

Journalism Online in Peru

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INTRODUCTION

Online journalism dates back to the end of the 1970s, when Knight-Ridder launched an initiative to develop a video-text service in the United States, which it later dropped, in 1986, after realizing enormous losses. In 1988, Knight-Ridder bought *Dialog Information Services, Inc.*; only a year later, the first signs of success appeared. By the end of the 1980s, Gannet launched a daily news piece in text format. In 1992, *The Chicago Tribune* became the world's first daily to launch an electronic version of its newspaper. In 1993, Knight-Ridder started publishing what would eventually become one of the paradigms of electronic journalism, the *San Jose Mercury Center*. By 1994, the major newspapers in the United States offered readers an online version (Díaz & Meso, 1998). Now, Internet users can read newspapers, listen to the radio, and watch TV from anywhere, anytime (McClung, 2001).

BACKGROUND

Electronic journalism stands out for four features: it uses multimedia resources; it breaks down the sequence of information through hypertext and hypermedia; it breaks down periodicity, because it allows for information to be accessed at any time; and it is interactive (Díaz & Meso, 1998; Cohen, 2002). Interactivity gives an opportunity for readers to disagree with the publishers or contribute to the writers' work by incorporating readers' opinions (Giles, 2000; Cohen, 2002).

Many sites relating to printed media have evolved from pages that initially were simply reproductions of the printed version into a dynamic environment that is constantly updated (Pack, 2001). In this sense, Internet journalism principles should not be different from those governing traditional channels. Digital-era journalists must find the way to reach a global audience without compromising the values of truthfulness, of reliable sources, and of independence (Pavlik, 2000).

Nowadays, the Internet opens the door to new, purely virtual media, although they must still walk a long way before they gain enough credibility. Additionally, they must rise to the challenge of a huge infrastructure that has already been put in place by consolidated newsgroups and overcome limited access to capital (Giles, 2000; Uy,

2001). Purely virtual media must carefully analyze their projects' feasibility. The collapse of Taiwan's virtual *Tomorrow Times* information medium—despite 1.8 million daily page visits—poses a question about the viability of sustaining the high cost of generating news (Ling & Guyot, 2001), when no journalistic infrastructure has been developed in the physical world. So, online journalists must reconcile money-making and news interests (Cohen, 2002).

Although the cost of preparing a news feature has remained almost unaltered, and although presenting news in a multimedia format (Fulton, 2000) may slightly increase costs, it is clearly cheaper to prepare a page and make it available to millions of people around the world over the Internet than to distribute it on a printed format (Small, 2000 and Singer, 2001).

Finally, given the phenomenon of ethnocentricity (Priess, 2000), publishers may find it convenient to specialize on reporting about a reality that is best known to them (Singer, 2001).

PERUVIAN ONLINE JOURNALISM

To evaluate Web journalism in Peru, the most important print, broadcast, and purely virtual media were analyzed. The criteria to select the media were their readership or rating in the physical world and their number of visits in the virtual world.

The following printed media were chosen:

- *El Comercio* is Lima's best recalled and most widely read daily (Apoyo Opinión y Mercado, 2003). It has a reputation for being the most truthful, entertaining, and the best at covering local political news events (Apoyo.com, 2001). It is read by an average 574,700 people in Lima (Instituto Cuánto, 2001).
- *Gestión* was Peru's first written medium to produce an online version. Its printed edition, targeting the business community, reaches an average 27,500 readers in Lima (Instituto Cuánto, 2001).
- *La República* was Peru's second printed medium to publish an electronic version. It is regarded as the second most truthful and is also mentioned as the second most reliable daily in providing local political news coverage (Apoyo.com, 2001). It is read by

an average 171,300 readers in Lima (Instituto Cuánto, 2001). At this time, it is regarded as the second most widely read online Peruvian daily (Apoyo Opinión y Mercado, 2003).

Radio broadcasters in this study comprise those that broadcast over the Web but focus on news programming:

- *Radioprogramas del Perú, RPP Noticias*, enjoys a spontaneous recall rate of 27% among all radio broadcasters and 62% among news radio broadcasters. Its annual average half-hour audience in Lima reaches 95,100 listeners (Instituto Cuánto, 2001). It is one of the most widely heard radio broadcasts (Apoyo Opinión y Mercado, 2003).
- *CPN Radio, Radio Cadena Peruana de Noticias*, has an annual average half-hour audience of 22,900 listeners in Lima (Instituto Cuánto, 2001). It is the second most widely heard news radio broadcast in Peru (Apoyo Opinión y Mercado, 2003).

Rather than displaying full and updated information, Peruvian television networks on the Web underscore programming information. Their Web sites are closer to an institutional page than to an information page, so they were not included in this study.

Of the three Peruvian information media lacking a print, radio, or television matching part, only www.peru.com and www.primerapagina.com.pe participated in this study; the latter plummeted shortly after this research; the third did not answer.

A preliminary evaluation of the selected media Web sites was conducted preceding in-depth interviews with their managers; a subsequent examination on the media Web sites complemented the analyses.

In the following pages, a brief explanation is provided about the origins, main goals, content, audience, and income sources of the studied Peruvian Internet media.

El Comercio

Founded in Lima in 1839, it published the company's institutional page on the Internet in 1996 and in 1997 started publishing the www.elcomercioperu.com.pe electronic daily; in May 2001, it organized an independent area charged with the Web publication. News is updated on the Web using information provided by the daily's reporters and input from news agencies. Its Web site gets an average 11 million monthly hits, mostly from Peruvian expatriates. Information sections in the daily's electronic version include national and world affairs, business, entertainment, politics, and sports; its most widely read pages are the front page and local soccer news.

The revenues of www.elcomercioperu.com.pe come from advertising by some announcers, sale of news to the telephone operators who distribute the news to their cellular telephone customers, as well as preparation of private circulation newsletters for other companies. The daily's electronic version has created a portal providing, among other services, the www.ec-store.com.pe virtual shop as an additional source of revenue. At the same time, an Internet public kiosks network was put in place around the country. Additionally, *El Comercio* offers free e-mail and a PDA news service.

El Comercio's management has made a decision to make the newspaper a Latin American leader. Comprised in their strategy to reach their goal is the effort to provide Internet-based news services.

Gestión

Gestión was Peru's first written medium to produce an online version when it launched its electronic site www.gestion.com.pe in September 1996. An economics, finance, and business newspaper, *Gestión* first circulated in 1990. Its specialized reports go hand in hand with information about political events and world affairs.

From the daily's Web site, it is possible to access other media run by the corporation: *CPN Radio* (www.cpnradio.com.pe) information broadcast station and its *Gestión Médica* (www.gestion.com.pe/GM) weekly health publication. Most of its visitors are businessmen from abroad who have business and interests in Peru. Articles on political issues are the most frequently visited, followed by economic reports. *Gestión's* contents are prepared with materials gathered by its reporters, together with news from news agencies. Information in www.gestion.com.pe is posted on the Web and updated by *CPN Radio* personnel. *Gestión* also offers a free e-mail news service twice a day.

La República

Founded in Lima in 1981, it has as its objective to inform and become an opinion maker for the Peruvian public. Since 1995, it uses satellites to publish local editions in other cities around Peru. In October 1996, *La República* launched its electronic version (www.larepublica.com.pe).

Since its Web site launching, the number of opinion letters it gets through e-mails from readers outside Peru has grown steadily. Some visitors at www.larepublica.com.pe have become the newspaper's foreign correspondents who "add a Peruvian flavor" to international reports. Foreign readers account for 70% of the electronic edition's readership. All of *La República*, including its supplements, is published on its Web site;

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