

## **Platforms, influencers and distributed narratives**

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# Platforms, influencers and distributed narratives

*Sports communication, beyond sports journalism*

## INTRODUCTION

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Joan Ramon Rodríguez-Amat, PhD - Principal Lecturer at the School of Journalism, Media and Communication, University of Sheffield. His main area of research revolves around communicative spaces, the cultural constructions of time and space, citizenship, and power (see <http://communicativespaces.org>). This threefold discussion emerges at the intersection of research on media governance, cultural production and democratic debates; and the communities and identities - including sexual, national and cultural identities - that emerge from the geopolitics of social networking platforms and communication technologies.

The proliferation of platforms in global media ecosystems has changed the forms of stories, and narrative processes in their entirety throughout cultural production (Poell, Nieborg & Duffy, 2021). This special issue anchors this premise to explore through its articles several cases of narrative innovations and aspects related to transmedia, social interactions, and culture. This starting point opens and contributes to updating a territory of academic and research discussion of more than two decades of transformation, which is mixed with other social and cultural phenomena such as fandom (Booth's volume, 2018 or Fiske's classic, 2002), and the role of celebrities (see, for example,

Turner's work, 2010), and *influencers* (Booth & Matic, 2011).

This introduction is structured around the concept of platformization in tension with works on celebrities to propose the notion of *distributed storytelling* as a concept that allows explaining some of the narrative innovations that emerge in this context of ecosystem transformation. The case used for this case is the analysis of the activity on social networks of Shakira's song that later earned her the Latin Grammy of 2023 (Sandhar & Dacosta, 2023). This initial reflection is just one more example that will contribute to contextualizing the fertile possibilities and combinations both for the creation and for the

analysis and understanding of the stories that weave global culture.

The concept of platformization, already used by Helmond to refer to “the rise of the platform as the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the social web and its consequences, in its historical context. Platformization entails the extension of social media platforms into the rest of the web and their drive to make external web data “platform ready.” (2015). It is therefore a phenomenon that permeates many aspects of modern society, leading to the development of platformization studies, which focus on professional and labor dynamics (Casilli & Posada, 2019; Pires & Tomasena, & Piña 2024), creative, and interactional interactions in which they follow one another thanks to the mediation of a complex digital interface that extends social, cultural, or professional interactions, through mobile screens and data warehouses, building a “connective world” (Van Dijk, Poell & DeWaal, 2018). This field of study is distinguished by its emphasis on cross-cutting aspects that extend from the conditions of content production to the conditions of interaction with them; and in between, aspects related to distributed production (throughout the length and breadth of networks) and its algorithmic distribution. For this reason, platformization studies also consider the role of fans and *influencers* in the dissemination and interpretation of cultural production, in addition to paying attention to the precarious economic conditions faced by platform workers.

Within the complexity and simultaneities that occur in platformization, several logics can be distinguished that overlap and mix: Economic, productive and labor logics on the one hand; legal and governance logics on the other; and the logics of cultural production and consumption. In this way, while it is insisted that platforms function as intermediaries between

online access communities and proprietary industrial infrastructures, and often extend their influence to encompass physical and economic value, they also generate conditions for the formation of cultural communities in frameworks of precarious legality (Schor, et al, 2020, Duffy, 2020). To distinguish these three aspects, this text opens the three fronts separately.

The economic and productive logic of platforms modifies the relations between producers and owners in complex ways because the forms of resource generation and financing are also divorced from the complex processes of distribution and consumption. Platforms such as fast food, or parcel transport, or care for the elderly (Ticona & Mateescu, 2018), are installed in logics of precariousness and interaction that under masks of virtuality – or online interactions – mask conditions of materiality that evade legal protection frameworks. There are many open research fronts that explore these relationship conditions and the social communities that emerge in the shadow of these structures and interfaces (examples include booktubers (Tomasena & Scolari, 2024), riders (Pires, Tomasena, & Piña, 2024) or YouTube communities (Pires, Masanet, Tomasena & Scolari, 2024).

Platform revenue and monetization models are also part of these productive and economic logics, and while platforms are often oriented towards cultural production, traditional revenue models have also evolved in favor of digital logics of impact and reception measures that update contemporary ad-based revenue streams, for example in the music sector. subscriptions, online sales, or live events (Marshall, 2013). These dynamics extend – in cascade – to cultural creators who find monetization opportunities in models that simultaneously feed on complex algorithmic logics – and incomprehensible to the creators themselves – that send them to create in uncertain, precarious

and trans-platform environments (see, for example, Glatt, 2022). Among the platforms that complement the work of creators with much more personalized monetization models are microfinancing, or direct support from fans through platforms such as Patreon (Bonifacio, Hair, Wohn, 2023; Regner 2021) or OnlyFans (Hamilton, et al, 2022) among others. In this context, professional content creation is mixed and confused with the privacy of artists and with content created by fans or non-professional creators who distribute content through platforms and social networks. User-generated content (UGC) is spread and multiplied by platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, allowing individuals or small groups to create and disseminate content without large production budgets (classically anticipated by Jenkins, 2006b).

These dynamics that define the economic and productive logic of the platforms, generate – as a by-product of this activity – rich data repositories that turn the platforms into databases that can be analyzed and processed to identify – behaviors, models, patterns, and possibilities of demographic, sociocultural, or sexual analysis – that the platforms can return to creators to help them develop content by improving the quality of production (Anderson, 2006); or selling to help businesses determine consumer profiles; or to the security forces to identify models of criminal behavior, in data, dataism, or dataveillance (Van Dijk, 2014). This dynamic of monetization and datafication places large platforms at the top of a “winner-takes-all” structure, as Thomas Poell described it in his inaugural lecture at the University of Amsterdam’s Chair of Data, Culture, and Institutions (Poell, 2022). And although it could be argued whether it is more of a pyramid fraud, the exploitation model is clear.

From a legal and organizational point of view, platforms also happen in an intermediate zone of alegal or precarious opportunity. Many platforms operate globally, often within tax and regulatory havens, and adhere to selective sets of laws (Bloch-Webba, 2019). This dynamic has turned the idea of a platform into an economic and legal model that favors corporations; in this sense, corporations such as Pornhub have adopted the platform model (Rodriguez-Amat, & Belinskaya, 2023). For example, ride-sharing platforms such as Uber and Lyft connect passengers with drivers and control access to data, pricing structures, and user experiences, although users may perceive them as neutral service providers (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016). In addition, complex negotiations over access to resources such as data, information, decision-making processes, and legal frameworks further highlight the intricate dynamics at play (classically, Gillespie’s original work, 2010, and its development in 2017; Plantin et al., 2016) that establish conditions for publication, sharing and moderation of content. Economic processes, including profit generation, algorithmic management, and working conditions, are integral to these negotiations.

Precisely the issue of data is one of the key aspects that challenges the function and dynamics of platforms. Legal and ethical challenges include those related to copyright, fair use, and intellectual property, especially in the area of user-generated content and remix culture (Lessig, 2004; Sarikakis, Krug, Rodriguez-Amat, 2017). Lately, however, the discussion about the ownership of available content has shifted to the debate around the databases of generative artificial intelligence models. Examples of this new dynamic are Apple’s recent announcement of an agreement with OpenAI for its data to also be used to train ChatGPT (Kleinman, McMahon, 2024).

These legal and organisational frameworks, which slip platform logics between economic, labour, productive and legal precariousness, articulate cultural production more and more clearly and frame the forms of participation and production, consumption and distribution of content. While cultural platforms are built on the principle that they offer unprecedented opportunities for creators, they also present challenges, such as sustainability for creators and managing complex issues related to copyright and intellectual property (Sanchez-Cartas, 2021). These dynamics continue to shape and redefine the landscape of cultural production in the digital age.

In this sense, the cultural and community and platform logic extends symbolically from the ways in which platforms exert influence on cultural production, consumption patterns, and cultural diffusion, affecting both the intangible and material aspects of the creative industries (Duffy, Poell, Nieborg, 2019). These forms of influence include social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube that have revolutionized cultural consumption and interpretation by “democratizing” access to cultural production, and allowing artists, writers, filmmakers, and creators to reach global audiences and circumventing traditional mechanisms of control (Burgess and Green, 2009) and misleadingly feeding narratives about networks and platforms as spaces of “free access” and “solidarity” between participants (Yu, Trere, Bonini, 2022). It is true, however, that platforms have amplified diverse voices and perspectives, fostering greater inclusion within the cultural landscape, and that they foster hybridity and cultural fusion, leading to innovative forms of expression and dynamic feedback-driven creative processes (Lobato & Thomas, 2015).

Platforms facilitate audience participation and interaction, giving rise to fan communities, fan

fiction, remix culture, and active engagement with cultural products (Baym, 2015). The interaction between social media and traditional media involves a dynamic exchange of content, in which social media discourse shapes traditional media articles and vice versa. This exchange is facilitated by the convergence of different communities and audiences, which allows for the rapid dissemination of social media content (Giles, 2018). Traditional media content also finds a digital foothold, subject to wide dissemination and commentary in the online sphere. Social media platforms, particularly Twitter, exemplify the power of reciprocal exchange and community sharing, revealing intricate networks and patterns of content dissemination (Passman et al., 2014).

In the same way that platforms define conditions for interactivity and interaction thanks to the design of their interfaces, they also define the conditions for creativity. The rise of ephemeral content, popularized by platforms such as *Snapchat* and *Instagram Stories*, emphasizes immediacy and authenticity in content creation (Leaver et al., 2020). They are new forms of narrative creation that call for new forms of research and new conceptual models that help explain the processes that move viral through global networks, for example, memes (Gebbers, & Pilipets, 2024; Carpenter, 2024).

However, platforms’ sophisticated content management algorithms have far-reaching implications for cultural consumption patterns and in turn significantly influence users’ exposure to content, defining which artists or genres gain prominence and provoking debates about algorithms among users (e.g. Silva, Chen, Zhu, 2024, or Prey, Esteve-Del-Valle, 2024).

The platform model, moreover, is mixed with social media discussions and involves various entities, including traditional celebrities, in-

ternet celebrities, journalists, commentators, media organizations, high-profile or verified accounts, renowned fans, parody accounts, companies, brands, organizations, and bots. Each of these actors contributes uniquely to the intricate tapestry of social media discourse (Davis et al., 2018; Alterkavi & Erbay, 2021; Ferrara, 2020).

Influencers are agents who have a great capacity for dissemination because they have accumulated a large number of followers. Their activity shapes trends, disseminates content and influences consumer behaviour, which significantly affects the reception and popularity of cultural products (Abidin, 2016, Zhang, 2023 ). While celebrities often come from high-profile entertainment, sports, politics, or other fields, and their lives and actions are subject to intense public scrutiny and media coverage. In this sense, celebrities have a high public profile and can influence public opinion and behavior due to their visibility and social status (see, for example, the work of Dyer, 2019).

The centrality of networks and connections in the cultivation of celebrities is well established in some fields (Currid-Halkett, 2010). Online celebrities, in particular, rely heavily on strategic networking facilitated by mechanisms such as multichannel networks and collaborative ventures (Lobato, 2016; Rasmussen, 2018). Celebrity culture emphasizes interpersonal relationships, extending beyond individuals to include their associates, partners, and family members, who can also achieve celebrity status (Rojek, 2001; Deller, 2016).

The discourse around the private lives of celebrities, characterized by gossip and speculation, is prevalent in fan communities and has gained prominence on social media platforms (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Prins, 2020). The analytical discourse based on fans' interpretations of ce-

lebrities' creative products further contributes to the complexity of this interaction (Zhang, 2021). Fans, anti-fans, and general audiences often compete with celebrities and their proxies for narrative control (Dare-Edwards, 2014; Baym, 2018).

Platforms such as Twitter create a "context collapse", in which diverse audiences converge within a single social context (boyd, 2008). Navigating these multiple audiences is crucial for celebrities to maintain their public image and manage impressions (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). This underscores the importance of networking, relationships, and audience engagement in online celebrity culture.

Fan work encompasses a wide range of practices, from altruistic activities in the "gift economy" to monetized efforts (Chin, 2018). This includes the dissemination and recirculation of content on social media, often on behalf of celebrities and fan-centric entities, regardless of explicit endorsement. Tensions arise around ownership, authority, copyright, image governance, and the potential exploitation of unpaid labor (Jenkins, 2006).

In fan communities, certain individuals gain elevated status as "big-name fans" or "super fans," who possess substantial "fan capital" due to their sustained engagement, frequent contributions, entertainment value, demonstrated talents or skills, and access to insider information or individuals within the fan community (Hills, 2006; Sarikakis, Krug, & Rodríguez-Amat, 2017).

### **Shakira, and the distributed narrative**

One of the cases that has marked the year 2023 is that of the phenomenon Shakira and Pique, which exploded in January with the publication of the song that anticipated the couple's

divorce, and rounded off in November with the confirmation of the Latin Grammy (Sandhar & Dacosta, 2023).

Shakira exemplifies stardom as a transnational celebrity, her music transcends gender and linguistic boundaries. Her ethnic identity and her portrait as an idealized Colombian and Latin American citizen make her a figure embraced by fans, political figures, and commercial brands (Cepeda, 2003; Fuchs, 2010; Douglas, 2022). Shakira's ability to cross cultural boundaries, negotiate feminine archetypes, and navigate her complex identities enhances her transnational appeal (Gontovnik, 2010).

Shakira's relationship with Gerard Piqué, a prominent figure in football, further underscores their collective influence as a Spanish-speaking and transcontinental power couple. Their partnership is significant for its appeal within Spanish-speaking communities and beyond (Quiroga, 2017). Shakira's music, which includes compositions that reflect personal experiences such as her separation from Piqué, illustrates her use of music as a means of personal expression (Doyle, 2013; Goodman & Carlson, 2014) in addition to their influence within the Spanish-speaking world, and their interactions through platforms with fan communities.

The example of Shakira and Pique can be studied as a reference opportunity to understand processes of innovation in the formation of narratives that emerge through social media platforms and that contribute to critical discussions about the creative industries and the political economy of *influencers* and celebrities. In this way, the dynamics of interactions between fandom and audiences, and the emerging platforms and music industry around the release of the song "SHAKIRA || BZRP Music Sessions #53" in January 2023 helps to open up the

space of cases occupied by this special issue of *Obra Digital*, as a case of distributed narrative, that is, a bouquet of stories that are disseminated through platforms and that acquire a distributed nature that is autonomous from more or less planned commercial narratives.

Computational methods (Trilling, van Atteveldt & Arcila Calderon, 2022) were used to collect and analyze Twitter data focused on Shakira's transnational stardom and her relationship with Gerard Piqué. Using a Python script (modified since Padilla, 2020), tweets were collected between January 8 and 16, 2023. The focus was on hashtags and keywords such as "piqué", "shakira", "BZRP", "Bizarrap", "mz53", "Piqué", "Clara Chía" and "ClaraChía". This method yielded a dataset of 6,815,565 tweets, most of them in Spanish (5,735,899), English (373,900), Portuguese (273,307) and French (72,691).

The findings of this study illuminate orchestrated promotional strategies and community-driven reactions within Shakira and Piqué's *fandom*. One notable aspect is the "Controlled/ Programmed Explosion," where strategically timed press releases generated anticipation for the song's release. Key *influencers* and prominent fans were recruited to amplify engagement, which contributed significantly to the campaign's reach. After the release, "Ripples, Branches, and Continuations" were detected, characterized by interpretive chains where fans explored, discussed, and created parodies of the song. These activities fostered parallel narratives and interconnected conversations, allowing an interpretive network to emerge in the hands of fans. This communal interaction was further underscored by the formation of distinct factions within the *fandom*. Fans aligned themselves with Shakira or Piqué, expressing their loyalty through hashtags such as #teampique and #teamshakira.



On the periphery of this very personal activity – of celebrities, influencers, and fans – new agents emerged that further developed the conversation and narrative networks. The involvement of corporate entities such as Casio and Renault opened the front for “networked brand management-driven responses.” These companies strategically aligned themselves with Shakira or Piqué to improve their brand visibility, demonstrating the interplay between celebrity culture and corporate branding. The social media managers of both corporations made gestures back and forth, starting by encouraging divergence and polarization, to end up retracting and returning to the central space of the discursive range.

In this sense, the research highlights an intricate dynamic of the platform’s logic, revealing a pyramidal scheme of *fandom* and network capital that opens up to a dispersed participation of users who end up appropriating the narrative generating new and decentralized journeys. The results emphasize the initial and orchestrated nature of the promotional strategies and organic, community-driven responses within Shakira and Piqué’s *fandom*; but they also underscore the opportunity to dedicate future research to the peripheries of these networks. Only by exploring outside the center of cultural-capital can one understand the real dynamics of fan engagement and their dynamics of narrative creation, as well as generate methodological and conceptual opportunities to capture that form of narrative innovation.

### **Innovations in Storytelling and Media**

This special issue of *Obra Digital* compiles several examples of different nature of innovative narrative experiences and studies that explore these innovations. Each contribution delves into the specific applications and impacts of these

strategies, highlighting their importance in contemporary cultural and media landscapes: the body of contributions is made up of four articles that offer a range of cases and analyses: the first explores Alternative Reality Games versus the narrative universe of Taylor Swift (Lucía Garrido-Rodríguez y Alfonso Freire-Sánchez); the second, considers interactive crime novels and gamification theories as educational tools (Irene Solanich Sanglas). The third article is about the experience of rapper Lil Nas X and the transmedia strategies that surround his album “Montero” (2021) (Ana Sedeño-Valdellós y Ana Alicia Balbuena Morilla); and the fourth contribution considers the case of hololive, the Japanese virtual talent agency consisting of virtual YouTubers as a transmedia experience (Rafael Dirques David Regis, Paula Gonçalves, Júlio César Ferreira y Gabriela Diniz). The fifth article, in *doctoral thesis results section*, focuses on studying gender inequality in journalism in times of digital convergence and platformization (Nan Chen). These five articles open a space for narrative innovations and conceptual and methodological tools to study them within the framework of the media ecosystems of digital platforms

Alternate reality (ARG) games are a powerful tool for engaging fans within expansive narrative universes. In recent times, the impact of alternative reality games on the environmental knowledge of first-year students has been explored (Xiong, et al, 2024). Or to improve student learning in museums (Liang, et al., 2024). These games mix fiction with reality, creating immersive experiences for participants and help, for example, students to solve problems and explore solutions in game mode while developing their knowledge. In learning frameworks it is a very useful and creative way to increase the participation and involvement of students in the learning process; in fan frameworks,



success repeats and allows these principles of connection and engagement to be applied with brand strategies, illustrating the potential for ARGs to improve consumer engagement and loyalty. The article featured in this volume is a study of Taylor Swift's use of ARG and explores how different elements of the game are integrated into what becomes a communication strategy and narrative universe. The study consists of identifying the presence of the defining characteristics of successful ARGs following the theoretical foundations established by academics such as McGonigal (2011). In the case of Taylor Swift's communication initiative, the research positively identifies 19 of the 20 defining characteristics and concludes that Swift's communication strategy excels in the expert use of these elements to create a cohesive and engaging experience for fans across multiple platforms.

The possibilities of didactic exploration are also the focus of the second article of the volume. It uses the genre of crime fiction to investigate the didactic potential of interactive and transmedia narratives. The study analyzes how these narratives can be adapted, through interactive designs and transmedia, to be applied in educational contexts, and proposes innovative methods for teaching literature to secondary school students. The study is based on theoretical models such as that of Murray (1997), who highlighted the potential of digital environments to create attractive and participatory narrative experiences; and extends to educational theories of gamification and experiential learning, which suggest that interactive and game-based learning can improve student engagement and understanding (Gee, 2007; Deterding, 2015). The study describes the process of designing an engaging, educational, interactive narrative aimed at improving the teaching of literature; and in doing so, delves into the

practical aspects of the creation of interactive and transmedia crime novels for educational purposes, based on concrete examples and discussing the theoretical foundations of interactive narrative design.

The third article leaves the educational aspect and returns to the music industry, connecting again with the case of Taylor Swift. In this case, however, it is about the transmedia strategies employed by Lil Nas X in his visual album 'Montero' (2021) to understand how these strategies build the musician's identity and audience participation. Drawing on cultural and multimodal analysis, the study examines how the integration of visual motifs and social media content contributes to the construction of a queer identity and engages audiences through a cohesive narrative experience. To carry out this project, the theoretical frameworks of the construction of identity and media representation are rescued (Hall, 1997; Butler, 1990), and extend to digital narratives and transmedia through a multimodal analysis that allows us to understand the complex interaction between the different forms of media in contemporary storytelling (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). The study allows us to find out the potential of this rich narrative strategy to articulate and amplify marginalized voices. The intertextuality and cultural references within the visual album and its social media-related content underscore the innovative narrative techniques that define Lil Nas X's narrative approach.

The fourth article studies the world of VTubers – or virtual *influencers*. Recent research is dedicated to exploring the ways in which VTubers challenge the question of *influencer* authenticity (Schmieder, 2024). The VTuber phenomenon triggers debates about artificial intelligence and digital influencers and has generated a lot of exploratory work recently on ways to connect

with fans and their veracity (see for example Martin, et al 2024).

The article in this volume looks at the Japanese virtual talent agency Hololive and how it exemplifies the intersection of participatory culture and transmedia storytelling. The study explores how Hololive leverages the combination of narratives and engagement to increase audience engagement and engagement. The study provides insights into the mechanisms behind the success of VTubers and their fan communities, reflecting broader trends in digital culture and participatory media. The research highlights the role of fan-produced content and participatory culture in the broader success of VTuber's media. This reflects the significant impact of user-generated content and fan communities in shaping contemporary media landscapes.

In an era of complex platformization and convergence of the media, gender inequality in the journalistic professions remains a major challenge. A study investigates the factors that affect the careers of Spanish women journalists. Analyzing data from 387 surveyed professionals, the study shows the need for systemic change to achieve gender equality in the profession. Inequalities reflect ongoing struggles for representation and equity in media professions already systematically described (e.g., in Byerly, 2023; Melki & Mallat, 2019). Based on

the results, the article offers recommendations to promote gender equality in journalism, based on feminist studies on the media.

The studies presented in this special issue collectively underscore the transformative potential of interactive narratives and media convergence in various domains from advocacy in the music industry, to redefining gender inequalities in the professional sector. From music and education to journalism and fan culture, these innovative strategies not only redefine storytelling, but also foster deeper audience engagement and contribute to cultural and identity formation. Through the compilation of these various case studies, this issue provides valuable insights into the changing landscape of narrative and media and their opportunities for analysis.

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