

Independent Newsletters and Content Curation: The Editors' View

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This study presents a qualitative analysis of content curation in independent newsletters, specifically those not affiliated with mainstream media, with the aim of understanding their current and future roles in the media landscape. Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with editors of independent newsletters, which were subsequently analyzed using the Atlas.ti tool. This methodological approach facilitated the identification of convergences and divergences in their responses. The results reveal that editors draw inspiration from online content sources, organizational tools, and curation

methods, which directly influence the structure and aesthetics of their newsletters. High convergence was noted in key strategic aspects, such as involvement in niche communities, integration of original content, exploration of diverse monetization models, inclusion of multimedia elements, and continuous commitment to improving their newsletters. The findings affirm the significant current and future roles of newsletters and content curation in the media landscape.

Keywords: newsletters, content curation, email, editors, interviews.

Email newsletters have grown significantly in number in recent years, becoming a widely used communication channel for both businesses and media, as well as independent authors or creators (Convertkit, 2022; Newman, 2020; Newman, 2022). In the current landscape of digital communication, newsletters maintain a distinct profile from other Internet services and digital

content, ranging from social media platforms to mainstream media or corporate websites.

This justifies the need for academic studies, such as this one, to delve into the characteristics and the current and future roles of newsletters in the ecosystem of communication and digital content. This work aims to review the role of newsletters from independent creators and examine their impact in the media system.

Based on this overarching objective, the specific objectives are:

1. Explore the opinions of editors of independent newsletters on various aspects such as their reference sources or the tools and techniques they use for the development of their newsletters.
2. Determine if there is a convergence of perceptions among editors regarding the current rise of newsletters.
3. Identify the current and future roles of newsletters and content curation in the media system according to their editors.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Newsletters have not been extensively studied thus far, but there is recent research that covers both the analysis of newsletters belonging to media outlets and those from independent creators not affiliated with major media institutions.

In the first group, various works, such as those by Fagerlund (2016), McClaran (2017), Santos and Peixinho (2017), Rojas-Torrijos and González-Alba (2018), Seely and Spillman (2021), Silva-Rodríguez (2021), and Guallar *et al.* (2021, 2022), generally explore newsletters belonging to large digital media, primarily digital newspapers.

On the other hand, studies on newsletters by independent authors are more limited, though noteworthy ones include Zilberstein (2022), Naharro (2022), Cascón-Katchadourian *et al.* (2022), and Atreja *et al.* (2023). Some studies also investigate both types of newsletters, such as Andringa (2022), who categorizes newsletters based on the relationship between the editor and the reader into two major groups: functional newsletters, focused on providing curated information on a specialized or current topic, and relational newsletters, more focused on showcasing the editor's vision and personality, thus establishing a personal connection with the reader. There are also hybrid newsletters that incorporate both approaches.

Literature has addressed the reasons for the current success of newsletters, finding that elements such as their finite nature, having a clear beginning and end in contrast to social media timelines (Suárez 2020); the intimacy provided to the reader through email (Pell, 2021; Rourke, 2021), as well as the complicity established between the reader and the newsletter editor through this channel (Santos-Silva and Granado, 2019), contribute to their appeal.

In addition to the above, newsletters are considered a digital product particularly conducive to content curation (Lopezosa *et al.*, 2023), an essential

activity in the current digital communication ecosystem involving the selection of already published digital content presented in an adapted, contextualized, and targeted manner for a specific audience (Thorson and Wells, 2016; Guallar and Codina, 2018).

The characteristics of curation specifically in newsletters have been studied previously by Silva-Rodríguez (2021), Guallar *et al.* (2021, 2022), and Cascon-Katchadourian *et al.* (2022), among others. Finally, the aforementioned reader-editor complicity, as a characteristic of newsletters, also fosters greater appreciation from the reader for the content curated by the editor, as noted by some specialists: "Links shared within a newsletter are more highly-valued by the audience because there is trust between the author and the reader" (Cabrera, 2023).

METHODS

For this study, 15 semi-structured interviews (Valles, 2002) were conducted during 2022 and 2023 with editors of independent newsletters —those not affiliated with media outlets— of Ibero-American scope and recognized prestige. The sample N=15 was conditioned to our time frame of one year (second half of 2022 and first half of 2023). The criterion questions method (Valles, 2002) was applied, where experts were identified based on considerations such as who had the most relevant information, who was more physically and socially accessible, who was more willing to provide information, and who was most capable of communicating it accurately.

Specific data about the interviewees and their newsletters are provided in the following table (see Table 1).

Table 1. Editors of interviewed newsletters and identification of their bulletin

Interviewee	Newsletter	Description	Country/ origin	URL
Mauricio Cabrera	The Muffin	Trend analysis in the media industry, content production, and marketing.	Mexico	https://www.storybaker.co
Esteban Concia	Esteban Concia	Analysis of the latest developments in media, advertising, narratives, among others	Argentina	https://substack.com/@estebanconcia
Patricio Contreras	Sala de Herramientas; Hipergrafía	<i>Sala de Herramientas</i> provides ideas, resources, and tutorials on digital tools. <i>Hipergrafía</i> is a newsletter with recommendations about the world of books.	Chile	https://pfcontrerasv.com/tag/newsletters/

Interviewee	Newsletter	Description	Country/ origin	URL
Nicolás Copano	Copano News	Current news from the author's personal perspective.	Chile	https://copano.news
Lluís Cucarella	Laboratorio de Periodismo	Information, curation, and analysis on the media industry and its future.	Spain	https://laboratoriodeperiodismo.org/
Mariel Lozada	Mariel Lozada	Newsletter in which the author talks about herself and recommends readings, tools, and journalistic news	Venezuela	https://medium.com/@marielozadab
Roser Manté	A Magazine	Information and resources for companies to enhance their communication, including strategies and best practices.	Spain	https://www.rosermante.cat
Ismael Nafría	Tendenci@s	Comprehensive information on current events and analysis of the media and digital content sector.	Spain	https://tendencias.substack.com
Chus Naharro	Chusletter	Content on online marketing, especially on newsletters and email marketing.	Spain	https://chusnaharro.com/newsletter/
Antonio Ortiz	Causas y Azares; Error 500	<i>Causas y Azares</i> is a newsletter curating news on a wide range of topics selected under a personal focus. Error 500 is a newsletter centered on current events in technology.	Spain	https://causasyazares.substack.com
Héctor Pérez	Zumitow	Daily news about investments and Wall Street.	Spain	https://zumitow.com
Eva Sanagustín	Content News	Curation of news on marketing, communication, branding, among other topics.	Spain	https://www.evasanagustin.com

Interviewee	Newsletter	Description	Country/ origin	URL
Javier Saul	Lunes	News and updates from the journalism sector, especially digital journalism.	Argentina	https://lunes.substack.com
David Soler Crespo	África Mundi	Information and analysis about Africa.	Spain	https://africamundi.substack.com
Luis Miguel Pedrero Esteban	Audio Gen	Current news and analysis of the digital audio sector	Spain	https://audiogen.substack.com

Source: Own elaboration.

The questions have been formulated considering the specific objectives of this research, and the responses have been collected via email and subsequently transcribed. Once this was done, the responses were coded (see Table 2) and the results were analyzed using the qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti (Paulus and Lester, 2015; Lopezosa *et al.*, 2022). This tool allowed, on one hand, to identify response patterns under convergences and divergences, and on the other hand, to define specific themes and categories for subsequent coding and analysis.

Table 2. Questions developed during the interviews and specific objectives for each of them

1. Which newsletters (or other digital products or services) have served as references or inspiration for the development of your newsletter?	Reference products for the development of the newsletter.
2. Which tools and/or techniques do you use to identify and curate content for your newsletter?	Tools and techniques for content curation in the newsletter.
3. How do you envision the future or upcoming evolution of your newsletter?	Future of your newsletter.
4. To what do you attribute the rise of newsletters, both in terms of production and consumption?	Rise of newsletters.
5. Do you believe newsletters will play a significant role in the current and future media landscape? Could you justify your answer?	Role of newsletters in the present and future.
6. How do you foresee the future or upcoming evolution of content curation in digital communication products?	Role of content curation in digital communication.

Source: Own elaboration.

RESULTS

Here we present the results of the interviews, focusing on the different coding themes applied with ATLAS.ti.

REFERENCE PRODUCTS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEWSLETTER

The results of the interviews revealed that editors were primarily inspired by other newsletters for the creation and development of their own bulletins, as well as sporadically by other formats and products. From our analysis, it can be confirmed that these sources have influenced aspects of the newsletters themselves, such as format, structure, content, and aesthetics.

Table 3 shows the list of newsletters that have exerted the most influence on the interviewees.

Table 3. Reference and inspirational newsletters for the interviewees

Newsletter	URL
Africa Brief by Foreign Policy	https://foreignpolicy.com/category/africa-brief/
Axios AM	https://www.axios.com/newsletters/axios-am
Axios Finish Line	https://www.axios.com/newsletters/axios-finish-line
Axios Media Trends	https://www.axios.com/signup/media-trends
Axios PM	https://www.axios.com/newsletters/axios-pm
Daniel Eskibel	https://danieleskibel.com
Dense Discovery	https://www.densediscovery.com
eCompills by Jaume Mesa	https://www.ecommpills.com
Fleet Street by Mar Manrique	https://fleetstreet.substack.com
Haken by Samu Parra and Zahara Fornieles	https://haken.io
Honos by Máximo Gavete	https://www.honos.es
Internazionale by <i>El País</i>	https://plus.elpais.com/newsletters/lnp/1/334
Kloshletter by Charo Marcos	https://kloshletter.com
La Wikly by Emilio Doménech	https://www.lawikly.com
Morning Brew	https://www.morningbrew.com
Next Draft by Dave Pell	https://nextdraft.com
Next Africa by Bloomberg	https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2023-04-14/next-africa-lofty-investment-goals-for-an-economy-in-crisis
Platformer by Casey Newton	https://www.platformer.news
Quartz Africa	https://qz.com/latest
Quartz Daily Brief	https://qz.com/emails/daily-brief/
Rickshaw by <i>Revista SW</i>	https://www.revista5w.com/podcast/el-rickshaw
The Hustle	https://thehustle.co
The Morning by <i>The New York Times</i>	https://www.nytimes.com/series/us-morning-briefing
Verne by <i>El País</i>	https://plus.elpais.com/newsletters/lnp/1/318

Source: Own elaboration.

Similarly, in addition to newsletters, some YouTube channels, especially tutorial-focused ones, were also mentioned as another source of influence and inspiration.

SOURCES, TOOLS, AND TECHNIQUES FOR NEWSLETTER DEVELOPMENT

The results of the research revealed that the interviewed experts use a variety of tools and techniques to identify and curate content for their newsletters. In general, they employ a combination of online sources, organizational tools, and curation methods to identify and select relevant content for their newsletters. These strategies enable them to stay updated, organize information, and present valuable and high-quality content to their subscribers.

The tools and techniques have been grouped into the following categories (see Table 4):

Table 4. Main sources, techniques, and tools used by the interviewed newsletter editors

Online content sources	
The interviewees use various online sources to find relevant content:	
1	Social media, especially X (formerly Twitter), where they follow relevant individuals and accounts in their fields of interest.
2	Mailing lists and newsletters to which they are subscribed.
3	Websites of media outlets and publications specializing in the topics covered in their newsletters.
4	News aggregation platforms, such as Mediagazer and Google News, that provide them with updated information on their field of interest.
5	RSS and feed readers, such as Feedly, which allow them to centralize and organize the content sources they follow.
Tools for organization and storage of content	
The interviewees use various tools to organize and store the content they find:	
1	Notion, a productivity and project management tool, where they save links and notes about relevant content.
2	Gmail and other email tools, where they save links and emails with interesting content.
3	Pocket, a curation app that allows them to save articles and content to read later.
4	Trello, a project management tool they use to organize and plan the content for their newsletters.
Content curation methods	
The interviewees employ specific techniques to select and curate the content of their newsletters:	
1	Compile an initial set of links and raw notes in an organizational tool.
2	Read and review the content carefully to assess its relevance and value.
3	Use tags and categories to organize and classify the content.
4	Create summaries or personal comments about the selected content.
5	Use annotation and highlighting techniques when listening to podcasts or consuming other types of audio content.
6	Maintain a database or filing system with relevant articles and links found.

Source: Own elaboration.

FUTURE OF THEIR NEWSLETTERS

Overall, the newsletter editors expressed a variety of perspectives on the future of their products. While there are differences in individual approaches and objectives, there is a general consensus on some issues, such as: a) the importance of staying updated, b) adapting to audience needs, and c) exploring different monetization models to ensure the long-term sustainability of newsletters.

Convergences were also observed on specific topics, specifically on aspects of (1) niche and community, (2) original content, (3) business models and monetization, (4) additional multimedia formats, (5) continuous improvements, and (6) geographical expansion.

Regarding niches and the community of the newsletter, some interviewees believe that newsletters will continue to be niche products, with a segmented and quite specific audience. In this regard, they see the opportunity to build communities around their newsletters, fostering participation and interaction among their subscribers.

Several interviewees expressed a desire to incorporate more original content into their newsletters. In addition to curating external content, they would like to delve into aspects such as analysis, opinion, and personal reflections. They also believe that the combination of creation and curation allows them to offer additional value to their subscribers.

When it comes to business models and monetization, some experts said that they plan to explore different monetization models for their newsletters. These include options such as sponsorships, direct subscriptions, and additional paid services. However, they also consider it crucial to strike a balance between revenue generation and subscriber satisfaction.

The interviewees envision the incorporation of additional multimedia elements into their newsletters, such as audio and video, with the aim of providing a richer newsletter experience for subscribers.

In terms of the continuous improvement of their newsletters, some interviewees consider their newsletters to be in constant evolution and adaptation. They make adjustments practically week by week, to improve and adapt to the needs of their subscribers. They see their newsletters as minimum viable products that evolve and improve over time.

Finally, some interviewees have plans to broaden their geographical reach and target audiences in other countries or regions. This involves adapting their content and considering the particularities of each market.

RISE OF NEWSLETTERS

Participants expressed many diverse opinions, from the perspectives of both newsletter production and consumption.

The consulted experts attribute the rise of newsletters to various factors. On one hand, the interviewees see newsletters as a way to escape algorithms, establish communities, and maintain greater control over their content. On the other hand, they believe newsletters offer a personalized way to consume information,

providing credibility, intimacy, and closer engagement with readers. Additionally, the platforms and tools available today greatly facilitate the production and distribution of newsletters, fostering their popularity and growth.

Furthermore, certain convergences have been identified among the interviewees regarding several themes, including (1) community building, (2) personalization versus information overload, (3) authority and credibility, (4) intimacy and trust, and (5) the ease of newsletter production.

Community Building

Newsletters allow creators to escape dependence on search engine and social media algorithms, enabling them to establish a more direct relationship with their audience. Because they are not algorithmically mediated, creators have greater control over their content and can build more engaged and segmented communities.

Personalization versus Information Overload

The rise of newsletters is largely attributed to readers' fatigue regarding information overload on the internet. Newsletters offer a more organized and personalized way to consume information, selecting relevant content and delivering it directly to the reader's email. Consequently, this provides a more controlled experience and saves time for the reader.

Authority and Credibility

In the interviews, newsletter editors highlighted that newsletters are often created by individuals with authority and experience in their respective fields. This fosters reader trust and means that newsletters are perceived as credible sources of information. Moreover, they confirm their belief that consumers place a high value on having a direct relationship with the experts behind newsletters.

Intimacy and Trust

The interviewees pointed out that newsletters provide an intimate space on the internet, as algorithms have limited influence in this area. Readers appreciate being able to select and receive content in their email, which implies a more careful and controlled selection process. Ultimately, this creates an atmosphere of trust and tranquility for consuming information.

Ease of Production

The interviewees confirmed that recent newsletter creation platforms like Substack have greatly facilitated content production and significantly reduced barriers to entry for creators. These platforms offer a simple yet powerful experience for content curation, motivating more people to launch their own newsletters.

ROLE OF NEWSLETTERS IN THE PRESENT AND FUTURE

Experts' responses offer a variety of different perspectives on the role of newsletters in the current and future media landscape. While there are some doubts about

their relevance on a large scale, the majority of interviewees recognize their value and importance in the media landscape.

The crucial role of newsletters primarily revolves around their ability to establish direct connections with users, attract potential subscribers, and complement the offerings of traditional media. Additionally, the potential of newsletters is highlighted, on one hand, as independent media and, on the other hand, for their ability to provide firsthand content and personal opinions from journalists.

In terms of newsletters as a niche product, some interviewees believe they will remain a product targeted at specific audiences with limited growth. They note that this niche approach can be positive, allowing creators and brands to reach their target audience more effectively and establish a more direct relationship with them.

They acknowledge that newsletters have the capacity to establish a special connection with users. They provide a more intimate and personalized communication space and this close connection can also generate greater loyalty and satisfaction among readers.

The interviewees confirm that newsletters are an effective means of capturing and increasing the number of digital subscribers for media outlets. Further, some media organizations use vertical newsletters or hire recognized content creators to attract and retain subscribers. The interviewees also point out that newsletters can encourage readers to become paying subscribers.

Likewise, the interview results confirm the perception that independent newsletters can be relevant as recognized media because some journalists create their own newsletters to take advantage of editorial freedom, monetization possibilities, and building a personal brand. However, there is a drawback and, in many cases, the success of independent newsletters on a large scale is limited due to the lack of a business focus.

In conclusion, the interviewed experts highlight the role of newsletters as a complement to traditional media. Some media outlets have incorporated newsletters as part of their strategy to strengthen their relationship with users and thus offer exclusive content. Additionally, they mention the possibility that groups of independent thematic newsletters could compete with traditional media, potentially giving rise to new independent media in the future.

ROLE OF CONTENT CURATION

The results confirm that, for newsletter editors, content curation will continue to be a fundamental part of digital communication. Technological evolution is seen as providing new opportunities, emphasizing the importance of combining automation with critical thinking. The need to use specialized tools and training programs to facilitate effective content curation and information organization is also highlighted. Additionally, the value of personalized curation and collaboration between media outlets to provide a quality user experience is emphasized.

The majority of interviewees agree that content curation is crucial in an environment of information overload and dispersion as it allows for filtering and

contextualizing information, thereby providing added value to users. Curation becomes even more relevant as the number of channels and content creators increases.

Interviewees acknowledge that the incorporation of artificial intelligence is a key element in the technological evolution of content curation. AI can automate selection processes and provide tools to help curators identify and organize valuable materials. However, combining automation with human judgment and manual work in content curation is important.

Interviewees point out the need to develop specific tools and applications to facilitate intuitive and efficient content curation. Examples mentioned in the interview results include applications capable of tracking relevant news on social media and news outlets, allowing curators to have all content in one place for coherent use. Additionally, there is a confirmed need for training programs that teach how to create curatorial systems and organize information effectively.

Furthermore, experts recognize the importance of personalized curation that can adapt to the interests and needs of users. The possibility of automating recurring aspects of newsletters, such as pre-designed templates based on user behavior, is mentioned. However, at the same time, the value of manual and personal content curation is emphasized.

Finally, experts highlight the relevance of content curation in both collaboration between media outlets and the creation of a comprehensive informational offering. They believe that content curation allows media outlets to expand their reach through recommendations and collaborations with other content curators. The importance of content recommendations to strengthen the digital identity of media outlets and, consequently, build greater trust among users is also emphasized.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Next, the objectives of this research are examined and discussed to verify their degree of accomplishment, and finally, suggestions for new research are presented.

1. This work has allowed for the exploration of the opinions of independent newsletter editors on aspects such as their reference products and the tools and techniques used to create their newsletters. According to the interviewees, the results reveal that editors draw inspiration from online content sources, organizational tools, and curation methods, influencing the structure and aesthetics of their newsletters. This reinforces the results of other studies, such as those by Zilberstein (2022) and Cascon-Katchadourian *et al.* (2022), defining processes and productive routines that enable the optimal development of newsletters, highlighting effective content curation (Guallar *et al.*, 2021) and storytelling skills (McMullen and Braithwaite, 2013).
2. According to the results of the interviews, there is a high convergence in the perceptions regarding the rise of newsletters. We have been able to

corroborate a high convergence regarding strategic aspects such as niche communities, the incorporation of original content, the exploration of various monetization models, the integration of multimedia elements, and continuous improvement and geographical expansion. Additionally, this work has identified the major opinions surrounding the rise of newsletters, emphasizing their appeal for escaping algorithmic control, providing personalized information, and facilitating production through user-friendly platforms.

3. In line with the findings from the interviews, the results confirm the significant role of newsletters and content curation in the current and future media system, as pointed out in other studies (Lopezosa *et al.*, 2023). They are highlighted for their ability to build a brand image, specifically for their strategic importance in establishing direct connections, attracting subscribers, and complementing traditional media. While some interviewees anticipate that newsletters will remain niche products, their unique ability to offer close, even 'intimate' communication fosters loyalty to the editor's personal brand, in line with findings in other works (Andringa, 2022). This work also recognizes newsletters as effective tools for acquiring subscribers and as potential competitors to traditional media.

On the other hand, the analysis related to the use of content curation in newsletters stands out for its view of the growing importance of curation in the digital communication landscape. Interviewees acknowledged the importance of combining automation with manual handling and critical thinking, using specialized tools, and providing personalized curation. In other words, the crucial role of content curation in the face of information overload is emphasized, recognizing the impact of technological evolution and supporting collaborative efforts among media entities for comprehensive content recommendations and a trustworthy digital identity. In this regard, the perspective of newsletter editors in this study complements the results of studies based on the content analysis of newsletters, such as those by Rojas-Torrijos and González-Alba (2018), Silva-Rodríguez (2021), or Guallar *et al.* (2021, 2022).

Finally, it is worth noting that these results suggest possible directions for future research that we believe can delve deeper into studies on newsletters and content curation. Firstly, it would be interesting to expand the case studies conducted so far to newsletters from different countries and with different characteristics (media, business, independent), using the two methodologies predominantly employed to date: newsletter content analysis or, as in this work, interviews with editors, to gain a richer understanding of this topic, even correlate it with aspects such as the typology of the newsletters. Secondly, exploring the application of other methodologies, such as ethnographic studies and specifically participant observation, can provide insights into how successful newsletters operate and their effects, or even apply more quantitative studies, considering that triangulating with quantitative research would help eliminate certain methodological limitations. Lastly, we propose studies focused on new technologies that impact the productive routines in newsletter development,

with a particular emphasis on the strategic use of generative artificial intelligence, including its ethical and responsible use.

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