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Search engine optimisation in online journalism: A case study of the *Grupo Joly* media company

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Abstract

Given the confirmation of the fundamental role of the application of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) in digital news media as part of the media's commitment to its readers, this chapter proposes to analyze the process of implementing SEO to the productive routines of *Diario de Sevilla* and its consequent transfer to the rest of digital news media that make up the Joly Group and collect the quantitative results of web visibility resulting from said implementation, specifically from 2018 to 2021. To carry out this research, first of all, the case study was used, specifically of the editorial team of *Diario de Sevilla*. For an adequate triangulation, a participant observation, a battery of semi-structured interviews, and a qualitative analysis of the content of the internal manual on SEO of Joly Group, a media group to which *Diario de Sevilla* belongs, have been carried out. All this has been complemented in turn, with a quantitative study, where, thanks to Google Analytics, the web traffic obtained from the group from the year of implementation to the present (2018 - 2021) is collected. The results confirm that in order to comprehensively implement the SEO of a newsroom, it is necessary to clearly separate the work of the journalists/editors and that of the SEO experts or managers at the level of the entire medium. In this sense, the SEO department has a strategic function of analysis and generation of guidelines for editors. While it is up to the newsroom to apply the SEO optimization recommendations without affecting the journalistic quality of the news.

Keywords

Digital news media, SEO, search engine optimization online journalism, website visibility.

Título

El SEO en la empresa periodística: estudio de caso del Grupo Joly

Resumen

Ante la confirmación del papel fundamental de la aplicación del SEO en los cibermedios como una parte del compromiso del medio con sus lectores, este capítulo plantea analizar el proceso de implementación del SEO a las rutinas productivas del Diario de Sevilla y su consiguiente transferencia al resto de cibermedios que integran el Grupo Joly y recoger los resultados cuantitativos de la visibilidad web resultante de dicha implementación, concretamente desde 2018 hasta 2021. Para llevar a cabo esta investigación se ha utilizado, en primer lugar, el estudio de caso, concretamente del equipo de redacción del Diario de Sevilla. Para una adecuada triangulación, se ha llevado a cabo una observación participante, una batería de entrevistas semiestructuradas, y un análisis cualitativo del contenido del manual interno sobre SEO del Grupo Joly, grupo mediático al que pertenece Diario de Sevilla. Todo esto se ha complementado a su vez, con un estudio cuantitativo, en donde se recoge, gracias a Google Analytics, el tráfico web obtenido del grupo desde el año de implementación hasta la actualidad (2018 - 2021). Los resultados confirman que para implantar de manera integral el SEO de una redacción es preciso separar claramente el trabajo de los periodistas/redactores y el de los expertos o responsables SEO a nivel de todo el medio. En este sentido, al departamento de SEO le corresponde una función estratégica de análisis y de generación de orientaciones para los redactores. Mientras que a la redacción le corresponde aplicar las recomendaciones de optimización SEO sin que las mismas afecten a la calidad periodística de las noticias.

Palabras clave

Cibermedios, SEO, posicionamiento en buscadores, periodismo online, visibilidad web.

1. Introduction

With two decades of accumulated history both in Spain (Salaverría and Martínez-Costa, 2021) and worldwide, the online news media have had to respond to the challenges of a communicative situation that have little in common with those that affected the traditional media. Today's panorama is characterised above all by processes of interactivity (Cebrián-Herreros, 2009; Rodríguez-Martínez et al., 2012; Caminero & Sánchez-García, 2018), the constant renewal of internet technology and, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic that has, as of 2020, resulted in a heightening of the problems and processes of digital adaptation that have impacted the media as they strive for survival.

These changes mean the news media have few options other than to reorient their content and strategies (Rodríguez-Martínez et al. 2010; Díaz-Noci, 2018; García-Avilés et al., 2018) as swiftly as they can (Suárez-Sucre, 2017) and, clearly, the integration of newsrooms into the online world has become one of the primary initiatives taken by media companies (Muerza-Ferrer, 2017). To this we need to add the growing importance of the role being played by social networks, on the one hand (Trillo-Domínguez & Ollero, 2018), and by search engine positioning, on the other (Giomelakis & Veglis, 2015a), in what is very much a new context of enhanced web visibility and the dynamization of the news.

Indeed, this critical need for web visibility has meant that the news media are obliged to optimise their search engine performance (Carlson, 2007; Norris, 2007; Smyrniaios & Rebillard, 2009; Smyrniaios, 2015), given that part of the traffic the online media receive comes from user searches on platforms such as Google (Norris, 2007; Machill et al., 2008). For this reason, it is essential that newsrooms implement strategies of search engine optimisation (SEO) (Smyrniaios & Sire, 2014;), that is, the techniques or procedures applied to websites that help increase their chances of appearing among the main search results (Gonzalo-Penela et al., 2015; Lopezosa et al., 2018) and, so, of having greater visibility and attracting more readers.

Logically, in terms of their fine detail, SEO techniques and strategies can differ from one medium to another (Dick, 2011; Giomelakis & Veglis, 2015b; García-Carretero et al. 2016), primarily because each medium has at its disposal a series of different resources, be they

of time, finances, technical capabilities or managerial support (Dick, 2011). However, there is little question – and this is a point stressed by more than one study – that the convergence between journalistic and SEO principles has favoured online newspapers (Asser, 2012; Lopezosa et al., 2020).

Given the blanket acceptance of the fundamental role played by the application of SEO in the online news media as part of the newspapers' commitment to its readers (Richmond, 2008; Iglesias-García & Codina, 2016), this chapter has two primary objectives: (1) to analyse the implementation of SEO in the production routines of the *Diario de Sevilla* and its subsequent transfer to the rest of the online papers that make up the Spanish media company, *Grupo Joly* and (2) to study the quantitative outcomes of this implementation in terms of the Group's web visibility between 2018 and 2021.

2. Methodology

In conducting our research, we have drawn, in the first instance, on the case study method described by Yin (2014) and applied here to the work of the newsroom of the *Diario de Sevilla*. To ensure an adequate triangulation of data, we carried out a participant observation, employed a battery of semi-structured interviews, and undertook a qualitative analysis of the content of *Grupo Joly's* in-house SEO manual. All this was, in turn, complemented by a quantitative study, in which, thanks to Google Analytics, we determined the Group's web traffic from the year it implemented its SEO strategies to the present day (that is, the period 2018–2021).

In what follows, we first outline the design of the participant observation, which is based essentially on the methodologies described in Angrosino (2012) and Pons and Monistrol (2017). Second, we describe the configuration of the semi-structured interviews and the steps taken to complete the content analysis of *Grupo Joly's* in-house SEO manual. Third, and finally, we explain how we went about collecting the quantitative data.

The participant observation was carried out during the initial phase of implementation of SEO in the newsroom of the *Diario de Sevilla* (2018). Our objective here was to determine the type of SEO work carried out by journalists within the online news media and the extent of their knowledge and understanding of the techniques of SEO. To obtain these insights, the observer was integrated into the newsroom of the *Diario de Sevilla*. All the paper's journalists were aware they were being observed and were fully informed about the goals of the study.

Additionally, to complement this participant observation, we conducted 10 semi-structured interviews (Coller, 2000; Valles, 2002) with employees of the *Diario de Sevilla* using the NVivo qualitative analysis tool.

The questions put to the interviewees were the following:

- How would you define SEO?
- Do you think it is important to use SEO strategies in the newsrooms of a digital newspaper? Why?
- Do you think journalists have enough information and sufficient guidelines to be able to create news stories that are optimised for SEO?
- What SEO strategies do you apply on a daily basis as part of your productive routines as a journalist?
- Do you think a journalist should be able to implement SEO strategies or, on the contrary, these strategies should be the responsibility of the web positioning department? Why?
- Do you think that having to carry out SEO strategies affects the quality of the news and its broader social role? Why?
- How do you envision the future of journalism and its relationship with SEO?

In selecting the interviewees, we took into account the following so-called inclusion criteria (Valles, 2002), which consider who has the most relevant information, who is most socially and physically accessible, who is most willing to inform and cooperate and who has the greatest communicative fluency to ensure the accuracy of the information reported. Having concluded our participant observation and the interviews, we proceeded to analyse the content of the SEO manual that all the journalists of the *Grupo Joly* employ when working on their news items. To do so, a semantic network analysis was carried out based on the repetition of terms, using the NVivo tool. The *Grupo Joly's* in-house SEO manual explains what SEO is and its importance for news visibility and includes the principal elements that a journalist must optimise and explains how to optimise them.

Finally, we accessed Google Analytics to obtain the quantitative results for *Grupo Joly* between June 2018, the beginning of the implementation of SEO in the Group, and October 2021, the date this study was undertaken.

3. Results

In conducting this study, we are interested in identifying the principal dimensions involved in the implementation of a model of SEO in an online newspaper, the *Diario de Sevilla*. In so doing, we take into consideration the particular point of view of the editor/journalist as well as that of the SEO expert.

The participant observation allowed us to confirm that in order to ensure the full implementation of SEO in a newsroom, a clear distinction has to be drawn between the work of the

journalist (editor) and the work of the SEO expert (as carried out by the SEO department), given that their functions and skills differ greatly.

Consequently, we identified two significant levels at which SEO operates: (1) the strategic level – dependent, in this instance, on the SEO department and with a global impact on the online newspaper, and (2) the tactical level – the direct responsibility of the editors and with an impact on the news and journalistic production of the online newspaper. The outcomes of this study have been transformed into 16 SEO checkpoints that are explained in detail in an earlier study by the authors (Lopezosa et al., 2021).

Each of the semi-structured interviews focused specifically on understanding the processes of strategic assimilation experienced by the SEO department and the processes of tactical application of SEO techniques by the different departments of the *Diario de Sevilla*. Their respective responses confirmed that:

- In general, SEO is perceived as being very important in the newsrooms as it helps attract more readers. The interviewees consider that SEO does not affect the quality of the news.
- The interviewees report having a good understanding of what SEO entails. Their responses point to the emergence of two basic definitions of SEO. The first sees SEO as the set of techniques or practices that ensure news items appear at the top of Google SERPs, while the second is more closely related to the work of the professional whose responsibility it is to position the website in Google.
- They report having received sufficient training in SEO. The interviewees believe that major efforts are being made to train journalists in SEO.
- They consider that when applied correctly, SEO does not affect the quality of the news. In fact, they believe that the future of journalism depends on digital platforms and, specifically, on Google. As such, they feel newsrooms will tend to seek a greater convergence between journalism and visibility in search engines.
- The interviewees recognize that having an SEO department in the newsroom is essential and that, therefore, the newsroom and the SEO department should work shoulder to shoulder.

Additionally, *Grupo Joly's* in-house SEO manual is confirmed as constituting a handbook that addresses the basic strategies that all news items published in its digital edition must comply with.

Finally, after more than three years of the intense digital overhaul of all of *Grupo Joly's* newspapers (2018–2021), the data point to a clear upward trend in the news Group's web visibility. As the following tables show, over the last three years, increases of up to 500% have been recorded in the user traffic of some of its newspapers (Table 1), with two marked peaks,

one coinciding with the first wave of Covid-19 (the May 2020 lockdown) and the other with the second wave of the pandemic in the new year (January 2021). The turning point that the pandemic has represented for digital users is most clearly seen in Table 2.

| | June-18 | Oct-21 | Variation (%) |
|----------------------|-----------|------------|---------------|
| Grupo Joly | 2,835,835 | 13,984,684 | 393.14 |
| Diariodesevilla.es | 961,332 | 6,200,538 | 544.99 |
| Diariodecadiz.es | 556,347 | 2,125,240 | 282.00 |
| Malagahoy.es | 240,408 | 1,196,173 | 397.56 |
| Diariodejerez.es | 176,329 | 582,511 | 230.35 |
| Huelvainformacion.es | 189,724 | 1,143,377 | 502.65 |
| Eldiadicordoba.es | 157,985 | 557,738 | 253.03 |
| Europasur.es | 160,242 | 655,325 | 308.96 |
| Granadahoy.com | 228,597 | 1,030,063 | 350.60 |
| Diariodealmeria.es | 135,333 | 552,812 | 308.48 |

Table 1. Evolution in user traffic between June 2018, date of the introduction of *Grupo Joly's* transformation plan, and October 2021, latest available data. Source: Google Analytics.

| | March, 2020 | April, 2020 | May, 2020 | June, 2020 | Difference vs same month previous year (%) | Difference 2019 vs 2018 (%) |
|----------------------|-------------|-------------|------------|------------|--|-----------------------------|
| Grupo Joly | 14,349,784 | 12,825,737 | 16,631,544 | 12,076,932 | 25.59 | 115.68 |
| Diariodesevilla.es | 5,366,841 | 5,328,324 | 6,267,981 | 4,442,040 | 7.02 | 131.83 |
| Diariodecadiz.es | 2,249,794 | 2,073,209 | 2,405,904 | 1,998,991 | 18.89 | 93.52 |
| Malagahoy.es | 1,742,258 | 1,119,655 | 1,817,575 | 1,261,998 | 78.93 | 164.52 |
| Diariodejerez.es | 762,943 | 715,477 | 809,482 | 552,770 | 57.03 | 59.75 |
| Huelvainformacion.es | 757,134 | 642,338 | 754,922 | 719,780 | 44.64 | 96.21 |
| Eldiadicordoba.es | 685,523 | 489,454 | 649,372 | 477,032 | 28.89 | 105.95 |
| Europasur.es | 606,968 | 547,425 | 1,258,150 | 627,706 | 25.32 | 123.71 |
| Granadahoy.com | 1,443,410 | 1,309,718 | 1,877,250 | 1,326,386 | 64.53 | 115.32 |
| Diariodealmeria.es | 677,906 | 612,705 | 815,033 | 683,592 | 35.84 | 147.04 |

Table 2. Evolution in user traffic during the months of the pandemic lockdown, when user records were set in all the Group's newspapers. Source: Google Analytics.

As can also be seen in the graph (Figure 1) showing the evolution in the dynamics undergone by each of the different newspaper websites, growth in the number of users has been exponential

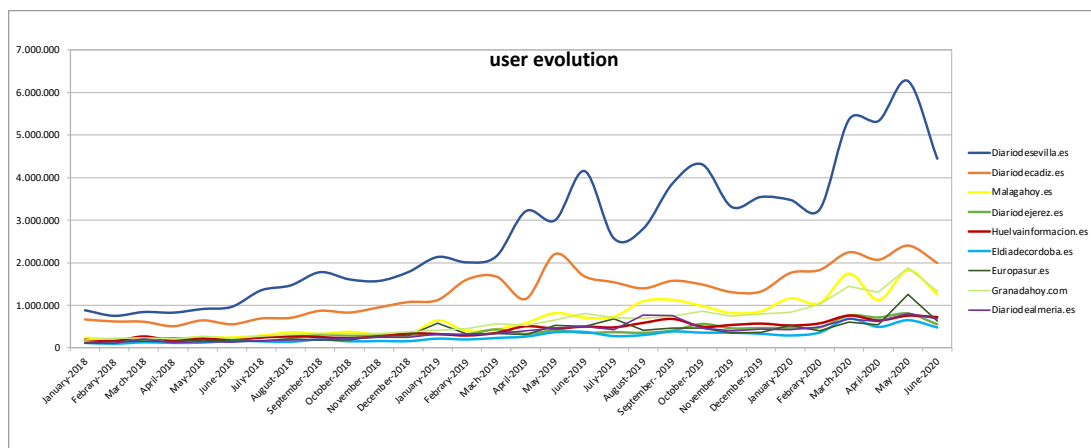


Figure 1. Evolution in number of *Grupo Joly* users, disaggregated by its nine newspapers (January 2018–October 2021). Source: Google Analytics

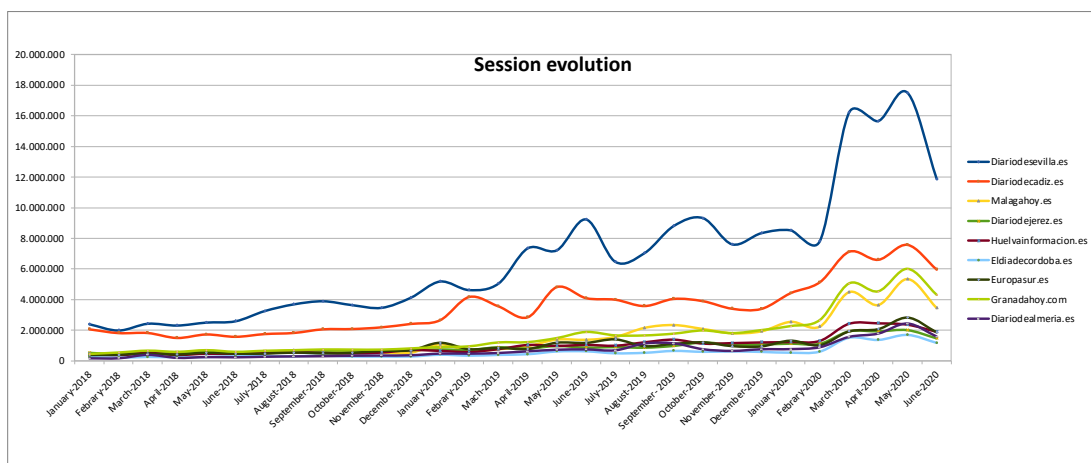


Figure 2. Evolution in number of *Grupo Joly* sessions, disaggregated by its nine newspapers (January 2018–October 2021). Source: Google Analytics.

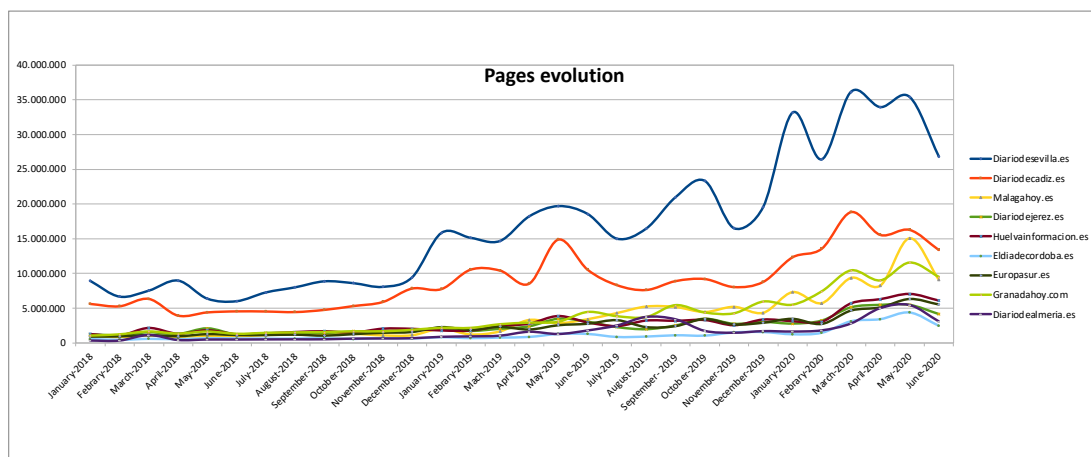


Figure 3. Evolution in number of *Grupo Joly* pageviews, disaggregated by its nine newspapers (January 2018–October 2021). Source: Google Analytics.

in all nine, with the *Diario de Sevilla* leading the way as the Group's leading newspaper and the primary lever of change. This growth is paralleled by the newspapers' metrics both for sessions (Figure 2) and pageviews (Figure 3).

From the perspective of SEO, the following graphs show how the content optimization strategies for search engines (organic traffic) have served to trigger growth in this first phase of

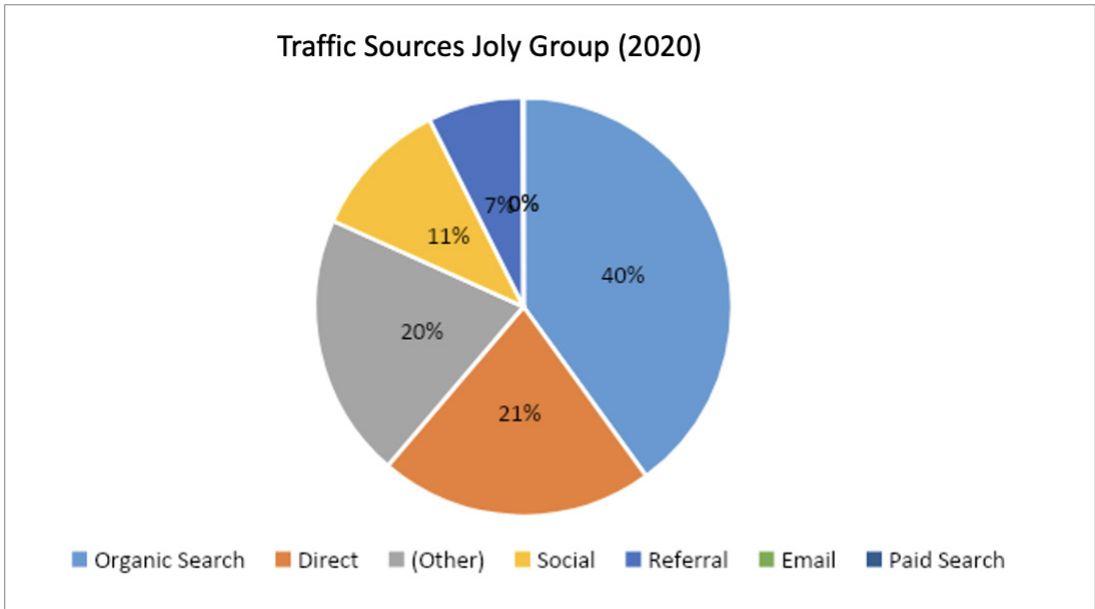


Figure 4. Origin of user traffic for the nine *Grupo Joly* newspapers in 2020, the year recording the greatest rise in the number of users. Source: Google Analytics.

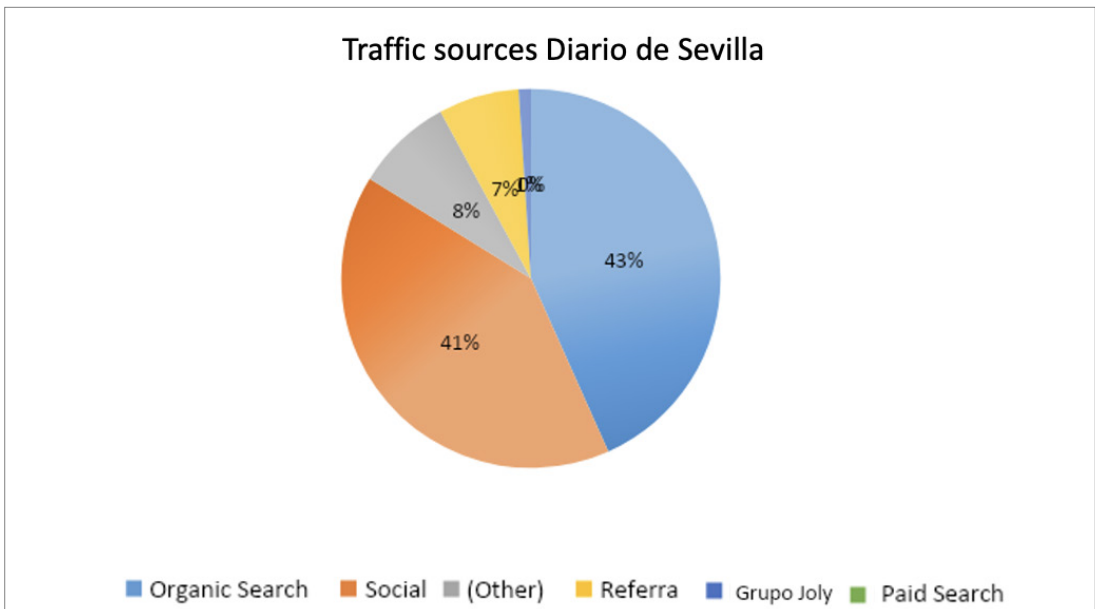


Figure 5. Origin of user traffic for the *Diario de Sevilla* as the Group's leading newspaper and the primary lever of change in 2020. Source: Google Analytics.

the Group's transformation. It is evident that this has become the primary way of accessing content in general in the Group, accounting for 40% of recorded users (Figure 4) and even more (43%) in the case of the *Diario de Sevilla* (Figure 5).

4. Discussion and conclusions

The digital transformation project implemented by the *Grupo Joly*, a leading media group in Andalusia, serves to confirm how SEO has gone from being the specialized task of computer technicians and engineers to occupy a central position in the news production business; how the purely quantitative concerns of SEO – that is, achieving visibility in the digital environment and winning audience as the primary business factor – have undergone a qualitative reorientation with direct repercussions for the way journalists work and for the introduction of new formats and content (Trillo-Domínguez & Alberich-Pascual, 2017); and, also, how the business has gone from incorporating a sole professional specialized in SEO to the dissemination of the SEO culture throughout the newsroom, to the point that SEO is now firmly established as a strategic factor for the digital transformation of the company.

First and foremost, the results confirm that in order to fully integrate the practices of SEO into a newsroom, the work of the journalists/editors and that of the SEO experts or managers need to be clearly differentiated throughout the news media company. Thus, the SEO department fulfils a strategic function of analysis and has a key role in generating guidelines for editors, while it is the job of the newsroom to apply the SEO recommendations without this affecting the journalistic quality of the news.

Another way to understand this distribution of tasks is as follows:

- The SEO department: takes responsibility for the general SEO strategies of the news outlet, analyses the impact on the search engines of applying these strategies, trains and provides support to journalists and editors, and applies the technical SEO required for the maintenance of the portal.
- Editors/Journalists: need to know how search results affect their news items and how they can attract more users, understand the basics of search engines and apply the visibility recommendations prepared by the SEO department to their work.

This study confirms the journalists' obvious interest in the optimization of news items for search engines and the practical application of SEO techniques to the news, in terms of both their planning and production routines. Likewise, the results reported by this study serve to identify the most common SEO strategies employed by journalists, on the one hand, and the SEO department, on the other. Indeed, the implementation of SEO strategies is perfectly evident in both ambits, that is, in the writing of news stories by journalists and in the global

strategic optimization practised by SEO experts. In fact, in the writing and optimization of news items, keywords are used in the headline, the standfirst, the body text, the skyline, the photo captions, and in the words in bold, etc., while in the SEO department the practices have a more strategic role focused on advising the paper's journalists about search engine positioning and identifying trends in news story searches to obtain more readers.

This chapter serves to corroborate that, when it comes to the implementation of SEO in a newspaper with a long tradition in its print edition, the possibilities of being able to do so effectively are high. Proof of this is the coherence demonstrated by the production routines of the main actors involved in the implementation described in this case study: that is, the SEO department, the digital edition of the *Diario de Sevilla* and the print/digital sections.

Moreover, the methodology employed here for gathering data, based on participant observation, semi-structured interviews and the analysis of Grupo Joly's in-house SEO manual, has proved to be a good way of understanding how an online newsroom operates in a context of the growing importance of web visibility.

In short, these operations are carefully articulated by the SEO department, as the head of search engine positioning strategies; the professionals that work on the digital edition, in their roles as news editors and as points of support for the journalists of the other sections; and the journalists of the different sections that work on the digital/print version, as the main creators of news stories for this news media group.

Likewise, our data serve to verify that the journalists consider SEO strategies essential for the writing of an online newspaper like the *Diario de Sevilla*, principally because many readers search for their information via Google and, so, appearing on the first page of the keyword searches means not only that they can compete for the top ranks in the SERPs but that they can also obtain more web traffic in the form of new users.

In line with previous studies, we are able to confirm the fact that newsrooms today have a good understanding of the SEO mission and its relationship with the visibility of journalistic production. Yet, in contrast with the findings of certain authors (Suárez-Sucre, 2017; López-García, 2017; Muerza-Ferrer, 2017; Trillo-Domínguez & Ollero, 2018), here we have described the case of a newsroom in which journalistic interests can be successfully combined with the objectives of SEO, at least from the important stand point of professionals working in the newspaper sector.

It is apparent that the boundaries between the journalistic, marketing and commercial worlds are increasingly being weakened, in terms of both their content and the specific focus of their respective teams. On the one hand, the most highly specialized professionals of the newsroom have to respond to the needs of the largest projects, whether or not there is a commercial agreement behind it, and on the other, it is the SEO content, fully oriented on the user, that

is doing most to break down the barriers that have traditionally separated the information of opinion from advertising.

As far as the optimisation of search engines is concerned, the experience gained by the *Diario de Sevilla* over the last three years provides a clear example of the importance of combining specialized profiles dedicated entirely to improving positioning (both in terms of technical and content optimization) and of the need for the implementation and dissemination of an SEO culture throughout a newsroom until such knowledge and strategies have been integrated as just one more factor in the journalistic routines associated with agenda setting, writing and specific focus.

However, restructuring online newspapers in this way is a challenge across the board, from those taking their first initial steps to the emerging realities of various leading newspapers in Latin America (the case, for example, of *El Tiempo* in Colombia and *La Nación* in Argentina), newsrooms are being transfigured as they seek to adapt to the communication flows of the digital environment and social networks, to the different challenges brought by this transformation and to the new journalistic constraints of the profession. In this sense, the sector has initiated a debate about the survival or otherwise of the various sections that constituted the central axis around which newspapers have been structured as they shift to a model that can respond, in one of its channels, to the production of SEO content.

In the case study described in this chapter, the good quantitative results reported by Google Analytics for the *Grupo Joly* have even conditioned the decision to reinforce the newsroom with the hiring of new SEO professionals. Moreover, the team that is currently being formed is highly illustrative of the latest trends affecting the labour conditions of newspaper companies: the SEO professionals are hired as freelancers, their renewal in the post depending on their meeting goals measured in terms of increased web traffic.

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