

Reinventing travel journalism in the digital age: Quality, specialization, technology, and a unique perspective

Reinvención del periodismo de viajes en la era digital: Calidad, especialización, tecnología y mirada única

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32870/cys.v2022.8250>

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This article analyzes the transformation of travel journalism in the digital age, based on 22 in-depth interviews with Spanish and Russian professionals. The research delves into the evolution of this type of journalism with regard to the emergence of blogs in the age of low-cost tourism. The main challenges of travel journalism include narrative quality with a unique perspective, specialization, and the integration of digital tools.

KEYWORDS: Travel journalism, evolution, digital age, Russia, Spain.

Este artículo analiza la transformación del periodismo de viajes en la era digital, a partir de 22 entrevistas en profundidad a profesionales españoles y rusos. La investigación muestra la evolución de esta modalidad periodística ante la irrupción de los blogs y el turismo low cost. La calidad narrativa y la mirada única sobre los destinos, la especialización y la integración de nuevas herramientas digitales constituyen la apuesta clave de la crónica de viajes.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Periodismo de viajes, evolución, era digital, Rusia, España.

Este artigo analisa a transformação do jornalismo de viagens na era digital, a partir de 22 entrevistas em profundidade com profissionais espanhóis e russos. A pesquisa mostra a evolução dessa modalidade jornalística diante do surgimento dos blogs e do turismo de baixo custo. A qualidade narrativa e o olhar único sobre os destinos, a especialização e a integração de novos digitais constituem a aposta chave da crônica de viagem.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Jornalismo de viagens, evolução, era digital, Rússia, Espanha.

How to cite:

Lekant, M. & Palau-Sampio, D. (2022). Reinventing travel journalism in the digital age: Quality, specialization, technology, and a unique perspective. *Comunicación y Sociedad*, e8250. <https://doi.org/10.32870/cys.v2022.8250>

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Submitted: 08/01/21. Accepted: 03/08/22. Published: 08/24/22.

INTRODUCTION

Travel writing has undergone a profound evolution from ancient times to the present (Belenguer, 2002), as this genre is now immersed in a technological transformation with new challenges and opportunities. So much so that the media dedicated to travel journalism are increasingly complex, diverse, international, and fragmented, now more than ever (Fürsich & Kavoori, 2014). To a large extent, travel journalism has migrated to the Internet over the last decade, with a flourishing of miscellaneous, free content that does not always meet the standards of journalistic quality.

One might consider travel writing to run parallel to the history of civilization, due to the need to travel and “the human desire to involve others in their own experiences” (Rivas Nieto, 2006, p. 63). However, a story that was more journalistic in style did not appear until the end of the 19th century, when the narration became the purpose of the trip (Revenko, 2016), and the story itself became a regular and popular feature of the press (Belenguer, 2002; Luchinskaya, 2009). In this context, the first magazines specializing in the topic of travel were born. However, it was not until the 20th century that this field was consolidated, due to the development of tourism after the Second World War, which was driven by the growing wealth of society, the reduction of working hours, and advances in the development of transport and communication (Pirolli, 2014). In 2019, there were 1.5 billion international arrivals, and the tourism sector accounted for 3% of global GDP (World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2020).

The opportunities provided by the Internet have not only changed information consumption habits, but have also made it possible to choose self-planning when organizing trips, and to share experiences through forums, specialized blogs and social networks, which has blurred the border between professional and amateur journalism. Moreover, digitization has affected the work of travel journalists as well. On the one hand, it has made many tasks easier and faster and, conversely, it has created new demands for the profession in the Web 2.0 era.

Within this context of change, in a sector where economic and cultural aspects converge, it is vital to analyze the way in which travel journalism is reinventing itself in the age of digital technology. Based on in-depth interviews with journalists from Spain and Russia, this article investigates how travel journalism has been transformed in order to face multiple challenges, which range from magazines having to adapt to competition from the digital world, to the evolution of design and content, as well as the hybridization of models with the emergence of travel blogs and publications on social networks (Pirolli, 2018).

SPECIALIZED TRAVEL JOURNALISM

Travel journalism has received scant attention in the academic world until just recently (Belenguer, 2002; Hanusch, 2010; Pirolli, 2017; Pokazanyeva, 2013), despite the growing interest in travel by society and the role of the media in providing information about potential destinations (Hanusch & Fürsich, 2014), as well as the proliferation of platforms for its transmission (Fürsich & Kavoori, 2014), not to mention the digital transformation. Despite its link to travel literature and the tourism sector, travel journalism differs from the former due to its inclination for fact-checking, accuracy, reliability, and ethical conduct (Hanusch & Fürsich, 2014). At the same time, travel journalism puts distance between itself and the tourist press, as the former often contains an element of social protest (Belenguer, 1999). In fact, while the purpose of touristic texts includes informing, persuading and directing (Calvi & Bonomi, 2008), the “essence” of travel journalism is “informing, educating and entertaining” (Grómová & Shuliak, 2015, p. 147).

Belenguer defends the classification of travel journalism as a specialization based on its historical background, professional specificity, and the variety of platforms available for its publication, as well as the number of genres by which it can be addressed (Belenguer, 2002). Both Krivtsov (2017) and González-Rivera (2019) reject the idea that travel journalism is located at the crossroads of information and entertainment (Hanusch, 2010). González-Rivera (2019) emphatically describes it as the “antithesis” of advertising (p. 225). Based on

these approaches, travel journalism can be defined as a journalistic specialization with a long tradition, interpreted through different genres and multiple channels, which fulfills a wide range of objectives. Moss (2008) argues that the best travel stories are an archetype of journalism, as they have the ability to entertain, educate, and illuminate.

Transformation as a result of digitization

Digitization is seen as the most important factor in the transformation of travel journalism, offering new opportunities and challenges: immediacy, ubiquity, multimedia capability, personalization, interactivity, hypertext narratives, encyclopedic capacity, and virtuality (Tejedor & Larrondo, 2008, p. 136). In addition to hypertext, multimedia, and interactive options, the new technologies have also influenced the habits of readers, who now prioritize faster access, information that is shorter and more visual, a diversity of sources compared to traditional media, and who also want to participate in the communication process (Ulanova, 2014). In this context, the media have to deal with a lack of interest from the audience (Paranko, 2016), who are now able to obtain quality information quickly and at no cost (Pirolli, 2014). This implies a greater responsibility on the part of journalists to be content curators who are responsible for offering verified, contrasted information, which helps readers guide themselves among the information “chaos” (Tejedor, 2012).

The new technologies have broken the traditional monopoly of content production and distribution (Pirolli, 2014; Ulanova, 2014). The ability of Web 2.0, or the social web (O’Reilly, 2005) to allow the generation and sharing of content allows users and travelers to plan trips, share their experiences instantly with a wide audience, and react to stories published by others (Blanco, 2013). The impact of the social web on the tourism industry (Miguéns et al., 2008) has influenced the choice of other consumers as well (Hidalgo et al., 2014), and it has turned travelers into “co-creators and users” before, during, and after a trip (Dediu, 2016). Tejedor and Larrondo define travel-oriented cyber journalism as a specialization “that encompasses a travel story that might be produced by unknown citizens” (2008, p. 138).

The blog is the most prominent travel platform within Web 2.0, due to its extension, ease of use, autonomy, and proximity to the journalistic

environment. As a result, content created by users has become a key source of information for others (Chen et al., 2014), which has had a strong impact on their decisions (Lozanov, 2018). Added to these factors is the influence on purchase decisions that represent a significant volume of spending (Ting et al., 2014). The direct intervention of travelers in the communicative process erodes the exclusive role of the expert (Calvi, 2010) and raises the question of the status of the travel blogger compared to the travel journalist, two concepts with increasingly blurred borders (Goethals, 2013). Authors such as Pokazanyeva warn of the risk of equating bloggers with professional journalists, the latter of which have education and experience, stressing that the professional travel journalist follows the journalistic principles of providing information, following ethical standards, and being responsible for the veracity of facts (Pokazanyeva, 2015). The repercussions of giving erroneous information may be less damaging for bloggers, although they are not immune in terms of reputation or comments (Pirolli, 2014).

In any case, amateur travel reporters have shaken the media's status as the only source of information (Ulanova, 2014), representing the greatest challenge for travel journalism as a profession, according to Hanusch and Fürsich (2014). In fact, with the rise of free online content, the market for traditional travel magazines has diminished over the last decade. The dual crisis involving both the financial realm and business model affecting the media has not only caused the closure of some magazines, but has also led traditional magazines to explore opportunities offered by the Web, such as digital versions of their periodicals (García Marín, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

The objective of this research is to explore the changes experienced by travel journalism in the digital age from the viewpoint of professionals. For this purpose, we have opted for in-depth, semi-structured interviews with leading Spanish and Russian specialists. This methodology, which is associated with the qualitative research paradigm (Benny & Hughes, 1956), has demonstrated its usefulness in the field of social sciences (Lucas, 2014), as it allows one to take advantage of the knowledge

and professional experience of journalists through interaction with the researcher (Brinkmann, 2014; Taylor & Bogdan, 1992). The sample is composed of 22 travel journalists from Spain (n=12) and Russia (n=10), with diverse profiles, including magazine editors and veteran professionals who have experience in traditional media, digital platforms, and the academic field (see Table 1).

These two countries were selected due to their diverse status on the world tourism stage, as Spain is the second most visited destination and Russia is the seventh biggest originating market (UNWTO, 2020). Other selection factors include the development of this type of journalism associated with the arrival of democracy and the evolution of capitalism (Fletcher, 2011). Thus, this journalistic style has gained momentum in Spain from the 1970s onward, after its dictatorship expired (Belenguer, 2002), while in Russia it has gained strength since 1990 after the fall of the Soviet regime, with the emergence of a wide variety of travel magazines (Rostovskaia, 2012).

TABLE 1
INTERVIEWS WITH JOURNALISTS

	Name	Year	Identification
Spain	Luis Pancorbo	2016	Author of books, essays and documentaries, collaborator in magazines.
	Ana Puértolas	2016	Former director of RBA Revistas, of <i>Viajar</i> magazine, responsible for the travel section of <i>El País</i> and editorial adviser to <i>Altair</i> .
	Rosa M. Calaf	2016	Journalist with 40 years of experience and 178 visited countries.
	Paco Nadal	2017	Travel journalist, collaborates in <i>El Viajero (El País)</i> , and blogger.
	Mariano López	2017	Director of <i>Viajar</i> magazine since 1996.
	Luis Uribarri	2017	Editor-in-chief of <i>Viajar</i> since 2004.
	Sara Acosta	2017	Responsible for the website and social media of <i>Viajar</i> since 2009.

	Name	Year	Identification
Spain	Mariano Belenguer	2017	Journalist, founder of <i>periodismodeviajes.org</i> and professor at the University of Seville.
	Pep Bernadas	2018	Editor of <i>Altair</i> magazine.
	Josan Ruiz	2018	Director of <i>National Geographic Travel</i> magazine.
	Pere Ortín	2018	Director of <i>Altair</i> magazine since 1996.
	Santiago Tejedor	2019	Journalist, co-director of Master's Degree in Travel Journalism (UAB).
	Olga Yakovina	2018	Editor-in-chief of <i>National Geographic Traveler</i> since 2016.
Russia	Nelli Konstantinova	2018	Former editor-in-chief of <i>Condé Nast Traveler Russia</i> . In 2014, she launched the travel website <i>travelinsider.ru</i> , and she also collaborates with several magazines.
	Anna Chérnikova	2018	After several positions in <i>Vokrug Sveta</i> magazine, she is now the editor-in-chief of <i>L'Officiel Voyage Russia</i> .
	Svetlana Golovatiuk	2018	General director of the publishing house <i>Vokrug Sveta</i> .
	Grigori Kubatián	2018	Member of the Russian Geographical Society, author of two books and contributor to several magazines.
	Serguéi Aprésov	2018	TV host, editor-in-chief of <i>Vokrug Sveta</i> since 2016.
	Maxim Popov	2018	Editor-in-chief of <i>Business Traveller</i> magazine.
	Dmitri Telnov	2019	Travel journalist, photographer, presenter of a travel program on the radio.
	Olga Rastegáyeva	2019	Collaborator in <i>Aeroflot</i> , <i>L'Officiel Voyage</i> and <i>NG Traveler</i> magazines. In 2014, she launched <i>Orange Traveler</i> blog.
Alexánder Zhelezniak	2019	Editor-in-chief of <i>National Geographic Traveler</i> (2008-2015).	

Source: The authors.

With an average duration of 90 minutes, the interviews were conducted in-person and online. The goal was to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What advantages and challenges does digitization pose for travel journalism?
- 2) How has it influenced the level of quality and the kinds of topics addressed in Spain and Russia?
- 3) How have magazines adapted to the competition from travel blogs?
- 4) What requirements must be fulfilled by the travel journalist 2.0?

RESULTS

Advantages and challenges of digitization

The journalists interviewed acknowledge the advantages of digitization, but are mostly critical of the consequences in some cases. Pancorbo highlights the possibility of sending reports and photographs instantly, while questioning the need for such speed in travel journalism: “So much immediacy, for what?” As Calaf warns, instead of “having technology at the service of journalism”, nowadays “journalism is being put at the service of technology”. As pointed out by interviewees Belenguer and Nadal, digitization has “democratized” access to travel journalism, especially for young professionals, thanks to the development of an infrastructure that opens up new destinations, accessibility to travel, photography and video technology, and services such as online translators, according to Kubatian.

Nadal is convinced that travel journalism is “infinitely better now”, since “there have never been so many options for telling stories”. Tejedor emphasizes the opportunity to carry out “much better documentation” on the ground, as well as to narrate in multimedia, crossmedia, and transmedia formats. This journalist and researcher doubts that we read on screen less than on paper. The audience just “reads in a different way, and behaves differently”, a factor that encourages reflection and invites us to “offer content that adapts to it”. Chérnikova argues that readers consume diverse information “at a very high speed” from various sources (text, video, photos, and audio). Therefore, in order to

keep the magazines afloat, access options must be diversified instead of reducing the amount of information. Rastegáyeva stresses that young people today “are a generation who are more visual than an information consumer”, and they navigate “through Instagram images”, so reporters have to adapt to this change.

Bernadas admits that the Internet is a “great” tool, while highlighting that “digital products related to the world of travel have proliferated exorbitantly”. He warns of “a lot of digital garbage” with “unprofessional texts and photographs”, which hinders the profitability of quality digital products. “In this context, you can write the most incredible article, but it is very likely to be lost among all this stuff, because they just won’t find it”, Kubatián emphasizes.

Travel journalism in Spain and Russia: quality, topics, and trends

Professionals from Spain and Russia believe that the literary quality of journalistic travel texts has decreased. Nadal believes this is due to the fact that the public does not appreciate quality writing: “They don’t want to read four pages: they want a good photo and a short text”, the journalist argues.

Puértolas asserts that travel journalism is moving away from its literary side, while López attributes this trend to the influence of the Internet, with shorter texts, expanded practical guides that are transferred to the web, and a “less literary, more direct, less informative” style. Yakovina indicates that the Internet “sets a completely different rhythm of information consumption”. “Our texts have become much more dynamic: a person should be able to immediately immerse herself in the action, in some details”, the journalist emphasizes. Zhelezniak believes that “long, complicated texts” are acceptable, but with limits. In other words, “you have to clearly understand” how much information can be included, and “where it is necessary to stop”. In this regard, Aprésov confirms that the quality of texts “is decreasing” and the audience “is starting to be led by the simplified, practical style of bloggers”.

One of the main influences can be seen in the headlines, which is linked to the way in which readers search for information. While in the past, headlines were chosen according to the rules of good journalism, yet now it is done “so that Google can find you”, as Nadal points out.

Another example, according to this journalist, is *clickbait* headlines, designed to create expectations and compel readers to go in. Kubatián speaks of a “headline war”, where the important thing “is to make people click”, with lists or recommendations that have a “categorical” tone, as indicated by Konstantínova.

Contrary to this popular trend toward reducing links to literature and adapting to Internet language, Chérnikova praises the literary quality of the articles and authors in her magazine. Likewise, Telnov attests that he does not adapt the texts in his magazine, because the consumer buys it to read it, and she or he “is willing to make an effort”. Rastegáyeva points out that these new canons apply more to digital journalism, while indicating that few magazine publications prefer “higher quality reports”.

The Internet and the development of tourism have influenced the topics and destinations to which the magazines dedicate their reports, although they continue to focus on classic destinations, according to interviewees from both countries. Ruiz points out that both, now and in the past, trips have to be, and have had to be, “doable”, and have focused on certain “iconic places on the planet”.

An important factor in the selection of destinations is the infrastructure, especially the airlines, as Uribarri explains. Thus, he points out that low-cost airlines have opened up new destinations, including many cities “that no one knew” before, which must be added to the mix. On the other hand, “if they suddenly stop flying to a certain destination, it is more difficult to recommend it”. In addition to “small places that people are discovering little by little”, his magazine continues to pay attention to “classic destinations”, exotic places, and adventure trips. Chérnikova confirms that they are trying to include “all destinations” in each issue of *L’Officiel Voyage*, in order to make it “multidirectional”, and she recognizes “the difficulty of talking about famous places in a different way, or in other words, finding an angle to make it look different”. Yakovina shares this idea, explaining that if they write about a common destination, they choose to include less obvious information, although *National Geographic Traveler* has not abandoned classic themes.

Popov states that his magazine focuses on providing practical information that is difficult to find elsewhere, and he adds that “each

text has its own style, its own role, and its own task". For her part, Rastegáyeva emphasizes that the situation in Russia and its relationship with other countries is a factor that influences the topics of the travel media. "Luxury content now annoys many" readers, and themes about the United States "have been removed from all print magazines" in Russia: "We don't write about it now: it's an unspoken order, but no one wants to upset anyone with such content", Rastegáyeva argues.

Generally speaking, the interviewees perceive a less in-depth, more commercial approach in current travel journalism, which is a style that "loses its quality" and independence. Nadal points out trips paid for by tourist offices or interested companies. Russian journalists share the criticism of having too close a relationship with the tourism industry. Telnov explains that "press tours do not help" the profession, because "the journalist must write what the company that organizes the trip will like, so journalism has turned into public relations". Zhelezniak conclusively maintains that "travel journalism in Russia is nearly non-existent", and that very few people are capable of writing quality texts.

Tejedor believes it has fallen "into a very homogenizing dynamic", with the "same vision of the same places full of clichés and stereotypes". Ortín argues that the so-called "travel journalism" has been "hijacked by the tourism industry" and has become a tool of "pseudo-advertising promotion", which implies a loss of respect for readers. He underscores the fact that *Altair* has adhered to "deontology and journalistic ethics", and summarizes the magazine's credo as "culture from travel, and chronicles from journalism", in order to "tell the attractive complexity of the planet". Belenguer notes a trend toward "superficial journalism" in order "to sell tourist destinations", a tendency that is even more pronounced in the digital world, although he points out that journalism involving "serious, in-depth, high-quality reporting" has survived, which is an idea shared by Puértolas.

Competition with travel blogs and the adaptation of magazines

The emergence of blogs has marked a turning point in travel journalism. Most of the criticism points to the lack of professionalism and low quality of the content, as asserted by Chérnikova. "There is a lot of desire, interest and goodwill, but a terrible lack of knowledge", Ortín

says. López doubts the potential of bloggers without a journalistic background, an opinion shared by Belenguer, who expresses that a travel blog can serve as a “business card”, yet it is not a journalistic product. In the opinion of Popov and Yakovina, it is “a completely different genre”.

The scope of the blog is limited to a personal format which, on occasion, is far from the requirements of journalism, even when carried out by professionals: “They tell their personal battles, and that’s not journalism”, Belenguer emphasizes, while stressing that journalists “have to tell what happens to others”, not what happens to themselves. Uribarri points out that the absence of verified information is the biggest problem with blogs, a reality that Tejedor confirms by explaining that although the information they provide may be “valid” and interesting, “it does not have the essence of a journalistic commitment”. Similarly, Yakovina indicates that a blogger has “less responsibility than a print magazine” and does not pay as much attention to information verification. Popov points out the multiple errors that are made due to this reason. Pancorbo summarizes his point of view with an analogy: “Do you want to be operated on by a healer with the laying on of hands or by an expert surgeon in a hospital with good conditions?”

Calaf warns of “a lot of toxic information”, and of travel blogs influenced “by advertising and commercial interests”. Regarding the criticism of paid posts and sponsored trips, Nadal believes that bloggers “do more or less the same as magazines have always done”, and believes “it is a problem of the profession in general, and not of the Internet”. In fact, he believes that blogs include “much more criticism and much more personal reasoning than could have been included on paper in the past”. “Even though they are not completely free, there are more possibilities to say what they think”, he says. Rastegayeva, who is also a journalist and blogger, agrees that both styles represent travel journalism, although a blog always has a “more author-centered” approach and language, while magazines “adhere to the classic canons of journalism”. Nadal attributes the criticism of blogs to corporatism: “Whoever says that a blog is not travel journalism, or is not worthy of the name, has not understood anything”. “We sell chronicles, not paper”, and we have to be “where people communicate”.

Both Golovatiuk and Aprésov recognize the competition and the “threat” that blogs pose to magazines, although the former believes that major advertisers are continuing to work with large publishers. Both Russian and Spanish journalists have the same view regarding the situation of traditional travel magazines. López has made a tally of “several crises”, including the economic one and the one caused by the Internet. Ruiz underscores a generational change as well: “Young people read magazines less”. Popov confirms that the Internet has “devoured” all but the largest, most veteran magazines, and predicts that the market may shrink even more as advertisers focus on digital platforms.

Added to the difficulties above are those resulting from the political situation in Russia. Telnov mentions that sanctions following the Ukrainian crisis have caused the closure of publications, while Golovatiuk points out the legal prohibition of alcohol and tobacco advertising in magazines, as well as the closure of sales points.

As for the future of travel publications in print, Pancorbo hopes that “paper will not be completely cornered, because it is irreplaceable”. He argues that for this not to happen, the paper format has to attract readers “by increasing its quality”. Puértolas argues that traditional magazines can “combine perfectly” and coexist with the information offered by the Internet, if they assume that their role is not that of a “practical guide”, but rather of reading. Belenguer believes that “the smartest thing” that magazines can do is to adapt to the moment and make a product that “is partly present in the paper world, and partly located in the digital world”.

Tejedor advocates “searching for new strategies” and reflecting on format type, a business model that works, and the audience. The great challenge, according to this journalist, is “to experiment with new formats for reporting about trips, which must be interactive, horizontal, and dialogic; not only multimedia, but transmedia as well”. From the business model perspective, and “contrary to the gratuity of the Internet, which does not work”, we must think of “paid or hybrid formulas”, and “rethink the product to adapt to the way users approach it”. This researcher holds the view that a *boutique* product, “either by the cost of the material, or by the type of content, is the product that

works”. Nadal predicts that paper magazines will continue to exist “as a niche, as one more thing among a select group”, and he suggests choosing “high quality, knowing that they will have a small but very loyal audience”, an opinion shared by Konstantínova, who proposes the idea of the magazine as a luxury item that is “collectible, and something you can give to someone else”.

Chérnikova mentions “the aesthetic pleasure of reading” with regard to a printed text as a potential advantage over the Internet. Yakovina is optimistic about the survival of onboard magazines. Moreover, Rastegáyeva and Chérnikova agree that an airplane “is the only place where magazines are actually read”, at least as long as people “are forbidden to use their mobile phones during the flight”, Popov notes. The most pessimistic voices allude to the fact that magazines continue to exist “for older people”, as pointed out by Telnov, while Aprésov considers that “the future belongs to electronic media, both free and paid”.

The profile of the travel journalist 2.0

The proliferation of the Internet and technology has greatly changed the profile of the travel journalist 2.0. The first aspect to highlight is freelance work, which has facilitated access to this profession, as asserted by Nadal. “We are in a very rich scenario, with many journalists who have found a way to build, prepare and sell their stories related to trips”, says Tejedor. Both Spanish and Russian interviewees confirm that “all magazines” combine regular collaborations with new voices (Yakovina). They also highlight the commitment to “incorporate local people”. “Rather than send a person to do a report, it’s easier for you to contact someone in China who will write the report for you”, López explains. Ortín links the incorporation of local voices with the concept of “decoloniality”, since “the best-told story is the story of an *insider*”, and you have to “propose a dialogue to know the world”. Chérnikova confirms that *L’Officiel Voyage* works “a lot” with insiders, but clarifies that they “act somewhat like informants, or as sources of information” for the authors, because “the ability to narrate is rare”.

The second key point for the new generations is digital excellence, as they are skilled in the use of these tools, yet without forgetting “analog,

starting with a paper book, languages, culture, knowing how to write and refine, and the gift of communication”, as Pancorbo points out. In this regard, Nadal insists that while maintaining the usual requirement (“write well and know how to tell stories”), another of the great changes is multi-functionality. “You have to know how to use all the tools: a bit of video, photos, software; how to handle the tools; how to address the public; and you have to know the tricks of social networks. Now you are a one-man or one-woman show”. However, continues Nadal, along with this multidisciplinary requirement, the journalist has to be an “ultra-specialist” in a subject, which turns the travel freelance writer into “a kind of Superman”, states Belenguer.

Chérnikova adds that “a good journalist is also a good writer; he knows how to interview and ask the right questions, speaks different languages, and has other talents and abilities”. In addition, Kubatián points out that the modern economic system forces him or her to become a private entrepreneur, so “a journalist cannot be just a journalist”, but has to find ways to be a vendor of his or her product, and be “a seller, along with many other professions”.

Thirdly, the journalist’s viewpoint and capacity for analysis are fundamental. “What you look at, what catches your attention, and what you narrate, which others do not narrate”, is what constitutes the main value, says López. Ruiz emphasizes that he prefers a text that is “somewhat authored”, with “the maximum density of information possible, a bit emotional, and that tells you why a site is special”. Uribarri emphasizes the importance of using travel recommendations that “cannot be found on the web”, in order to give “a special touch” to the text. This implies carrying out “investigative, explanatory, descriptive, and prescriptive work”, in addition to “writing well, even if the topic is limited, by including information that is entertaining and informative”.

Moreover, prior documentation is also essential, as Chérnikova points out. “An author prepares for the trip and works on the process, even more so afterwards”, she explains. Bernadas shares an opinion regarding the need to have things documented, and to read what was done before, in order to have “a calmer view”. “We need people with a critical perspective, documentation, and a comprehensive view,

with respect and a desire to ask”. Similarly, Tejedor points out that “in a society of *infoxication*, of noise”, where there is “too much content”, people are looking for journalists “who give an authentic, genuine, more elaborate vision”.

CONCLUSIONS

This comparative study, which is based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with journalists from Spain and Russia, has allowed us to verify the global challenges faced by travel journalism from the perspective of two countries that belong to different journalistic traditions and media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2008), as well as divergent positions in the tourism industry.

Firstly, digitization has radically changed the nature of travel journalism, providing new tools for storytelling. Moreover, it has enabled journalists to work and interact with the public (Tejedor & Larrondo, 2008). It has also democratized access to the profession through blogs. Although the interviewees highlight the existence of some interesting projects, they criticize the poor quality, unfiltered publications, and non-compliance with journalistic requirements such as verification. However, professional journalists who publish blogs underscore the opportunity to offer critical, personal information, which opens the door to greater professional independence compared to publications (Philips, 2021), as well as adaptation to new narratives.

Secondly, Spanish and Russian journalists agree that traditional travel publications are experiencing a crisis due to competition from digital products and the loss of advertisers, who have moved to the Internet (García Marín, 2017). The Russian journalists add to this factor the country’s diplomatic conflicts and restrictions on advertising (Vartanova, 2019).

Thirdly, the research shows that the quality of travel journalism has been affected by a decline in the standards of digital journalism, as well as frivolousness. This has weakened the traditional links with travel literature (Belenguer, 2002), as a response to the new forms of information searches and consumption. Although the Internet has accelerated the crisis of print magazines, most professionals trust in

their survival through the use of extensive reports aimed at a “select” audience. However, such quality is not necessarily foreign to productions that choose digital narration (Dowling & Vogan, 2015).

Fourthly, the professionals are critical of the growing influence of the tourism sector and submission to commercial objectives (Hanusch & Fürsich, 2014). This reality is linked to the crisis in the sector, which is increasingly leaning toward the sale of tourist destinations, influenced by the so-called *press tours*, which are paid for by tourism offices or companies that promote a certain destination. According to the interviewees, this implies a lack of independence, which can have ethical repercussions (Pokazanyeva, 2015).

Finally, the current context poses several challenges for the practice of travel journalism, which is now seen as freelance work, and is more open to the incorporation of local voices. It not only requires multi-functionality, as well as technological skills for audiovisual and social media coverage, but also “ultra-specialization” in a given field, together with the commercial ability to sell one’s product. This presents major challenges linked to precariousness (Hayes & Silke, 2019), as well as work-related pressures on journalists (Fernandes & De Mendonça, 2017), who must produce texts in which their own view takes center stage, along with information, data, and details that are unique.

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