

AN IMMATURE MEDIUM

Strengths and Weaknesses of Online Newspapers on September 11

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Abstract / The events which occurred on 11 September 2001 were unprecedented in many ways. This article discusses how online newspapers reported on these events. Applying a descriptive methodology to a sample of 18 online newspapers from nine countries, this article analyses the strengths and weaknesses of online newspapers that could be seen that day. It shows the consolidation of the internet as an important global medium, as well as the impetus for multiple media synergies and for new multimedia formats that emerged from these events. But it also points to the lack of technological readiness of the medium, its editorial immaturity, and its reluctant use of its interactive capabilities. In conclusion, this article uses an important test case for the reporting of breaking news, to present an overview of the editorial strengths and weaknesses of online newspapers at the beginning of the 21st century.

Keywords / 9/11 / internet / news coverage / online newspapers / Spain

Without a doubt, 11 September 2001 will remain as a day for history. A few days after the attacks, the weekly magazine *The Economist* (15–21 September 2001) chose for its cover a significant headline, ‘The Day the World Changed’, over a picture of a smoky, dusty cloud hiding Manhattan’s new skyline without the World Trade Center’s towers. Experts from multiple study areas, including politics, economy, sociology and culture, came to the same conclusion: the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington that day are certainly a milestone in our history. And few doubt that this was a historical day for journalism as well (Zelizer and Allan, 2002).

More than any other previous event, the terrorist attacks with hijacked planes over the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were, by far, the most dramatic live news ever, and the most watched event in the history of television (Pew Internet, 2001: 4). At the same time, the attacks initiated some of the biggest news coverage ever produced by newspapers and magazines from every corner of the world. On that day, news agencies and radio stations also had to face one of their biggest journalistic challenges ever. And also, the September 11 events emerged as a complicated maturity test for the young internet media (Pew Internet, 2001: 6; Salaverría, 2001a).

During those hours, all the media were confronted with an overflowing information demand that they had to fulfil. Radio and television made information marathons (*El Mundo*, 2001c; *La Vanguardia*, 2001), in which they

cross-cut live images of the towers and film repetitions of the impacts with interviews with witnesses and experts. Newspapers got ready to prepare historic editions for the day after (Poynter.org, 2001) and even, in some cases, they urgently published extra editions a few hours after the attacks. News wires lived a day in which the only news subject was the attack on the United States, from all kind of aspects – politics, economic – as well as on every geographical level – international, national and even local. Finally, many internet media, alerted by a huge volume of visits, launched a frantic race to offer as fast as possible all the breaking news arriving at their headquarters (*El Mundo*, 2001a).

This article discusses to what extent the interactive media passed that technological and editorial test. News coverage of those events caused unknown technological demands of online publications all over the world. In such a context, the online papers had to prove their readiness despite their common lack of technological strategy, which tends to complicate the task of giving a proper answer to a crisis like that one (Saksena and Hollifield, 2002: 82–3). In addition, this challenge was followed by the kind of complex organizational and ethical requirements that are particularly present when terrorism becomes the news subject (Graham, 1985; Nacos, 1995). In these cases, the media must avoid becoming a blind amplifier of terrorist actions – since this is, precisely, one of the terrorists’ goals – but at the same time they have to preserve their duty and right to inform. So, briefly, September 11 was the opportunity to measure the grade of both technical and professional development reached by the digital media at the beginning of the 21st century.

Despite the wide range of media outlets that exist on the internet (e.g. online magazines, web radios, portals, weblogs), this article focuses on the online editions of newspapers. It is clear that these publications are among the oldest ones on the web and, therefore, it would seem logical to focus on them. They are also the most mature in journalistic terms or, as some authors prefer to say, in terms of their ‘professional standards’ (Deuze, 1999; Dicken-Garcia, 1989; García Avilés, 1996). In fact, compared to the other internet media, the online newspapers usually have the biggest editorial staffs, tend to offer the widest variety of journalistic genres and, in general, usually gather the biggest audiences; all these reasons probably make them the most adequate media outlets on which to focus an analysis like this one (Deuze, 1998). In addition, since they depend usually on bigger and highly consolidated news companies, it can be assumed that the providers of online newspapers are deeply concerned about their professional performance and their editorial decisions; especially, their mistakes not only affect themselves but the whole brand.

This article studies a sample of 18 online newspapers from nine different countries, but focuses on the Spanish case. Taking a similar approach as other studies of national cases, such as the one carried out by Baiocchi (2002) in the case of Brazil, we focus our attention on the performance of Spanish internet media during September 11, limiting our study to online newspapers. In particular, we study two online newspapers – <elpais.es> and <elmundo.es> – that, by the time of September 2001, and according to audience data from sources like the Oficina de Justificación de la Difusión (OJD), the AIMC (2001) and NetValue (2002), were attracting the biggest number of visitors in Spain.

The first, <elpaís.es>, is the internet edition of *El País*, the most widely read newspaper in the country with an average daily circulation of 433,617 copies in 2001, according to data from OJD. The second is <elmundo.es>, the internet edition of *El Mundo*, which at that time was the second largest in circulation among the Spanish print dailies (312,366 copies daily), but in close competition with <elpaís.es> for the first place on the internet. In addition, in order to understand better how similar media were treating the same events in different countries and to provide a context to the Spanish findings, 16 other prestigious international online media outlets have been studied. From the US, *The New York Times* <nytimes.com>, CNN <cnn.com> and MSNBC <msnbc.com>. From the UK, we study *The Daily Telegraph* <telegraph.co.uk> and *The Times* <timesonline.co.uk>. From France, we include *Le Monde* <lemonde.fr> and *Libération* <liberation.fr>. From Germany, *Die Welt* <welt.de> and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* <faz.de>. From Argentina, *Clarín* <clarin.com.ar> and *La Nación* <lanacion.com.ar> are included. From Sweden, *Aftonbladet* <aftonbladet.se>. From The Netherlands, *De Telegraaf* <telegraaf.nl>. From Brazil, *O Globo* <oglobo.globo.com>. And from Jordan, *The Jordan Times* <jordantimes.com>. Some contextual information offered by search engines like Google is considered as well. During the hours immediately following the attacks, a continuous assessment of the information updates of these outlets was performed,¹ in order to understand how they were responding in journalistic terms to an event of such considerable scope.

Before we go further, we should state that this analysis was complicated by the speed with which news was updated – literally, every minute – and by the slow navigation and even unavailability of the web editions of some newspapers, due to the heavy internet traffic generated by the events. Unfortunately, although there are websites that gather, in a non-systematic way, pages published on September 11 (Interactive Publishing, 2001), there is no archive that has preserved the web pages published by a sample of online media on a fixed time basis along the hours during that day. We therefore cannot use sophisticated content analysis methods, as used for example by Li and Izard (2003). Instead, we are forced to limit ourselves to a non-exhaustive research. Nevertheless, given the importance of the events and the unlikelihood that such unpredicted events can be completely covered, we consider that our study produces interesting conclusions about the role that internet newspapers play in the provision of news at the beginning of the 21st century.

News Relevance of September 11 Events

What happened in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 had some peculiarities, difficult to repeat by any other event. Together with the undeniable importance of the incidents, of almost warlike proportions – more than 3000 victims, thousands of injured, devastation in one of the most significant areas of Manhattan as well as serious damage to the Pentagon and four commercial aircrafts hijacked and crashed – there were other circumstances which contributed to magnify the facts even more. It can be argued that this magnification was one of the effects deliberately pursued by the perpetrators, who

intended to cause an act of ‘mass-mediated terrorism’ (Altheide, 2001: 12). Whatever the intentions of the terrorists were, the truth is that September 11 will remain as one of the events with the greatest media impact in history, ever. The factors that contributed to magnify this media impact could be summed up as two: space and time.

The Space Factor

The fact that the main events occurred at the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York, in the heart of one of the most famous urban landscapes, contributed to their iconic impact. Although less visually recognizable by the audiences, the Pentagon was also a place of undoubted symbolism. Since for many people the Pentagon evokes secrecy and invulnerability, the fact that it was attacked for the first time ever also helped magnify the event.

Besides, both places assured a maximum exposure for the media, even for a breaking news situation. Unlike other acts of war in which declarations of political leaders and troop movements anticipate the outbreak of conflict and allow the journalists to get ready, these attacks took everyone by surprise, including the media. Yet, hundreds of journalists and cameras could access the affected areas very quickly, in such way that the event could be watched, literally, live, as it was happening, and from multiple points of view.

The Time Factor

Also the timing of the September 11 events, as well as the pace of development of what was occurring, contributed to their spectacular nature and their media impact. The time at which the attacks started, 8:46 a.m. in New York (13:46 GMT), allowed maximum live media coverage, not only in the US but in nearly every western country. This coverage was not limited to broadcasters and online media. Newspapers also had enough time to prepare special editions about the events and many, both in America and in Europe, published extra evening editions that same day.

From a purely narrative point of view, the rhythm of development of the events produced a frantic information beat, almost like in a feature film, in which things were happening minute by minute (CNN.com, 2001). This also contributed to maintain the astonishment and the visual attraction at all times.

Briefly, the spatial and time factors, along with other more specific factors (economic, political, etc.), helped to rapidly spread the shock caused by the events among citizens all over the world. With unusual speed, images and news from the attacks were circulating everywhere, shaking the ordinary activities of citizens in every country. Inside and outside the US, millions were paying full attention to the non-stop news offered through multiple channels.

That said, what did happen specifically on the internet? In fact, the World Wide Web suddenly became the platform towards which users massively rushed to search for information. Data given by Google, the most popular internet search engine, provide a good example (Wiggins, 2001). According to Google, during the two hours following the start of the attacks, an average of 6000

searches of the acronym ‘CNN’ were performed every minute. And, as a matter of fact, 80 percent of the 500 most searched words of that day in Google were related to the terrorist attacks (Google, 2001).

With such unexpected information demand, what was the answer that the media on the internet, and the online newspapers in particular, gave? How did they respond to the sudden avalanche of users? To what extent did the online newspapers satisfy the expectations of millions of people, eager for breaking news? We now describe the main strengths and weaknesses of that response on an international scale.

The Weaknesses of Online Newspapers on the News Coverage of September 11 Events

As has already been said, the September 11 events caught the world by surprise. This is particularly certain in the case of online newspapers. They showed a deep lack of material and organizational anticipation, which translated into diverse problems. Some of the deficiencies that could be observed are as follows.

Lack of Technological Foresight

The experience of September 11 meant a key test of the internet as a network (Pew Internet, 2001). A few minutes after the news of the first attack was broadcast, the internet had to respond to a sudden multiplication of traffic. Different services in charge of monitoring the browsing speed in the web point at the fact that the internet as a whole responded satisfactorily to the test. In fact, although to a lesser extent than other media outlets, the internet was used by millions of people in many different ways (Pew Internet, 2001). Due to this fast multiplication of audience, and even though the web as a whole was not jammed (Keynote Systems, 2001), many online newspapers as well as other interactive media on the internet collapsed (Outing, 2001; Wendland, 2001).

According to the Keynote Business 40 Internet Performance Index (Keynote Systems, 2001), which measures the average download time for the homepages of 40 important US-based business web sites, <CNN.com>, <ABCNews.com> and *The New York Times on the Web* offered zero percent accessibility in the following hour after the first attack. Keynote also states that:

... on Monday, September 10, the overall Index average at the same time, 10:15 am EDT, was approximately 5.0 seconds, which was a slight but normal fluctuation from the usual daily average of 2.5–3.5 seconds. On Tuesday at 10:15 am, following the attacks, the Index average reached 12.9 seconds – a performance degradation over twice what it was at the same time when it peaked on Monday and three to four times the normal daily average.

Regarding the online media, and again according to Keynote index, <USAToday.com> reduced its accessibility to 18.2 percent and MSNBC to 22.0 percent, comparing their performance on the previous days. In order to resolve this problem, a significant number of publications drastically reduced the quantity of text and graphic elements in their pages. <CNN.com> homepage,

for instance, was reduced from 255 kb before the attacks to 20 kb in the hours following, according to Keynote Index.

This drastic reduction in the accessibility to online media did not only occur in the US, but also affected digital publications in other parts of the world. More precisely, eight out of 18 online newspapers of our sample had problems maintaining their standard layout during the three hours that followed the first attack. In addition, most of the newspapers reduced their graphical offer to the minimum. Among others, newspapers such as *Le Monde* (France), *Die Welt* (Germany), *Clarín* (Argentina) or *El Mundo* (Spain), which practically doubled its average daily traffic (*El Mundo*, 2002), experienced serious accessibility problems due to the sudden avalanche of users searching the latest breaking news (see Table 1 and Figures 1–2).

In fact, the most prestigious newspapers, those that usually attract a greater number of visitors, were precisely the ones who experienced the greatest problems keeping their services on the internet active. They were forced to reduce drastically the graphic and text elements in their pages. The smaller papers had a considerable multiplication of visits but, in general, this did not cause a collapse in their services. Hence, a curious paradox took place: the smaller media outlets offered a more satisfactory technological performance to the public's information demands than the larger media.

In this sense, as the case of *Jordantimes.com*, an online newspaper that in September 2001 only used to shovel the content of its print counterpart, suggests, online newspapers without a breaking news service do not receive much attention from the internet users when this kind of event happens. This lack of attractiveness, of course, preserves them from suffering the connectivity problems of larger online media.

Lack of Editorial Prudence

Precisely at 8:46:26 a.m. (New York time; 13:46:26 GMT) on that September day, a vertiginous and continuous chain of spectacular events unfolded and extended over 102 minutes (*The New York Times*, 2002). This was exactly the lapse of time that passed between the first airplane impact against the North Tower of the World Trade Center and the fall of the South Tower. During these nearly two hours, there was time for a second aeroplane to crash against the South Tower, for a third one to crash over the Pentagon and even for a fourth one to disintegrate in the fields of Somerset, Pennsylvania, and finally, for the Twin Towers to collapse with thousands of people inside. In the face of this sudden and unexpected avalanche of news, the online newspapers had to act rapidly.

However, as is well known, a rush is not the best companion of accuracy. Therefore, online newspapers were one of the media outlets in which haste resulted most evidently in information errors. This lack of editorial prudence confirmed the fears of Fred H. Cate (1996: 36) about online sources. From his point of view, expressed before the popularization of the internet as a platform for news delivery, online media would have more problems than other media outlets in terms of accuracy and reliability due to their structural characteristics.

TABLE 1

Breaking News Coverage of September 11 Events on Online Newspapers' Homepages^a

Online Newspapers ^b	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Standard layout radically lightened	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
News stories and headlines about 9/11 [% (total)]	40.7 (24)	39.1 (9)	100 (21)	100 (2)	100 (9)	100 (5)	100 (11)	100 (8)	100 (1)	88.2 (15)	100 (1)	14.6 (6)	100 (2)	58.1 (18)	62.5 (5)	0 (0)	40 (4)	32 (8)
Pictures about 9/11 [% (total)]	66.7 (2)	100 (1)	100 (1)	100 (1)	100 (3)	0 (0)	100 (2)	100 (1)	0 (0)	100 (1)	0 (0)	33.3 (1)	100 (1)	20 (1)	100 (1)	0 (0)	100 (1)	20 (1)
Image gallery of 9/11	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
Sounds of 9/11	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Video of 9/11	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Infographics or maps of 9/11	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No
Discussion board about 9/11	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No

^a Data collected randomly from 15:45 GMT to 18:30 GMT; the first attack on New York took place at 13:46 GMT.

^b (1) *Aftonbladet* (Sweden); (2) *Chicago Tribune* (USA); (3) *Clarín* (Argentina); (4) CNN (USA); (5) *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands); (6) *Die Welt* (Germany); (7) *El Mundo* (Spain); (8) *El País* (Spain); (9) *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany); (10) *La Nación* (Argentina); (11) *Le Monde* (France); (12) *Libération* (France); (13) *MSNBC* (USA); (14) *O Globo* (Brazil); (15) *The Daily Telegraph* (UK); (16) *The Jordan Times* (Jordan); (17) *The New York Times* (USA); (18) *The Times* (UK).

FIGURE 1

Elmundo.es (11 September 2001, 16:02 GMT) Copyright © 2004 by Mundinteractivos S.A. Reprinted with permission.

elmundo.es EL MUNDO VER EDICIÓN IMPRESA

Noticias | Edición impresa | Callejero | Suplementos | Servicios | Multimedia | Charlas | Tienda | Juegos | Loterías | Clasificados

URGENTE [Arafat condena los atentados](#)

Martes, 11 de Septiembre de 2001. Actualizado a las 17:02

Ataque terrorista organizado contra EEUU

Mapa de los objetivos alcanzados

Poco antes de las 9.00 de la mañana, hora local en Nueva York (15.00 hora peninsular española) un pequeño avión se estrellaba contra una de las Torres Gemelas, símbolo del 'skyline' de Manhattan. Apenas 18 minutos después, un Boeing 767 enfilaba directamente contra la segunda y destruía su parte superior. Después, ambos edificios se han desplomado. Lo siguiente ha sido en Washington: el Pentágono ha ardió tras impactar un avión contra el edificio. Un avión secuestrado ha sido derribado en Pensilvania por cazas estadounidenses. Las principales instituciones de EEUU, incluyendo la Casa Blanca y el Capitolio, han sido evacuadas ante el temor de nuevos ataques terroristas. Estados Unidos se encuentra en estado de máxima alerta mientras el pánico y el caos se apoderan de todo el país y la [economía mundial cae en picado](#), las Bolsas se desploman y el petróleo sube sin cesar. [Los líderes mundiales](#) se han mostrado "horrorizados". Todo el [tráfico aéreo ha sido suspendido](#) y los vuelos que se dirigen a EEUU se han desviado a Canadá. [\[Sigue\]](#)

ATAQUE SUICIDA AL CORAZON DE MANHATTAN

Las Torres Gemelas de Nueva York dos aviones

Las dos Torres Gemelas de Nueva York han quedado destruidas después de que dos aviones se estrellaran contra cada una de ellas. Como consecuencia del ataque, ambas se han desplomado. Según el presidente Bush, se trata del mayor ataque terrorista perpetrado en suelo estadounidense. La CNN asegura que, de momento, se han contabilizado seis muertos y más de 1.000 heridos y podían observarse dos enormes agujeros que atravesaban los edificios y que afectaban a varios pisos. El Ejército ha clausurado todos los aeropuertos de Estados Unidos durante las próximas siete horas y los vuelos que iban a llegar al país han sido derivados a Canadá. [\[Sigue\]](#)



Imagen del segundo avión momentos antes de impactar contra la segunda torre. (AP/ABC)

Secuencia fotográfica del ataque a Estados Unidos

- ▶ [El pánico y el terror: se apoderan de la ciudad más frenética del mundo](#)
- ▶ [Los abogados de un líder terrorista islámico amenazaron con una campaña terrorista en abril](#)

COCHE BOMBA EN EL DEPARTAMENTO DE ESTADOS

El Pentágono en llamas; el aeropuerto de Los Angeles, ardiendo; la Casa Blanca y el Capitolio, evacuados

Un avión se ha estrellado en Washington cerca de las instalaciones del Pentágono, provocando una explosión e incendio en sus instalaciones. Parte del emblemático edificio se ha derrumbado. Un coche bomba ha estallado a la puerta del Departamento de Estado y el edificio principal del aeropuerto, en llamas. [\[Sigue\]](#)



Momento de la segunda explosión en las Torres Gemelas. (CNN)

Las bases estadounidenses en España, en estado de alerta

Las bases americanas en España, Rota (Cádiz) y Morón (Sevilla), se encuentran en estado de alerta desde las 11.05 horas de hoy, según ha podido saber elmundo.es. Las autoridades mantienen mutismo absoluto. [\[Sigue\]](#)

FIGURE 2

Elpais.es (11 September 2001, 15:57 GMT) Copyright © 2004 by Prisa.com S.A.
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URGENTE: **Se derrumba la segunda de las Torres Gemelas**

EL PAIS

es

CRISIS INTERNACIONAL Galería
fotográfica: oleada de
atentados en Nueva York

ATENTADO EN EEUU

PORTADA
ÚLTIMA HORA
ESPECIALES
TEMAS
MULTIMEDIA
FOTOGRAFÍA

BUSCADOR

ARCHIVO
 EDICIÓN IMPRESA
 PRIMERA
 INDICE
 INTERNACIONAL
 OPINIÓN
 VIÑETAS
 ESPAÑA
 SOCIEDAD
 CULTURA
 ESPECTÁCULOS
 AGENDA
 DEPORTES
 ECONOMÍA
 RADIO Y TV
 ÚLTIMA
 AUTONOMÍAS
 SUPLEMENTOS
 ESTADÍSTICAS
 PARTICIPACIÓN
 SERVICIOS
 JUEGOS
 HERRAMIENTAS
 AYUDA

ENCUESTA

¿Cree que la Iglesia debe tener su propia sociedad para invertir en Bolsa?

Sí

No

Ns

votar

[▶ Resultados](#)
[▶ Comentarios](#)

Martes, 11 de septiembre de 2001 - Actualizado a las 16:47 h.

CRISIS INTERNACIONAL

Una oleada de atentados en Nueva York y Washington colapsa EE UU

EE UU vive a esta hora la crisis más grave de toda su historia tras sufrir una oleada de atentados que han destruido las dos torres gemelas de Nueva York y parte del Pentágono. Dos aviones y al parecer un tercero han impactado a primera hora de esta tarde (9 de la mañana hora estadounidense) contra los dos edificios más emblemáticos de la ciudad. A continuación, otro aparato ha impactado contra el Pentágono.

- [Galería fotográfica: Atentados masivos en EE UU](#)
- [Video: Segundo impacto del avión](#)
- [Localizador: Atentados en Washington y Nueva York](#)
- [Bush asegura que "cazará" a los responsables de la oleada de atentados en EE UU](#)
- [Pánico en las bolsas de todo el mundo](#)



Momento en el que el segundo avión impacta en la torre (CNN+)

CRISIS INTERNACIONAL

El segundo ataque contra las Torres Gemelas

(EL PAÍS.es)

El atentado de hoy contra las Torres Gemelas de Nueva York tiene un precedente reciente, aunque incomparable por los daños causados. El 28 de febrero de 1993, una explosión en un parking de una de las torres causó cinco muertos y más de 400 heridos y sembró el pánico en toda la isla de Manhattan.

▶ MÁS NOTICIAS DE ÚLTIMA HORA

Cate underlines the fact that the unstoppable trend to digitalization could lead to an easier manipulation of data, since there wouldn't be a physical registry of any information; in addition, he indicates that online networks tend to speed up the flow of information in multiple directions, which reduces the time and opportunity for checking data. These kinds of problems could be seen, indeed, on the online newspapers on September 11.

In Spain, one of the examples that can be recalled is the case of the internet edition of the national newspaper *El Mundo*. Two hours and 16 minutes after the beginning of the attacks (16:02 GMT), <elmundo.es> published a news story whose headline announced the following events: 'El Pentágono en llamas; el aeropuerto de Los Ángeles, ardiendo; la Casa Blanca y el Capitolio, evacuados' ('The Pentagon in flames; Los Angeles airport, on fire; the White House and the Capitol, evacuated'). Moreover, this information had an introductory heading that read this: 'Coche bomba en el Departamento de Estado' ('Car bomb at the Department of State'). As was later confirmed, two of the facts reported as completely certain in that piece (the fire at Los Angeles airport and the bomb at the Department of State) were simply false. <elmundo.es> attributed that information to 'news wires', but wasn't specifying the agencies from which it had obtained such supposed breaking news. What is more, these events were expressed in a categorical way, and not as a mere possibility or rumour.

Curiously enough, the following day, *El Mundo* published an article in its print edition boasting about the fact that its internet edition was the first one in Spain to give information about the attacks, even before some international and national news wires such as Reuters, AFP, EFE or Europa Press (*El Mundo*, 2001b). What *El Mundo* didn't mention at all is that its news coverage had included false events, such as the ones referred to above. Consequently, the paper did not publish any corrections, either in the print or in the digital version.

Of course, such kinds of errors were not exclusive to any single newspaper. On the contrary, it seems logical to think that the spreading of news without a clear verification was, more or less, a general trend on a good proportion of digital publications. In our sample of 18 screenshots of online newspapers, we have found at least three more cases in which false news was published. These mistakes belong to the online editions of the Argentineans newspapers *Clarín* and *La Nación*, and to the German *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

In Argentina, *La Nación Line* at 16:05 GMT – that is, three minutes after <elmundo.es> – was also publishing two untrue headlines: 'Un coche bomba explotó en el Departamento de Estado' ('A car bomb exploded at the Department of State') and 'Habría una cuarta explosión en el Congreso; la Casa Blanca fue evacuada' ('A fourth explosion in the Congress might have happened; White House evacuated'). One hour later, at 17:06 GMT, <clarín.com> was also still presenting the first of these two same false news items, written exactly in the same words as *La Nación Line* and without any attribution. Therefore, similar mistakes were made as in <elmundo.es>, although in this case it must be said that the second headline of *La Nación Line* was not written categorically.

The German online paper <faz.de> made the same errors as well. Into the

second paragraph of its unique and large news story on the homepage, the following was written: ‘In der Hauptstadt flog ein Flugzeug auf das Pentagon, das zur Stunde in Flammen steht. Kurz darauf kam es zu einer weiteren Explosion im Old Executive Building in unmittelbarer Nähe des Weißen Hauses. Vor dem Außenministerium explodierte eine Autobombe. Das Gebäude steht ebenfalls in Flammen.’ (‘An aeroplane flew in the capital city into the Pentagon, which is currently in flames. Another explosion happened shortly afterwards in the Old Executive Building in the immediate surroundings of the White House. A car bomb exploded in front of the Department of State. The building is also in flames’). The same mistakes, once again.

These examples suggest that, on September 11 and in response to the information needs of the public, editors took the decision of giving priority to the last-minute news, before data could be verified. That decision can be understandable in such a context. But, what did these media do when they saw that some of the news published on the web was not true? In the cases of *La Nación Line*, <clarín.com> and <faz.de>, we were not able to find out if any correction was given to readers afterwards, whether in the online or in the print edition. However, in the case of Spanish <elmundo.es>, we confirmed that there was no correction at all. Anyway, these examples suggest that these kinds of errors were not just a problem of specific papers or specific countries. On the contrary, they pose a general problem of editorial immaturity among the online newspapers, who show a lack of prudence when they face the coverage of this kind of breaking news.

In this way, the online newspapers stand apart from the print versions, where including errors and omissions notes is common practice. It seems as though online editions understand the evanescent character of digital media as justification for impunity and that it isn’t necessary to correct errors, since they do not stay written, ‘in black and white’ somewhere.

However, it is important to stress the fact that, in this case, even the print newspapers were not completely free of information errors, which were not rectified afterwards either. For instance, in its edition of September 12, the Spanish daily *El Mundo* used the following main headline on its front page: ‘El mayor ataque terrorista de la Historia derriba los símbolos del poder de EEUU y causa más de 10.000 muertos y heridos’ (‘The biggest terrorist attack of history knocks down the USA’s symbols of power and causes more than 10,000 people dead and injured’). As some months later it was confirmed, the number of people who died in the attacks was roughly 3000 and even counting the injured, the numbers didn’t reach the amount that the newspaper reported.

But beyond the errors made by one and another medium, it is undeniable that an insufficient prudence towards information, together with the eagerness to be the first to publish the news, led to the online press community making notable information errors which could have been avoided with a more cautious information processing. It seems that online media journalists tend to give more importance to speed than to accuracy, and that they adopt some sense of impunity justified by this need for speed.

Lack of Own Identity

No medium begins its life as an adult. History shows that, just like people, the media need decades to reach maturity and to find their place in the ecosystem of information. This was always so. When the print media emerged and later on the broadcast media, they experienced a process of gradual evolution until they reached their present position. In the same way, internet publications, barely 10 years of age, have just begun their particular process of development and independence. The news coverage of September 11 clearly showed that, by that time, the internet newspapers were still in their youth.

In these beginnings, newspapers' web editions certainly face an identity problem. They tend to integrate the characteristics of a networked computer environment – hypertextuality, multimediality and interactivity (Deuze, 2001). As extensions of print media, they stress the analytical and interpretative information element. However, at the same time, they tend to provide immediate and concise information. In view of this duplicity, which one of these two roles did online newspapers choose in order to inform readers about the events of September 11? The answer was not at all unanimous, although there were some common aspects.

The most evident common denominator among all the internet newspapers was probably the effort to publish breaking news. The newspapers included continuous information updates, trying to keep up with the frantic pace of the events in the US and to attend to the unceasing information demand by the readers.

However, in this race to give the most recent information, some newspapers modified not only their standard layout, but their character as well. For example, the Argentinean <clarín.com> – instead of its usual form of a mix of long and short texts, pictures and hierarchical sections – transformed its homepage into a very long column of 21 chronological headlines, which started to pile up in just minutes. The final result resembled a news wire service, where quantity and speed are more important than providing depth and context. In this way, <clarín.com> gave up its interpretative duties for several hours.

Other newspapers, however, tried to combine last-minute news with a more analytical treatment of information. A good example of this second model was *El País*, from Madrid. As soon as the magnitude of the events became known, this newspaper removed all content related to other issues in order to offer exclusively information concerning the attacks. Instead of limiting itself to summarizing facts as they become known, <elpaís.es> made the effort to give additional background information in order to provide context and to complete the news with a better documentation related to the events. During the hours immediately following the attacks, this newspaper published infographics that gave details about the scenes where they took place and outlined explanations on how they occurred. In addition, it also included multimedia resources such as photo galleries and image clips of the impacts. The internet edition of *El País* also added real-time information about the rates at international stock markets and, finally, retrieved articles and reports from its archive that could be useful to set up the context of the incidents.

Nevertheless, this kind of outstanding professionalism was the exception.

In our sample, we just found one other media outlet, the online edition of *La Nación*, that had published by the time we came to analyse the reporting another background story (to be more precise, a piece about a previous terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in 1993). However, other online newspapers that were able to maintain more or less their standard layout – like the internet editions of *Chicago Tribune*, *O Globo* and *Libération* – were not publishing any background piece at all on their homepages.

Most online newspapers, whether due to a lack of anticipation or a lack of news staff (or both), hesitated when the time arrived as to how to define the kind of news coverage the events deserved. And this hesitation is a clear sign that the journalistic identity of digital publications still remains unresolved.

Strengths of the Online Newspapers

Of course, not everything about the news coverage of the September 11 events by the internet press was a failure. Those incidents brought an excellent opportunity to show the development of the multimedia and the potential of hyper-linking and interactivity that had never yet been so clearly exhibited before by online publications. Maybe not so clearly during the rush of the first hours due to the problems already explained, but certainly in the days and weeks after, that experience contributed to the improvement of the online newspapers. Therefore, September 11 may be considered as a key date for the consolidation of certain strengths that are described in the following.

The Definitive Consolidation as Media

Although it might seem quite obvious, it does no harm to point out that the September 11 events proved that the internet press is already an autonomous communication medium, with its particular character and its own audience.

As has already been stated, the internet as a whole experienced an unusual increase of usage shortly after the attacks. Nonetheless, if we pay attention to the news sites – not only to online newspapers, but any kind – we clearly see the importance and scale of this increase in usage. An average of 11.7 million North Americans visited news websites every day during the week after the tragedy, which meant almost double those 6 million who did the same the week before the terrorist attacks. The audience of the ‘News’ category increased by about 80 percent during the week ending 16 September, compared to the previous week. Regarding specific media, <CNN.com> registered 4.6 million visitors daily during the week after the attack, making it the sixth most visited website in US. On the other hand, <BBC.co.uk> grew more than 260 percent. The number of daily visits rose from an average of 146,000 to as high as 526,000 (Pastore, 2001).

This growth of audience on the internet media worldwide lasted a long time, especially in the case of online newspapers. After experiencing an audience peak during the days right after the attacks, the web editions of the main dailies experienced a sustained upward trend in their audiences (Cores, 2002). The internet edition of the Parisian daily *Le Monde*, for example,

TABLE 2

Unique Visitors to <Elpaís.es> and <Elmundo.es> from January 2001 to January 2002 (in millions)

	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May.	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.
<i>Elpaís.es</i>	4.0	4.4	5.0	4.3	5.7	4.9	5.0	5.5	9.7	10.3	10.8	12.2	14.4
<i>Elmundo.es</i>	5.1	5.0	6.8	6.7	7.4	7.0	4.8	4.5	9.8	11.1	10.6	10.1	11.5

Source: OJD (Oficina de Justificación de la Difusión).

increased its number of visits from around 3 million visits in August 2001 to 6.1 million visits in March 2002. This meant that <lemonde.fr> doubled its audience during the seven months after the terrorist attacks. This wasn't the only case in France: *Libération* grew from 1.5 million in August 2001 up to 2.95 million in March 2002 (*Le Journal du Net*, 2001; *Le Monde*, 2002).

Something similar happened in Spain as well. The digital editions of the main newspapers, in some cases, almost doubled the number of visits between August and October 2001. The growth was also very significant in the long term: the number of visits to <elpaís.es> and <elmundo.es> almost tripled between September and the end of 2001. According to OJD, the online edition of *El País*, for instance, rose from 5.5 million visits in August 2001 to 14.4 million in January 2002, whereas <elmundo.es> grew from 4.5 million up to 11.5 million in that same period (see Table 2). Considering the audience data from the whole year 2001, there was a clear milestone on September 11.

Therefore, it seems that the information experience of September 11 led to a significant number of internet users discovering the online newspapers and getting used to consulting them regularly. In addition, it should be emphasized that this growth in audience ratings for the digital press paradoxically occurred while this press was suffering its harshest months economically. During the end of 2001 and the beginning of 2002, the online newspapers saw their advertising income, which was nearly their sole source of finance, drastically reduced. Needless to say, this economic loss frustrated many developments and improvement projects at these publications. For that reason, the audience growth should doubly be stressed, since it took place under circumstances in which the media were forced to keep more conservative strategies.

Development of Multimedia Information Synergies

The September 11 incidents monopolized for hour after hour the focus of all media: printed press, broadcast media, as well as the internet press. Therefore, one of the main challenges that communication companies had to face was the correct coordination among their diverse media outlets in order to serve better information to different audiences. The challenge consisted in producing coherent and complementary news coverage using these media. In short, they had to achieve an adequate multimedia synergy.

Despite the urgency caused by the news avalanche in such a short time, some media brands managed to complement their news offer through the use of different outlets. To be more precise, they used the web as a platform to offer

the last-minute news, but also as an archive for providing context and background data.

That was the case of CNN, for instance. On September 11, this television company offered live, non-stop news over the hours but, at the same time, it used its website as an information repository – despite the serious connectivity problems it suffered during the first hours because of the great information demand by internet users. This way, CNN watchers could follow the latest news through television, and at the same time they could retrieve on the internet a summary of the news of the previous hours. The editorial coordination – or, at least, coincidence – at CNN between its website and broadcast service was even more evident by the fact that both platforms shared the same headlines simultaneously (‘America under attack’).

Implementation and Development of New Interactive Journalistic Formats

Since the late 1990s, technology and software have advanced very quickly in the field of multimedia content. These developments have fostered a significant evolution of news and information formats in online newspapers. This kind of medium began its path on the web by offering textual contents almost exclusively. However, the evolution of the new multimedia applications, and particularly Macromedia Flash, made possible a qualitative jump in the formats and information genres for the web.

This technological development coincided on September 11 with a kind of news content that, due to its richness in images and sounds, asked for the use of multimedia genres far beyond simple text. The generous amount of graphic information on the attacks that the newspapers obtained shortly from news wires and especially from television helped in this quest for new visual formats. Thus, the newspapers’ print editions published outstanding infographics. In the same way, the quantity and quality of this graphic information encouraged the online newspapers to produce a great amount of interactive infographics with advanced uses of interactivity and, especially, of hypertextuality and multimedia. In fact, many of these productions were republished afterwards as independent products (*El País*, 2002; *Chicago Tribune*, 2002). This undoubtedly meant a step forward in the configuration of new journalistic formats for the web.

In Spain, the internet editions of *El País* and *El Mundo* produced infographics that have been praised internationally (SND-E, 2002). On September 11, they managed to quickly publish infographics that not only offered a generous amount of information but also took advantage of the hypertextual and multimedia potentials of the web. Barely an hour-and-a-half after the first attack, <elpaís.es> was already publishing highly detailed infographics locating the scenes of the attacks. Only two other online newspapers in our sample did so, but only very simple maps of Manhattan. As more data on the crashed airplanes and their damage became known, the infographic news items of <elpaís.es> improved to such an extent that they became pieces of news which explained with the utmost precision what had happened in US and how. The

informative success of these formats was confirmed by a great number of visits by users, who kept accessing these infographics even weeks after the attacks.

It should also be stressed that the September 11 attacks moved some media to test new multimedia information formats. These information pieces integrated texts, static and dynamic images and sounds that could be read, viewed and listened to all together. Until then, despite some rare exceptions, the multimedia content of the online newspapers used to be pieces in which texts, images and sounds were only juxtaposed, but not really integrated in a unique narrative discourse (Salaverría, 2001b). In other words, multimedia used to be understood as a mixture of separately produced and consumed textual and audiovisual pieces, without a common axis. After September 11, it has been observed that some online media started to produce multimedia pieces of information which finally integrate all the codes in a single discourse.

Probably the best example of these new genres is found in the US. One company that, without a doubt, was ahead of the experiments with new multimedia information formats was MSNBC. As a result of the September 11 terrorist attacks, MSNBC published a great number of special reports, such as 'The Darkest Day' (MSNBC, 2001), which are remarkable achievements in journalistic narrative on the internet. This multimedia experience, as MSNBC called it, brings to the reader/watcher the possibility of an interactive, multimedia and hypertextual account of the events, in which text, sounds, images and navigation are extremely well integrated in one unique narrative discourse.

Conclusions

In this article, we have examined some of the main deficiencies and strengths that the media on the internet showed during a key information episode. Due to its descriptive nature, this review cannot aim to draw categorical conclusions. However, it stresses the idea that online publications, just a decade old, have not yet reached their maturity.

First of all, the case of September 11 proves that, at the beginning of the 21st century, interactive media are not technologically consolidated yet and, despite their worldwide character, they are not in a condition to guarantee a stable connectivity. Second, these media show an insufficient editorial maturity that occasionally leads them to commit important mistakes in their news reporting. In addition, there is a lack of definition in the role that interactive media are called to play in the informative chain. Internet publications, in short, do not yet know who they are, what their informative tasks are and how they can perform them with sufficient technological reliability.

However, not everything is gloomy. As been shown in this article, news coverage of September 11 by internet newspapers involved a clear display of the potential that these media can offer. The millions of people seeking information after those events on publications on the internet show that these media have consolidated as a source of information in developed countries. With regard to the editorial management of these new media, the experience of September 11 gave some indication of the enormous possibilities of collaboration with traditional media. Against the paradigm that has led people to conceive

of the internet media as a menace for the classic media, the cases described in this article point out the multiple synergies that are possible. Finally, this study shows that interactive media are in the process of defining their own voice. In contrast to the trend which ruled during the first years of the online media of emulating news formats from the printed press, September 11 encouraged some of the media on the internet to test new formats in order to take full advantage of the communication potentials of the web.

Note

1. On September 11, an hour-and-a-half after the first attack, I started collecting dozens of screenshots of many online media on my computer. I kept doing so for two hours, more or less. After that time, I had amassed a large collection of online media pages, and some of them were used for this research.

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