking emerges as an innovation in the field of journalistic organisation, since it implies the adaptation to a virtual system which is positive for the company due to the implementation of new journalistic practices, the increase of team collaboration, a more proactive role taken by managers, and incremental changes in the value chain.

Experts highlight some advantages of teleworking, such as workers’ increased productivity and concentration. The president of a professional association of journalists exemplifies this point with press conferences broadcast live: “If you have to update a website quickly, you connect to YouTube and create the information instantly. It enables you to work with the information in a more immediate way, while attending the press conference”. However, this person also warns that these formulas can bring some drawbacks, such as limiting the possibility to ask questions.

In this sense, some experts point to the lack of personal interaction –with sources and among journalists themselves– as one of the greatest risks of teleworking, which can reduce creativity in the production processes and the quality of the product. “Having a certain friction is necessary for ideas to arise and for teams to be formed. We have learnt to interact in other ways, but we should not lose this one”, says one expert. This same expert thinks that media managers should keep newsrooms as “the

nerve centre of information” rather than prioritising the cost saved by eliminating them. In this vein, several interviewees point out that the application of teleworking is more complicated in the audiovisual media industry.

Experts stress that teleworking is useful in situations such as the pandemic but cannot completely replace in-office work. Creativity comes from professionals “rubbing shoulders” and exchanging ideas. In some way, as one expert points out, “teleworking brings out the best and worst in teams.” If a team is not sufficiently united, problems multiply; if it is united, instead, an environment of collaboration and creativity prevails. In addition, the hybridisation of technological resources and the circumstances of home environments triggered productivity, mental health and work-life balance problems, as journalists often shared their workspace at home with other household members.

The experience gained during teleworking led to organisational learning in newsrooms. Some interviewees argue that the concept of office and teleworking will change permanently, increasing flexibility and collaboration. According to a newspaper’s chief design officer, “Physical newsrooms are death-wounded because they are expensive and unsustainable. The classic model is going to disappear.” In this manager’s opinion, teleworking could favour talent retention and the incorporation of new professional profiles.

Some experts mentioned positive and negative consequences of teleworking on the mental health of employees and on their working conditions. The manager of innovation in a media group said that the quality of life of employees could be improved, as teleworking helped have a balance among household tasks, family obligations and free time, especially with the elimination of commuting. Another expert highlighted the benefits of teleworking for the staff, “Newsrooms become convenient spaces for journalists to decide based on the conditions in which they can do their job best. It is a great investment in the emotional salary.” However, as another expert points out, some aspects can have a negative impact on employees. For example, the cost of electricity, Internet connection or telephone should not be paid by journalists. This could worsen some situations of precariousness, which the profession already suffers, and the overload of teleworking which increases the levels of anxiety or stress in workers.

Experts from professional and academic fields agree that, once the exceptional situation after the pandemic is overcome, media outlets will choose hybrid formulas combining in-office work with teleworking. COVID-19 has served managers of these organisations as a mandatory testing ground for a modality of teleworking whose benefits were intuited, but that, to date, had not found sufficient stimulus to be implemented.

3.2. Analysis of case studies

3.2.1. eldiario.es

Eldiario.es is a digital native media outlet established on 18 September 2012 and edited by Diario de Prensa Digital, S. L., whose main shareholder is its general manager and founder, Ignacio Escolar. At the end of 2022, *eldiario.es* had 120 full-time employees and another 75 people hired in its network of local media partners in almost every autonomous region. More than 70% of the company staff are co-owners of the media outlet, including members of the editorial team.

Since its establishment, this outlet has stood out for its business strategy and membership model, which reached a peak during lockdown, going from 36,000 to 56,000 members in a matter of weeks (Oliden, 2021). In 2014, this outlet was classified as one of the most innovative media companies in Spain (de Lara et. al, 2014), mainly due to the disruptive nature of the aforementioned membership system, which served as an example for the evolution of the digital business of other international media companies, such as The Guardian (Carvajal et al., 2022).

On 10 March 2020, the entire staff of *eldiario.es* received an email telling them to leave the newsroom and go to work from home. In February 2021, according to the company's CEO, Rosalía Lloret, teleworking remained the dominant system in the company. But, at that time, the possibility of adopting hybrid work as a solution was already being explored. At the end of 2021, the staff responded to a survey which showed a large majority in favour of implementing a system which combined working at the newsroom and at home.

3.2.2. *The eldiario.es hybrid model*

Adaptability to teleworking increased in *eldiario.es* during the pandemic, especially when coordinating group meetings. With the implementation of online communication tools, some of the company's hierarchical structures were blurred and decision-making became more horizontal. In addition, this enabled professionals to get to know each other better on a personal level, and improved the cohesion of the teams. "While teleworking, I got to know other professionals better than when I quickly dealt with them at the newsroom. I was able to get to know my workmates in a different way", stresses the company's CEO. According to the interviewees, after the pandemic, a positive working relationship prevails, based on trust, respect and open communication at *eldiario.es*.

The relevance of the strategy of this digital native outlet lies in the decisions taken during the post lockdown: at the end of 2022: newsroom staff had not gone back to the office completely yet, and the strategy of the media company aims to continue this way in the long term, since it has opted for a hybrid formula, a "mixed return", as described by the professionals interviewed. According to the manager, teleworking hides several advantages, especially in terms of productivity, "Everyone has realised that there is a part of a journalist's job, like writing an article, they do better at home, away from the noise of the newsroom." However, at *eldiario.es*, they agree that the process of creativity, exchange of ideas and selection of editorial topics depends more on in-office work.

Given this, the newspaper launched a series of strategic changes, which point to both human capital and the physical space of the newsroom. First, all workers were surveyed when they returned from lockdown. And to the surprise of the management, who were expecting a negative response to teleworking, the staff was in favour of maintaining the formula, but with nuances. According to the data provided by *eldiario.es*, most staff opted for a model in which there were two days of in-office and three days of remote work. Other similar options were also voted on, covering three or four days of in-office work. In almost all cases, teleworking was still present in the responses. In this way, the trend described earlier in the Reuters Institute study, in which 89% of the surveyed managers agreed to implement the hybrid model, was followed.

Given this, the management refurbished the newsroom and reduced the number of workplaces, creating "hot desks". The workers have a laptop assigned, but there are no seats, set and the workplaces can be used by any newsroom professional,

according to the convenience of each particular moment and project. The only exception to this new mobility standard at the newsroom is the case of some strategic positions which are covered by professionals with a fixed workplace, as García explains. These changes, together with the good economic results during the pandemic, have enabled *eldiario.es* to increase its workforce to the point that it would currently be impossible to return to the level of in-office work prior to the health crisis. “If everyone came to the newsroom in person, we would not fit. We cannot go to a 100% in-office work system because the newsroom is no longer physically prepared”, says García. Therefore, the management ensures that this transformation enables a greater use of the space and has a positive impact, since there are more meeting rooms and areas for events with the partners available.

During the transformation process, managers and newsroom staff shared a similar view. According to the people interviewed, the adoption of the hybrid model started by listening to the workers, and this is confirmed by the survey carried out and in which all the staff had the opportunity to express their will regarding the system change. In fact, the hybrid work model has not only been adopted by the middle management, but also by the company’s senior management themselves. “Everybody is not all at once all the time. Instead, some come one day and others, another”, describes the CEO. In fact, according to the interviewees, the general manager of the newspaper, Ignacio Escolar, also opts for the 3x2 system (three days in-office, two teleworking). Likewise, the deputy director of the media outlet, Juanlu Sánchez, develops his activity from Seville, occasionally going to the newsroom and maintaining a teleworking system, in practice, in a quasi-permanent way.

In line with these arguments, an expert highlights the *eldiario.es* model because it implies a “radical innovation, since they have made renovations in their newsroom so that professionals only go to work once or twice a week”. Teleworking has been established “on a stable basis” because employees chose it that way.

3.2.3. *Heraldo de Aragón*

Heraldo de Aragón is a newspaper, whose information focuses on the Community of Aragón, founded in Zaragoza in 1895 by Luis Montestruc Rubio. It has offices in Huesca and Teruel and a staff of 120 employees. It is part of Grupo Henneo, to which 20 Minutos, La Información and SportYou belongs. During the first month of lockdown, *Heraldo de Aragón* had over 6.2 million unique readers according to ComScore. The number of visits to the digital edition increased by 52% compared to the previous year (La Información, 2020).

In March 2020, almost all of the staff left the newsroom to work from home. A management team was established to maintain the essential activities and the publication of the print edition. When the first state of emergency ended, on 21 June 2020, workers gradually returned to the office, although multiple health protocols were established to safeguard their safety.

3.2.4. *Heraldo de Aragón strategy towards 100% in-office work*

Unlike what happened at *eldiario.es*, the adaptability to teleworking in *Heraldo de Aragón* did not start with the health crisis. On the contrary, management had previously decided to provide employees with resources to telework, as a result of the digital transformation process implemented in the past five years. All journalists have a business laptop and an anchor point at their workplaces. In this way, the computer works as a portable device when employees are teleworking and as a CPU when

it is anchored to their workplace. According to the general manager, Mikel Iturbe, this increases the flexibility of journalists at the newsroom. The main objective is that work in this space can be moved to a remote position, so that any news writer “can work from anywhere in Aragón or Spain”. *El Heraldo de Aragón* was looking for greater agility in its production, and having been implemented before COVID-19 outbreak, this enabled to adapt more quickly. “The day the pandemic hit, people got their laptops and went home to work. There was nothing special”, says the general manager, who notes that they introduced some adjustments to improve connections in the communication software used –Microsoft Teams.

Elena de la Riva, head of SEO, also argues that the transition to work from home was practically non-existent, “Here the thing was: tomorrow, home, and that’s it.” Although she remembers that, in the audience development department, to which she belongs, teleworking was especially common because some people of the team work from Madrid. The interviewee says that, at present, their work method has “hardly” changed, but informs that this is an exception due to the nature of the team.

The main objectives that both interviewees mentioned about the implementation of teleworking were to ensure coordination and process flexibility, and to monitor working conditions. Journalists quickly adapted to teleworking and in the first week of lockdown new communication protocols were established. Most of the professionals worked in continuous shifts, reinforced at weekends, because there was too much information to cover. According to Iturbe, productive routines at the virtual newsroom have hardly changed compared to the physical one, “We kept 99% of the things we did before because, when you have a doubt, if you don’t have an answer, chaos begins. Instead, if you follow the same routines, everything works.”

Both interviewees point out that teleworking has several disadvantages. The main one for Iturbe is the damage to the collaboration between colleagues, which is one of the reasons why a remote model was not established. “Journalism is an effort of collective intelligence, and seeing each other’s faces, providing criteria, having a collaborative will... Teleworking makes all this difficult. Here many problems are solved by raising your head and asking a colleague”, says the general manager. From *Heraldo de Aragón* it is argued that teleworking “is effective for specific, orderly and sustainable issues, but not for structural ones”.

For this reason, the management opted for a strategy opposite to *eldiario.es*, and went back to in-office work when the first state of emergency finished. In June 2020, the journalists began to go back to their workplace at the newsroom and, in autumn that year, the company committee announced the return to in-office work, with some exceptions for those workers who had some disease or children or elderly people in their care, as well as for teams which are not part of the newsroom strictly (Audiences, SEO, etc.).

Between the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021, there was an atmosphere of dissension in the company, according to some workers. A professional points out that fears, tensions and comparisons between colleagues began to arise. According to this source, a large part of the editorial staff questioned the need to return to the completely face-to-face model when, for several months, the work had been perfectly organised virtually, with audience success.

This view contrasts with what was stated by the management, who emphasise that the staff accepted these decisions. However, the board and the editorial staff argue that, during the last quarter of 2020, the working scenario was flexible, and the writers were never strictly forced to return to the newspaper until the pandemic did not subside. In this sense, workers outside management explain the reasons of management to promote in-office work: the possible lack of work coordination, lack of

encouragement, of information pulse and of companionship with the writers who had taken returning to the newsroom as an obligation, perhaps pushed by their commitment to the newspaper or by direct orders from their bosses.

Likewise, the management state that the individual productivity of journalists increased with teleworking, but that this factor was not enough to implement a hybrid system to replace in-office work, “To produce, a worker locks himself at home and begins to publish many pieces. But this is not a mass production factory, it is a matter of meaning, the value of coordination and the value of journalistic criteria. To keep it going, there has to be coordination among the rest of the people at the newspaper, and the general manager needs to have influence on this informative will”, says Iturbe. The general manager of *Heraldo de Aragón* defends the importance of the face-to-face environment in decision-making and production processes at the newspaper, which favours feedback and the exchange of ideas among journalists. In June 2020, it was decided to resume the hierarchical newsroom model, with face-to-face meetings and workflows based on the attendance of the professionals. The management maintains that it would not have been good for the newspaper to have lost its identity as a result of teleworking because it is a media outlet with an editorial profile. In the case of other profiles, such as technicians, engineers or professionals closer to the product than to the content, teleworking was maintained because they could perform the tasks from home without altering workflows or the journalistic product. “At the newsroom, we tell things in an orderly manner, and it is important that we all coordinate in person”, the general manager stresses.

4. Discussion

The results enable to analyse the strategy of the media before the implementation of teleworking and the emergence of hybrid formulas two years after the beginning of the pandemic. In this sense, the existence of opposing positions regarding the adoption of these organisational processes is confirmed. Although both case studies developed structures to implement the hybrid model, *Heraldo de Aragón* chose not to adopt this practice as a standard, while the functioning of *eldiario.es* editorial staff changed permanently. These results show the difficulties to spread strategic roadmaps among media outlets with a different matrix and nature (Kung, 2015). They also highlight the relevance of the organisational culture of media companies in decision-making.

There is a close relationship between the innovation developed during periods of crisis and the changes implemented at an organisational level. According to the experts interviewed in the first stage of the research, the implementation of teleworking has accelerated a process of digital transformation, since media outlets launched immediate strategic plans that, in other circumstances, would have needed a longer time of conception and development. Therefore, these changes can be seen as a result of innovation in a time of crisis (Kung, 2013).

Teleworking has generated obvious consequences on the innovation ecosystem (Babina, Bernstein and Mezzanotti, 2020) – not only purely on the economic level – such as the need to acquire material or cost reductions after leaving newsrooms. In this vein, the experts consulted in the first stage argue that the impact of the emergence of teleworking (RQ1) has been decisive, especially because of its capacity to reshape the way in which ideas are shared and workflows are established.

These interviewees also warn of multiple risks that endanger the quality of the journalistic product and the very foundations of media organisational culture, as pointed out by Henderson et al. (2022). In line with the literature, the results of the study

show that the lack of physical presence can reduce the capacity to share knowledge through informal interaction with other colleagues, leading even to social isolation (Libert, Le Cam and Domingo, 2021) or to precarious situations (De Pablos et al., 2002). As the general manager of *Heraldo de Aragón* pointed out, journalistic work is part of an effort of collective intelligence, so teleworking would make it difficult to provide criteria and, more specifically, to have a collaborative will. Some experts interviewed highlight that, although teleworking has proven to be beneficial for productivity (Bloom et al., 2015), informal interaction between colleagues remains crucial for journalistic work in order to facilitate learning (Allen et al., 2015) and perform urgent or complex tasks (Battiston et al., 2017).

A relevant question refers to what is lost in virtual communication versus face-to-face conversations. Some professionals longed for face-to-face communication in the decisions that make up the daily work at a newsroom. However, using online tools also enabled to think differently and approach issues from original perspectives. As previous studies indicate, teleworking can increase knowledge sharing and reduce communication gap in teams (Bunce, Wright and Scott 2018).

Adaptability to teleworking has been found to be high in the case studies (RQ2). Although *Heraldo de Aragón* has not continued with teleworking in the post-COVID era, the management introduced the necessary changes to facilitate workforce movements, even before the pandemic. At *eldiario.es*, organisational changes were forced by the health crisis, with a high degree of flexibility to deal with unforeseen events (Baumann, 2013). In addition, we can see some similarities in this case with the theory by Nagy et al. (2014), who argue that startups have a competitive advantage, as they have greater flexibility. Thus, *eldiario.es* shows signs of loose and horizontal hierarchies, as reflected the query made to the staff about the adoption of the hybrid model. This flexibility would in turn be a catalyst for innovation in the organisational field (Baumann, 2013: 79).

With regard to the perpetuation of hybrid formulas at newsrooms (RQ3), *eldiario.es* exemplifies what the Reuters Institute study (2021) predicted: the management has clearly opted for the hybrid model. However, the majority of professionals consulted in this study wanted the staff to be physically at the newsroom for some days a week. This is consistent with the workers' statements about the risks of losing creativity if teleworking is fully and permanently established in the company.

Likewise, the study of the Reuters Institute indicates that a fifth of the managers chose to totally return to in-office work, as this research has shown at *Heraldo de Aragón*, whose managers were reluctant to adopt the hybrid system. In this case, a relationship of "resistance" could be established in the terms Davies (1977) points out. *Heraldo de Aragón* has shown in its strategy indications of "rational opposition to change", as this author describes, since its rejection is based on reasonable analysis which determines that the cost of the hybrid formula is greater than the benefits.

The interviewees' statements in both case studies support the previous assertions of experts from the academic and professional field. Their first hypotheses include the increase in productivity, the pandemic as an engine of innovation and promotion of teleworking –as at *eldiario.es*– and the organisational learning assumed by professionals in the newsrooms. But, in addition, they also share with the managers of the analysed media outlets the main negative factors of teleworking: the loss of interaction in face-to-face meetings, the importance of a physical space as an organisational nerve centre, and, in some cases, the decrease in creativity and even in the quality of content associated with journalistic criteria, as mentioned by *Heraldo de Aragón* general manager.

The mere adoption of teleworking is not an innovation, since there is evidence of its implementation in national media outlets for more than two decades (de Pablos et al., 2002). However, the findings show the improvements developed from the learning gained during pandemic months and the innovation that would imply the adoption of a hybrid work system. Organisational innovations are related to improving business performance in multiple ways, by increasing employee satisfaction and increasing their productivity (Sapprasert and Clausen, 2012). In this way, the hybrid model stands as an innovation in the media industry because it promotes incremental changes, although there is still uncertainty, since many media outlets which are in favour of this practice are still looking for the best way to apply it (Cherubini, 2021).

5. Conclusions

The study shows that, after the disruption generated by the pandemic, the media have implemented strategies for the reorganisation of journalistic work, maintaining most of the usual practices of physical newsrooms and incorporating hybrid models that combine teleworking in a partial way, which can be considered an organisational innovation. Journalists have implemented new production practices and communication protocols which enable the teleworking hybrid model to be considered an innovation that increases collaboration and promotes more flexible interaction between managers and employees. A formula that, unlike the teleworking developed during pandemic months (García-Avilés et al., 2022), does not register perceptions of work fatigue or stress suffered by journalists.

These conclusions advance the knowledge about the organisational evolution of newsrooms two years after the beginning of the pandemic, in an environment of normality, but with a high degree of experimentation on optimal formulas of work performance. Teleworking makes clear the need to analyse journalistic innovation without isolating it from the context in which it is developed. This invites us to continue deepening in how these formulas will be implemented in the coming years, without losing sight of what happens in other cultural industries, some intimately related, as is the case with advertising and audiovisual production. Advertising, for its part, also experienced a demand for content, caused, in its case, by the lockdown, while suffering a severe crisis due to the fall in investment (Corredor-Lanas, Marcos-Recio and Montañés-García, 2021). Organisational practices in audiovisual production favoured by forced teleworking during lockdown underline the complexity of coordinating small teams, the importance of technology, and the adoption of routines which are valuable learning and can imply new forms of execution and creation (Blas, García and Moraleda, 2020).

Previous technological developments have already led to substantial changes in journalistic routines, as Usher proved (2014: 4) a decade ago, when professionals faced for the first time the challenge of creating journalistic content without losing sight of immediacy and interactivity. For example, the search for participation by the public when configuring content for some professionals was an added value, while for others it was an imposition (Usher, 2014: 17). The changes in productive routines due to the lockdown were caused by a situation outside the profession, but in which, as in the past, the media had to continue to satisfy the demand for information, in this case worsened by that health uncertainty.

The data available at the end of 2022 show how the combination of remote and in-office work can favour increased flexibility in tasks, collaboration among professionals and teamwork. At the same time, the consolidation of the teleworking hybrid model has meant an unprecedented organisational change in some newsrooms, which has accelerated the digital transformation.

It should be concluded that hybrid models are expected to remain a common practice in newsrooms, reinforcing horizontal collaboration with an organisational management that increases communication, flexibility and transparency.

However, the adoption of this organisational system also presents some disadvantages. The case of *Heraldo de Aragón* exemplifies some relevant pitfalls in the application of teleworking, such as the loss of identity with respect to the editorial profile of the media outlet, the difficulty in making urgent decisions in coverage, in addition to isolation and the possible lack of interaction with other colleagues. For this reason, various media outlets which opted for hybrid formulas, evidenced in both the case studies (*eldiario.es*) and the literature (Cherubini et al., 2021), continue to validate their strategies with respect to teleworking, although a single formula which can be replicated across the media industry has still not been established.

This research has limitations, mainly because the analysis of the impact of teleworking comes only from two case studies limited to the Spanish media market. It would be appropriate to expand the sample in future research to draw more generalisable conclusions about the factors that condition the adoption of teleworking and hybrid models. Likewise, it would be advisable to extend the measuring of the perception of journalists on these issues through other tools – such as surveys – and to carry out a longitudinal study to analyse the evolution of these changes over time.

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