Agenda building in Spanish alternative and cooperative media: topics, use of sources and collaborative practices[1]

GUADALUPE AGUADO-GUADALUPE[2]
http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7314-2403

ITZIAR BERNAOLA[3]
http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1607-2661

This paper analyzes the agenda building of four Spanish alternative and cooperative media: *La Marea*, *El Salto*, *Crític* and *5W*. Using content analysis of the cover pages and open-ended questionnaires to the media, we have detected a prevalence of social issues and topics. Expert and primary sources, as opposed to institutional sources, predominate, while collaborative practices with related media for the development and diffusion of content are also common.

KEYWORDS: Alternative media, cooperative media, agenda building, sources, collaborative journalism.

El artículo aborda la configuración de la agenda building de cuatro medios alternativos y cooperativos españoles: La Marea*,* El Salto*,* Crític *y* 5W*. Mediante un análisis de contenido de sus portadas y cuestionarios abiertos a los propios medios, se detecta una prevalencia de temas sociales. Entre las fuentes se observa un predominio de las expertas y las primarias frente a las institucionales. Asimismo, se percibe que las prácticas colaborativas con medios afines son habituales para la elaboración y difusión de contenidos.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Medios alternativos, medios cooperativos, agenda building, fuentes, periodismo colaborativo.*

O artigo trata da configuração da construção da agenda de quatro mídias alternativas e cooperativas espanholas: La Marea*,* El Salto*,* Crític *e* 5W*. Através de uma análise do conteúdo de suas capas e questionários abertos ao mídia, uma prevalência de questões sociais é detectada. Entre as fontes, há uma predominância dos especialistas e os primários frente aos institucionais. Também, percebe-se que práticas colaborativas com mídias semelhantes são habituais para a elaboração e divulgação de conteúdo.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Mídia alternativa, mídia cooperativa, agenda building, fontes, jornalismo colaborativo.*

INTRODUCTION

The rise of alternative and cooperative media and their organic relationship with social transformation projects (Downing, 2002, p. 55) has led us to examine in our article how these media build their own agendas, what topics they tackle and what type of sources they use to elaborate their news stories. Likewise, we analyze if they engage in collaborative journalism, since this practice is considered to be an agent of transformation and for remediating the errors and excesses of conventional media (Graves & Konieczna, 2015; Martínez Mendoza & Ramos Rojas, 2020).

Interest in the agenda building of alternative and cooperative media is warranted because, as pointed out by Fleischman et al. (2009), these media "have become a door to publish information that is excluded from traditional media's agenda" (p. 257). Furthermore, these media are characterized by a variety of points of view and the diversity of topics dealt with, but with a common focus that is always present to a greater or lesser extent: distribution of wealth in a fairer and/or more equitable way and a desire for transformation.

We must keep in mind that construction of the agenda and use of sources are essential in alternative and cooperative media as they are perceived more as a public service and not so much as a factory manufacturing content (Jarvis, 2015). We must likewise take into account that they are opposed to mainstream, conventional and dominant media, and hence are very suitable for building local communities and facilitating communication between social movements, while being fundamentally critical (Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010).

An issue of concern that has been highlighted in research on the use of sources has been the media's loss of control over contents, and therefore of agenda building, in favor of interested sources. The media require news on a daily basis but they generally work with limited financial and human resources. This is more evident in the media sector that concerns us since, as Fleischman et al. (2009) point out, they are non-profit initiatives, which are usually based on voluntary collaboration from their participants. For this reason, they sometimes

reject advertising or financial support from foundations or governments in order to maintain their autonomy.

Authors such as Vázquez Bermúdez (2006) have warned about the inordinate dependence of conventional media on the agenda established by certain news sources, especially those occupying the most relevant positions in the political, economic, social and cultural hierarchy. Research studies by Casero Ripollés and López Rabadán (2016), Mayoral (2018), and Pérez Curiel et al. (2015) have also cautioned about this dependence, pointing out that "journalistic work has been oriented towards the predominance of official and government sources in the news" (p. 103). Ortega and Humanes (2000) consider that the excessive presence of institutional sources causes both a disaffection from reality by journalists (facts are replaced by statements from sources), and a biased vision, shaped exclusively by a few focal points. In a similar vein, Alonso González (2016) observes that in the mainstream media, institutional sources continue to be clearly overrepresented compared to other types of sources (civil society, alternative ones, etc.) and Mayoral (2018) asserts that traditional media "are increasingly dependent on these huge machines that produce press releases, calls, announcements, press conferences, etc." (p. 47).

Likewise, conventional media have shown an excessive dependence on news agency information, "which would explain how a great homogeneity of topics can be hidden under an apparent model of pluralism with a multitude of different media outlets" (Gelado Marcos, 2009, p. 245). It is a practice that Noelle-Neumann (1973) already warned about when referring to "consonance" as one of the causes of journalistic information uniformity and which other authors such as Lewis et al. (2007) have called "pre-packaged information".

In recent years, the digital environment has opened the door to interaction between the media and citizens, making it easier, in the case of alternative and cooperative media, to introduce their issues on the public agenda. This has given rise to initiatives ranging from information from a citizen source to the coverage of a specific event or to collective dissemination of specific campaigns (López-Fernández, 2018).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Alternative and cooperative media

An advanced democratic society is characterized, among other aspects, by having reliable, free and independent media. As McChesney (2011) reminds us, "the supreme duty of journalism is to provide public opinion with adequate food so that it can defend democracy" (p. 154). Alternative and cooperative media play an essential role in this regard as they are conceived as "options to traditional media" (Fleischman et al., 2009, p. 258), while, as Hernández Ceballos and Chaguaceda Noriega (2013) note, they are (or seek to be) outside the reach of the interests and networks of government institutions and economic actors. For that purpose, they are based on self-management, without being dependent on government or commercial financing for their work, functioning in many cases in the social and solidarity economy through cooperatives (Camps-Durban, 2021), although they are usually more professionalized than "community" media (Barranquero Carretero & Sánchez Moncada, 2018; Siapera & Papadopoulou, 2016).

We should consider that these media are circumscribed to the Third Sector of Communication, an emerging sector outside the binomial of public and private-commercial media, which combines professional journalism and citizen participation (Barranquero Carretero & Meda González, 2015). In addition, in most cases, they are examples of cooperative media in terms of their economic model, offering the possibility of building autonomous journalism that identifies with the interests of workers and citizens (Barranquero & Sánchez Moncada, 2018) as well as with other similar projects (Fleischman et al., 2009).

Likewise, according to Martínez Mendoza and Ramos Rojas (2020), their main premise is to share information and collaborate with other professionals to carry out news projects from their conception to their development and distribution. As Barranquero Carretero and Candón-Mena (2021) observe, collaborative practices with other media (generally also belonging to the Third Sector of Communication) are considered one of the variables influencing their eco-social sustainability. Along these lines, Fleischman et al. (2009) emphasize that alternative media should establish their collaborative relationships

and bonds of solidarity to strengthen one another. Hence, journalists from diverse media collect, process and distribute information together, "supported by communication technologies and citizens interested and/ or involved with the problems of the journalistic agenda" (Martínez Mendoza & Ramos Rojas, 2020, p. 5).

MEDIA AGENDA BUILDING AND SOURCES

The study of the media agenda has been fundamentally based on its effects on the audience, applying the agenda setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). However, in order to calibrate that influence, it is of interest to know how the former is constructed, and delve into the process known as *agenda building* (Sádaba & Rodríguez, 2007). This term, created in 1971 by Cobb and Elder, is known as the fourth phase of agenda setting and refers to the process of building the news that makes up the media agenda and to the elements that try to influence and ultimately do influence it (McCombs, 2006). The traditional analysis of who sets the public agenda shifts to who determines the media agenda (Kroon & Van der Meer, 2021). It is likewise useful for studying the type of interaction that occurs between the political and media agenda (Aruguete, 2017).

This construction of the media agenda or agenda building refers to the "process by which news organizations and journalists feature, emphasize, and/or select certain events, issues, or sources to cover over others" (Nisbet, 2008, p. 1). Despite its relation to agenda setting, it remains a much less explored field of study, whose framework has been applied sporadically and inconsistently (Denham, 2010).

The emergence of the media agenda as an object of research is explained by the confluence of a "complex network of structural and contextual factors, endogenous and exogenous, that shape news content" (Brandenburg, 2002, p. 39). As Aruguete (2017) points out, it is influenced by institutional limitations, news values, professional habits, values associated with the journalist's social role and work routines. Decades ago, McCombs (1992) used the popular metaphor of the layers of an onion, in whose outer layer were the external sources. The media themselves that influence one another are the second layer,

while the third one is the technical resources that constrain news production. The restrictions imposed by the organization's own culture constitute the fourth layer, whereas the fifth one is the journalists' individual preferences. Finally, the last layer is the journalistic styles or genres.

Along these lines, Weaver and Choi (2017) take up the onion metaphor and reduce the possible "layers" or spheres of influences in the media agenda to five. First, there are the most influential sources, especially the institutional and political ones. Second are the media themselves, which influence one another, especially the so-called media of reference. This layer is known as the *intermedia agenda setting*. In the third layer, we find social norms and journalistic traditions, which also affect the construction of the media agenda. Unscheduled or "authentic" events, such as a natural disaster, unexpectedly appearing on the agenda are the fourth layer. Finally, the last layer refers to the audience itself, which also participates in this process. The latter has been more influential since the appearance of the Internet and social media (Gillmor, 2006), as user-generated content (UGC) has found new channels with the development of the Internet (García de Torres, 2010) and less alternative media. Social media have also played a role in this battle for the agenda, and for setting the media agenda, as well as the political and public ones (Candón Mena, 2012).

McCombs (1992) and Weaver and Choi (2017) concur in placing those external sources that most influence its setting in the outer layer of this onion that represents the media agenda. This relationship between the media agenda and the sources is an issue that has been debated and examined in depth for half a century. As Atton and Wickenden (2005) observe, the credibility of the media is also influenced by the hierarchy of sources, a concept that has to do with notions of power, legitimacy and authority. On the other hand, Pérez Curiel et al. (2015) point out that "the management of sources is a factor of journalistic quality, based on ethical principles such as truthfulness, cross-checking sources, coherence and equity, which come up against political, economic, ideological and labor-professional constraints" (p. 104).

Thus, sources constitute an essential part of journalistic activity, and they have been a recurring object of study up to the present day

(Franklin & Carlson, 2011; Lewis et al., 2008; Splendore, 2017). At the same time, they are a key element in analyzing the construction of the media agenda (Weaver & Choi, 2017). The study of sources has led to the establishment of different categories, such as those of Ruiz and Albertini (2008). These authors differentiate between primary sources (those that are informed by their own participation in the newsworthy event, either as participants or as witnesses to what happened) and secondary (those that are informed through oral or written reports sought out or received from primary sources).

Along these lines, López (1995) distinguishes four categories of sources: own, institutional, spontaneous (from groups of citizens that normally come into conflict with the large corporations that constitute power, counterbalance the strategy of the powerful and whose opinions reflect the interests and concerns of the majority of citizens), and confidential and anonymous.

Armentia Vizuete and Caminos Marcet (2003) differentiate between: public (sources interested in making their public work known and who use press offices, press releases, press conferences, etc. to communicate with journalists); private (not available to all journalists and their access is restricted to a certain number of reporters); confidential (they usually work with the off-the-record system); and experts (individuals specialized in certain topics to whom the journalist goes to obtain unique information or to interpret available data accurately).

Finally, Mayoral (2005) establishes three types of sources: intermediaries or news agencies; official (central government, regional governments, city councils, unions, political parties, employers, other institutions, and others); and unofficial (associations, non-governmental organizations, experts, members of institutions or organizations, and others).

Methodology

The objective of this article is to analyze the process of agenda building of four Spanish alternative and cooperative media. In order to study the selection of the events covered by these media, we examine the type of topics and issues addressed, as well as the nature or origin of

the material used to produce the news pieces, and if they engage in collaborative journalism. To analyze the influence of sources, this study focuses primarily on the first –external sources– and the last –user-generated content– layers pinpointed by McCombs (1992) and Weaver and Choi (2017).

We rely on three hypotheses:

H1: Social and environmental issues prevail in the agendas of alternative media.

H2: Alternative media move away from the use of pre-packaged information and institutional sources, both governmental and political. Instead of consulting mainly sources from the political, economic, social and cultural hierarchy, they consider other types of alternative sources, such as citizen groups and movements, serving to give voice to social problems and issues.

H3: Collaborative journalistic practices with other media partially set the agenda of alternative media, establishing collaborative relationships and solidarity bonds between them to strengthen one another.

For our study, the cases of four Spanish alternative media with more than 50 000 followers on Twitter were analyzed: *La Marea* (https://www.lamarea.com/) (with 229 000 followers), *El Salto* (https://www.elsaltodiario.com/) (168 000), *Crític* (https://www.elcritic.cat/) (56 000) and *5W* (https://www.revista5w.com/) (53 000).

These four media were selected, because beyond their differences, they started up from microdonations (Martínez Polo & Martínez Sánchez, 2017). They function in a community and solidarity economy regime, opting for the constitution of cooperatives or entities of collective and equal participation among the partners; they ensure that internal democracy prevails; they safeguard transparency about their economic situation and have ethical advertising codes that restrict revenues in this sense, avoiding advertisements from companies that contradict their editorial principles. In all four cases, their main source of financing is subscriptions.

To carry out our research, a content analysis was performed, along with a questionnaire with open-ended questions to the four studied

media, addressing aspects such as the predominance of topics and issues, sources, collaborative practices with other media and the promotion of user-generated content.

The content analysis was conducted exclusively on the web front pages, following the work of other scholars such as Sigal (1978), Erbring et al. (1980), Danielson and Lasorsa (1997), and López Rabadán and Casero Ripollés (2012), as there is where the battle for the agenda is really fought. Indeed, these front pages include the news to which each medium confers greater relevance. The topics and issues dealt with and the sources used were examined in each news item published by these media in the selected period (February 2021). News pieces recovered by the media from previous days, months or even years and brought back to their front pages –a practice often observed in this research– were also included in this sample.

Monitoring the front pages of the four media throughout the month of February 2021 has meant there were 437 articles analyzed. Of these, 259 correspond to *El Salto*, 88 to *La Marea*, 70 to *Crític* and 20 to *5W*. This unequal number of items analyzed in each medium corresponds to the frequency of publication and the volume of articles published daily by each media. *El Salto* publishes the most news articles, followed by *La Marea*, *Crític* and *5W*.

In our analysis, we have had to take into account that these web front pages, although forming a unit, are dynamic, changing constantly throughout the day as they are updated. In addition, given the lack of records of these updates, as has been verified in our research and confirmed by the analyzed media, the content analysis has had to be conducted in real time.

In order to observe the events and issues that the media included, highlighted and/or selected, we examined the prevalence of social and environmental issues or lack thereof. Thus, each news item was catalogued under a specific topic, differentiating between social and environmental issues and those that are not, and classifying the former according to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) included in the 2030 Agenda.

Regarding the literature addressed in the theoretical framework, the following types of sources were considered for the analysis:

a. Expert: sources specialized in specific fields to whom the journalist goes to obtain unique information or to interpret available data accurately.
b. Primary: they get information through their own participation in the newsworthy event, either as direct participants or as witnesses to what happened. Primary sources include press releases, manifestos, medical reports, studies, sentences, laws, European conventions, lawsuits, reports, orders and court rulings.
c. Experience of the journalist as direct witness.
d. Institutional: information that reaches the media from government agencies, politicians and others.
e. User and citizen group-generated content. It should be pointed out that some opinion articles are considered in the study as user-generated content, as they are written by members of civil society, professionals, etc., who do not belong to the media's staff of journalists.
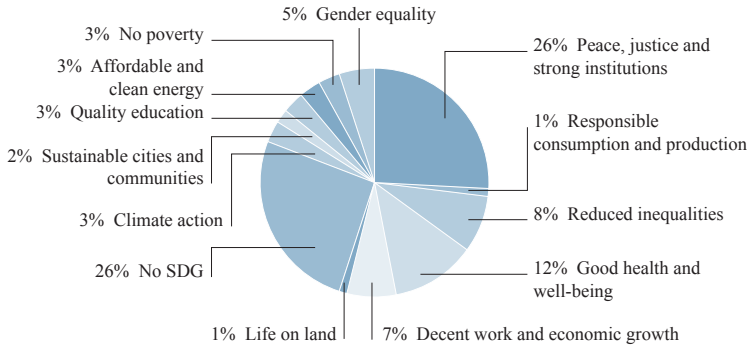f. Information from other media.
g. News agency information.

All the sources in each news item were counted, usually observing several sources from different categories in the same piece.

RESULTS

Predominance of social and environmental issues

Observing the four media as a whole has revealed that social and environmental issues (related to the SDGs) represent 74% of the total. Of these, the most frequent topics are those related to Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. In second place, we find those related to Good Health and Well-Being. Those linked to the Reduction of Inequalities; Decent Work and Economic Growth; and Gender Equality are third. Following those, we find No Poverty; Affordable and Clean Energy; Quality Education; and Climate Action (see Figure 1).

5% Gender equality
3% No poverty
3% Affordable and clean energy
3% Quality education
2% Sustainable cities and communities
3% Climate action
26% No SDG
1% Life on land
26% Peace, justice and strong institutions
1% Responsible consumption and production
8% Reduced inequalities
12% Good health and well-being
7% Decent work and economic growth

** Those SDGs with a presence of less than 1% have not been included in the figure.
Source: The authors.

In the four media studied, social and environmental issues prevail, although their weight with respect to other issues differs depending on the case. Thus, in *5W* (90%) and *El Salto* (83%) they fully dominate the agenda, while in *La Marea* (63.6%) and *Crític* (52.8%) their prevalence is lower.

Regarding the most published social topics, there is a predominance of issues related to Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions: *La Marea* (46.4%), *Crític* (43.2%), *5W* (38.8%) and *El Salto* (28.8%).

In second position, the most addressed topics differ from one media to another. Good Health and Well-Being stand out in the cases of *El Salto* (17.6%) and *La Marea* (12.5%), while in *Crític* this position is held by Gender Equality (13.5%), and in *5W* by Reduced Inequalities (22.2%).

In third position is Decent Work and Economic Growth in *El Salto* (13%), Reduced Inequalities in *La Marea* (10.6%), and Good Health and Well-Being in *Crític* (10.8%) and *5W* (16.6%).

It can be observed that during the analyzed period there are topics and issues that interest the four media, although they are not predominant

in all cases. Thus, in addition to Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, they all publish news pieces related to Health, Affordable and Clean Energy, Reduced Inequalities and Climate Action. In this sense, it is noteworthy that *El Salto* dedicates 17.6% of its information to Health and *5W* 22.2% to Reduced Inequalities. The three media show similar results in Affordable and Clean Energy (between 2.7% and 5.5%) and Climate Action (normally between margins of 2.7% and 8.1%).

There are issues in common, at least in three of the four media: No Poverty (*El Salto*, *La Marea* and *5W*), Quality Education (*El Salto*, *La Marea* and *Crític*), Gender Equality (*El Salto*, *La Marea* and *Crític*), Sustainable Cities and Communities (*El Salto*, *Crític* and *5W*), and Responsible Consumption and Production (*El Salto*, *La Marea* and *Crític*), with margins between 1.8% and 5.5% depending on the case.

As for non-social topics, the most frequently addressed issues are fundamentally political, especially national topics such as electoral processes and the extreme right, and quite far behind, international politics and culture.

The results coincide with the questionnaire responses, in which *El Salto* states its social nature and the predominance of this approach in its contents. *La Marea* is in line with this same philosophy, and whose interest in these issues has led to the creation of the project *Apuntes de Clase* and the specialized media on climate crisis, *Climática*. In the case of *Crític*, they state that climate and feminism are two of their main sections, along with others such as politics, economy, world and social issues. However, they have recently revealed that they are devoting a great deal of content to the climate emergency, the energy crisis and degrowth as an option for deterring social and economic collapse. They have also produced digital dossiers on energy and mobility. As for *5W*, it explains that its focus is currently more social.

Preponderance of expert and primary sources, and the reporter as direct witness

Regarding the sources used, in the four analyzed media, sources actively searched for by the journalist predominate, including experts, primary sources and those based on the journalist's own experience as a

direct witness. This corresponds to what was found in the questionnaires, where the four media reveal a predominant use of these own and expert sources.

Of all the sources, the primary ones are the most commonly used in the analyzed media, except for *5W*, where information based on the experience of the reporter as a direct witness prevails. We observe that in *Crític* frequent requests for access to information are made to official organizations. This use of data journalism based on the right of access to public information has not been computed as an institutional source but is instead included in primary sources. This is because the initiative comes from the media, with the institutional source being obliged to provide information by request. Expert sources are mostly used in *5W*.

It is noteworthy how in three of the cases (*El Salto*, *La Marea* and *Crític*) the journalist is rarely used as a direct witness, a practice that changes in the case of *5W*, where the reporter is a direct witness to the events in 32.5% of the cases.

Regarding institutional sources, they oscillate between 9.3% in *5W*, 18.9% in *Crític*, 24.3% for *El Salto*, and 29.8% in *La Marea*.

Content generated by citizen groups and users exceeds 20% in *El Salto* and *La Marea*, 12% in *Crític* and is scarce in 5W. As for news based on information from other media, it ranges between 3.5% (*El Salto*) and 8.6% (*La Marea* and *Crític*). Finally, hardly any content based on information from news agencies is observed.

Government sources stand out among institutional sources

As for the most used institutional sources (listed in Table 2), government sources predominate, with the exception of *Crític*, which stands out for relying on "Other organizations".

Thus, *El Salto* basically uses government sources (41.3%) and also turns to other national and international organizations such as ombudsman offices, universities, police departments, CIS (the Sociological Research Center),the EPA (Active Population Survey-Encuesta de Población Activa), the European Central Bank, public prosecutor offices, and the UN (35.1%).

At the same time, *La Marea* uses government sources first (40.6%), followed by political sources (30.5%) and other organizations (28.8%)

TABLE 1

TOTAL USE OF SOURCES

	N total sources	Expert	Primary	Direct Witness	Institutional	Citizen groups and users	Other media	News agencies
El Salto	716	50 (6.9%)	270 (37.7%)	29 (4.1%)	174 (24.3%)	163 (22.7%)	25 (3.5%)	5 (0.7%)
La Marea	198	16 (8.1%)	54 (27.3%)	2 (1.0%)	59 (29.8%)	48 (24.2%)	17 (8.6%)	2 (1.0%)
Crític	116	16 (13.8%)	51 (43.9%)	2 (1.7%)	22 (18.9%)	15 (12.8%)	10 (8.6%)	0
5W	43	9 (20.9%)	13 (30.2%)	14 (32.5%)	4 (9.3%)	1 (2.3%)	2 (4.6%)	0

Source: The authors.

TABLE 2

TYPES OF INSTITUTIONAL SOURCES USED

	Total Institutional sources	Governmental	Political	Other organizations
El Salto	174	72 (41.3%)	41 (23.5%)	61 (35.1%)
La Marea	59	24 (40.6%)	18 (30.5%)	17 (28.8%)
Crític	22	5 (22.7%)	3 (13.6%)	14 (63.6%)
5W	4	4 (100%)	0	0

Source: The authors.

such as universities, public prosecutor offices, the courts, CIS, police departments, and the UN.

In the case of *Crític*, other organizations (63.6%) such as police departments, CIS, CEOs, universities, and the World Economic Forum are especially consulted. Lastly, *5W* uses very few institutional sources and all of them are governmental.

Information from citizen groups, user-generated content and news agencies

In these types of news pieces (listed in Table 3), the role of citizen groups prevails over that of individual users. In first place for this type of practice is *El Salto*, which cites neighborhood associations, immigrant groups, environmental groups, student movements, feminist groups, tenants' unions, parent associations, support groups for imprisoned women, groups for the defense of public health and of the LGTBIQ collective. Meanwhile, *La Marea* also gives voice to citizen groups such as unions, student councils and patient associations. There is less use of this type of sources in *Crític* and especially in *5W*.

We observe that it is also common for these media to rely on NGOs, among which Greenpeace, Amnesty International, Friends of the Earth, Oxfam, Acnur and Doctors without Borders can be highlighted. Concern for issues related to migrations also leads to habitual reference to the Refugee Aid Commission, the International Organization for Migration and the Spanish Association for Refugee Aid.

Regarding user-generated contents (UGC), they range between 0 (in the case of *5W*) and 17.2% in *El Salto*. It can be observed that in some news pieces it specifies that they have been produced "with the collaboration of" various NGOs, the Platform against the Vulture Funds, Ecologists in Action, jurists, political analysts and university professors, among others. In the case of *Crític*, news pieces elaborated "with the support" of official organizations such as the Catalan Agency for Development Cooperation of the Generalitat, the National Youth Council of Catalonia or Barcelona City Council have also been detected.

TABLE 3

CITIZEN GROUP OR USER-GENERATED CONTENT

	Total	Citizen groups	NGOs	Users	Others
El Salto	163	118 (72.4%)	17 (10.4%)	28 (17.2%)	0
La Marea	48	26 (54.1%)	13 (27.1%)	4 (8.3)	5 (10.4%)
Crític	15	8 (53.3%)	5 (33.3%)	1 (6.6%)	1 (6.6%)
5W	1	0	0	0	1 (100%)

Source: The authors.

The results of the content analysis coincided with the information supplied by the media themselves in the questionnaires, because while *El Salto* states that it is open to collaborations of all kinds and publishes texts from citizens, with a members' blog, *5W* states that it does not promote this type of practice, confirming the data obtained in the content analysis. On the other hand, *La Marea* explains that this is not their main content, although this media has a space called "Your articles", featuring some opinion articles from citizens. They also try to organize online meetings with readers. In the case of *Crític*, surveys are sent periodically to the 1 600 paying subscribers to find out their opinion about what has been published and what they would like to see published in the future.

The practically null reference to news agencies is noteworthy, although it does occur in some cases with very specific agencies, as with *El Salto*, where news agency information usually comes from small agencies such as Equipe Media Sahara (a Western Sahara press agency).

References to other media and collaborative practices
Collaborative practices among the media analyzed are noteworthy, either through producing news pieces together, as happens with *Crític*

and *La Marea*, or publishing information produced by other media, referring to web pages, journalistic reports and investigations, as *El Salto* does with information from the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. Collaborations by the same journalists are also shared, as occasionally happens in *La Marea* and *Crític*, media outlets that occasionally publish the same opinion articles.

This type of collaborative practices, chiefly with similar media, is also reflected in the responses to the questionnaires, where *El Salto* highlights that throughout its history they have collaborated with dozens of media and is currently engaged in a plan with *La Marea* to allow for joint production in some special editions. At the same time, *La Marea* also regularly shares content with media such as *Catalunya Plural* or *Sentit Crític*. In addition, they have an alliance with *Pikara Magazine* and *El Salto* to distribute content three times a week. In a similar vein, the alliance they have with *El Salto* for joint subscriptions is worthy of note, "precisely to support independent journalism and shake hands with related media". Very active in this sense is *Crític*, which maintains channels of permanent collaboration with media such as *La Marea*, translating articles into Catalan and Spanish, respectively. They also collaborate with *La Directa*, publishing joint interviews and reports, and sporadic collaborations with *Alternativas Económicas*, *Público* and *5W*. In the case of *5W*, although it is not on a regular basis, it does so when its resources permit and chiefly with alternative media. In addition, *El Salto*, *La Marea* and *Crític* are part of the Independent Media Platform. "Independent" is precisely the term that they choose to identify with, as opposed to "alternative", as pointed out in the responses to the questionnaire from *Crític*: "We don't like to call ourselves alternative media, because that means being alternative to something established and normative. We define ourselves as independent, so the others become dependent on the economic and political powers".

Discussion and conclusions

Social and environmental issues occupy a very prominent part of the agendas of the four media analyzed, confirming the first hypothesis. This supports Downing's (2002) affirmations that these media are

related to social transformation projects, as well as observations from Jarvis (2015) when considering that they are fundamentally conceived as a public service. It is also in line with the assessments of Barranquero Carretero and Candón-Mena (2021) who noted that these media are characterized, among other aspects, by their aim to promote democracy, human rights and other ideals of social and environmental justice.

Of the four outlets, *Crític* has the lowest percentage of social issues on its agenda (52.8%). However, we should bear in mind that the issues addressed by this media have likely been conditioned to a great extent by the period analyzed, coinciding with the Catalan regional elections on February 14, 2021. This resulted in an increase in information about politics and elections to the detriment of other issues. In this sense, the results observed in *El Salto*, *La Marea* and *5W*, have led us to conclude that social and environmental issues occupy between 63% and 90% of the agendas examined.

Within these topics, and if we look at the cataloguing according to the SDGs, not all of them are addressed equally. The most present issue is in regard to Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, which occupies first place in the four media. Information on Good Health and Well-Being, frequently related to the Covid-19 pandemic, and Reduced Inequalities, are also in a prominent position in the studied media agendas.

Regarding the sources used, the second hypothesis is confirmed upon observing that the media analyzed are based mainly on sources resulting from the journalist's own initiative, whether expert or primary ones. Nevertheless, there are few news stories covered by the reporter as a direct witness, with the exception of *5W*, where this practice is common. This is possibly due to its profile as a media outlet dedicated to investigative journalism and highly focused on international affairs, with collaborators reporting from various countries.

The study of sources also reveals a distancing from institutional sources, both governmental and political, and practically non-existent news agency information, which also differentiates them from the practices of traditional media pointed out by Pérez Curiel et al. (2015), Casero Ripollés and López Rabadán (2016), Alonso González (2016) and Mayoral (2018). However, among the institutional sources, the governmental ones still predominate.

It is also observed that they consider other types of alternative sources such as citizen groups and movements, giving voice to social problems and issues, in line with observations by Downing (2002).

As for user-generated contents, they are also present, although with less weight and unevenly so depending on each case. Among the media studied, the most noteworthy in this regard is *El Salto*.

Regarding collaborative practices, the third hypothesis is confirmed, being common in the cases of *El Salto*, *La Marea* and *Crític* for developing editorial content, publishing translated articles, promoting joint subscriptions with other related media, and forming part of the Independent Media Platform. It is precisely these media who state that they prefer to define themselves as "independent" instead of employing the term "alternative".

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