

Television archives, social networks and the young audiences: The example of Internet memes as a way to revitalise public broadcasters' engagement

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explore the efforts that Spanish public television archives are making to bring their audiovisual content closer to young people via social networks. Specifically, this text focuses on analysing the public television archives of the Spanish national television company RTVE and of the Andalusian regional public television agency (RTVA), known as Archivo RTVE and MemorANDA, respectively. The methodology used is based on both qualitative and quantitative tools, consisting of content analysis and in-depth interviews. The results obtained show that both platforms manage to reach young people, but indirectly through viral videos or Internet memes. The RTVE archive is the most successful among young people because it has a more extensive collection and more resources as well as a policy that is more clearly geared towards the dissemination of its audiovisual heritage. The most negative aspect identified in this study was the repetition of regional clichés, especially in the case of MemorANDA.

Keywords

television archives, social networks, young audience, Internet memes, public service, Spain

1 Introduction

The nostalgia the public often feels for certain television broadcasts has been used as a tool by traditional television channels to attract the attention of their audiences. The use of TV archives in different formats to cater for this nostalgia for material from the past, however, is particularly successful among elderly audiences, who, years later, remember those original broadcasts that are being made available via different platforms and formats (Gutiérrez Lozano, 2013). But do they also attract younger audiences, that is, those who did not originally watch those television contents? Following Hegel's famous phrase, which Marx later modified, it could be said that, in relation to television archives, history always repeats itself twice: once as drama or tragedy, and the second time as farce or comedy. Perhaps something similar happens with television fragments from the past. Thanks to Internet memes and the virality they currently enjoy on social networks,

these television contents from TV archives get a second life, full of adaptations and new uses that modify their original meaning and generate new modes of appropriation.

Traditional television broadcasts in Spain maintain a high following among the adult population, but younger viewers are increasingly moving away from linear consumption as it does not satisfy their demands, or at least not in the same way as new proposals such as YouTube or Twitch seem to do. In this context, in any case it is striking how some programmes or fragments of the broadcasts of traditional channels have a great repercussion on YouTube, Twitter or Instagram thanks to different kinds of memes spread by younger viewers or users, who in most cases are unaware of the origin of these images and do not have any knowledge about the facts or the people who appear in them.

In the case of public broadcasters and traditional channels seeking to adapt to new viewing cultures, the impact of parallel or multiple reception, and especially that of vi-



ewing television content while commenting on it and sharing it on social networks in a connected way, is a creative and adaptive challenge (Bruun, 2020; Lotz, 2017). In relation to this trend, this research aims to explore the strategies being used by two Spanish public corporations, Radio y Televisión de Andalucía (RTVA) and Radiotelevisión Española (RTVE) to bring their archival content closer to young people by making use of social networks.

The Andalusian public regional channel, Canal Sur Televisión (created in 1989 by RTVA), has chosen YouTube and Twitter as the main digital windows for its audiovisual content in social networks. The portal that reflects these efforts is “MemorANDA,” launched in 2013 with a blog format to disseminate images “that should be remembered or are part of the sentimental memory of viewers” (MemorANDA, n. d.). Televisión Española (TVE), which would later go on to become Radiotelevisión Española (RTVE), was launched in 1956 and is the largest Spanish national public channel. Since 2008, RTVE has made its archives available via its web portal and on social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube through “Archivo RTVE.” Currently, both public broadcasting companies are also seeking to attract the attention of young audiences through their two respective free VOD platforms: RTVE Play and CanalSurMás.

2 Theoretical frameworks: New forms of TV consumption

According to the report “The Networked Society,” young Spaniards live immersed in today’s digital landscape. In 2021, the Internet penetration among the 16–24 age group was 99.2%, a value bordering on universal access. Young Spaniards are also spending less and less time watching television (Red.es, 2021). This trend has been observed for some years now, with increasingly lower figures, and contrasts with the older population (Barlovento Comunicación, 2020).

This trend consisting of young peoples’ preference for social networks and the increase in consumption via smartphones has led to a great deal of academic research be-

ing devoted to analysing the relationship between young people and the Internet. The literature addressing this matter in Spain is very extensive (Pertega Vega, Oliva Delgado, & Rodríguez Meirinhos, 2019). Internationally, other interesting contributions are those made by Craig Watkins (2009) when the phenomenon was incipient, or the changes that social networks brought about regarding mass media (Stefanone, Lackaff, & Rosen, 2010). The process of media convergence has given rise to new patterns of audiovisual consumption. The progressive abandonment of linear television by young people and the strong competition from OTTs force traditional television channels to search for new market strategies (Cunningham, Craig, & Silver, 2016; Guerrero Pérez, 2018; Guerrero Pérez, González Oñate, & Camussetti, 2018; Lobato, 2019; Neira, Clares-Gavilán & Sánchez-Navarro, 2021; Vonderau, 2016).

The case that concerns us, that is, the relationship between television archives and social networks in Spain, has not received much attention from researchers. Nevertheless, there are some interesting contributions on the role of public audiovisual services and the different strategies to strengthen audience engagement and participation in Europe (Kolokytha, Korbiel, Rozgonyi, & Sarikakis, 2019; Vanhaeght, 2019). As regards Spain, Anton and Gaullar (2013) analysed the presence of the audiovisual archives of Spanish regional television companies and highlighted the good position of Canal Sur at that time. Previously, López de Solís and Martín López (2011) investigated the possibilities offered by the Internet for audiovisual archives to incorporate part of their collections on the web, for both commercial and educational purposes. This situation has meant that documentalists working in television archives have had to acquire a new role and new skills; for example, they have achieved competences in “analytics to measure the time-shifted audience a long time after a series has stopped being broadcast” (Rodríguez Mateos & Hernández Pérez, 2015, p. 117). In other words, some of the documentalists working in television archives have begun to acquire community manager skills so as to be able to manage the audiovisual contents of the TV archives.

One of the tools most commonly used by community managers of audiovisual archive platforms to attract young audiences and achieve greater engagement are Internet memes (which from here on we will refer to as just “memes”). The term *meme* has its origins in the book *The Selfish Gene* by zoologist Richard Dawkins, published in 1976, where he defined a meme as the agent responsible for cultural transmission within the human being and considered it to be “the minimum unit of information that can be transmitted” (Alarcón, 2017, p. 123). Nowadays, the concept of meme more commonly refers to a variety of types of contents that, with different origins, circulate through social networks and are capable of evolving as each user uses them and gives them a different meaning (Shifman, 2012). Thus, the key to the success of this social media content is its ability to transform as it is distributed (Ask & Abidin, 2018; Milner, 2016).

Digital forums such as 4chan or Reddit were the first to make room for this type of content. What has been called the “meme-fication” of content began to take shape in these forums. But memes have been defined as one of the predominant means of communication for Generation Z to translate and bring any type of content closer to their reality (Zeng & Abidin, 2021). Social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and, more recently, TikTok (Zulli & Zulli, 2022) have been the ideal propagation vehicle to virilise this type of archival content. The global incidence of the meme phenomenon, extended to all areas of communication, has led to research on its political implications (Chagas, Freire, Rios, & Magalhães, 2019; Howley, 2016), cultural links (Islas, 2020), identity relations (Ismangil, 2019; Milner, 2012), and even the possible incidence of memes in hate speech (Kiela et al., 2020).

The creation of memes is grounded on the anonymous and at the same time collective dynamics of the participatory culture of Internet, where the boundaries between production and reception are completely blurred (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2015). This means that most users do not know the origin of the images or videos they use, to such an extent that there are even spaces on the web devoted to finding out the origin of

memes (such as “Know your meme”). Not surprisingly, some authors attribute the rise of memes to a kind of “catharsis” through which young people try to adapt to a socio-economic context that they cannot accept (Girard, 2006). In this way, the meme has become the predominant discourse through which youth construct and imagine their own generational consciousness around social issues of interest to them (Zeng & Abidin, 2021). Many of the memes that draw on television archives, which are very successful among younger audiences, are received in a decontextualised way by those who use them. This is a challenge and a double-edged sword for public service broadcasters.

3 Objectives and methodology

The digitisation of TV archives has provided a new way of sharing and making television heritage visible. Analysing the presence of these archives on social networks is an interesting way of finding out what strategies these archives use to connect with young audiences, as well as the uses that those audiences make of this content (Newman et al., 2021, p. 10).

The main objective of this research is to analyse the strategies used by the television archives of two Spanish public channels, the Archivo de Radiotelevisión Española (RTVE) and that of Canal Sur Televisión – which belongs to Radio y Televisión de Andalucía (RTVA) and is called MemorANDA, to bring their audiovisual content closer to young people through the use of social networks. RTVE and RTVA archives were chosen because they are two of the public TV broadcasters that reach the highest number of people in Spain. RTVE has the largest television archive in Spain, while RTVA, created in 1989, is aimed at the most populated autonomous community in the country.

To achieve these objectives, the following research questions will be addressed:

- › RQ1: What are the differences between RTVE and RTVA in terms of the way they define their strategies on social networks?
- › RQ2: Do these portals try to attract young people’s attention with politically, socially

or culturally relevant archival content, or do they focus on infotainment or national / regional identity topics, more suitable for viralisation through memes?

The methodology we have implemented combines both a qualitative and quantitative approach using the methodological tools of content analysis and in-depth interviews. Firstly, a content analysis of the social networks of MemorANDA and Archivo RTVE was performed. The networks analysed were the Twitter and YouTube profiles of MemorANDA, and the Twitter, Facebook and Instagram profiles of Archivo RTVE. The period studied covered two months (from 1 May 2019 to 30 June 2019). The analysis sheet created for this phase of the research consists of different sections including date of publication, original date of the archival material, name of the programme, television format, function played by the message that is broadcast, content of the message, subject matter, and social interactions (“likes”, shares or comments). The second part of the methodology used in-depth interviews as a qualitative tool. Specifically, after the first approach to the analysis described above, we interviewed the people responsible for managing the social networks of the archives analysed: María Ángeles Martín, head of the Archive and Documentation Department of Canal Sur and community manager of MemorANDA, and Víctor Peña, community manager of Archivos RTVE.

4 Results

In this section we present the main results of the research in which the different strategies used by both television archives to try to attract the attention of young people are evidenced. Some of these strategies have been extremely effective, while others present obstacles in gaining loyalty among youth audiences.

4.1 The strategies of RTVE and RTVA's television archives in social networks

The analysis has shown the use of certain strategies by the archives of both public broadcasting corporations under study. The

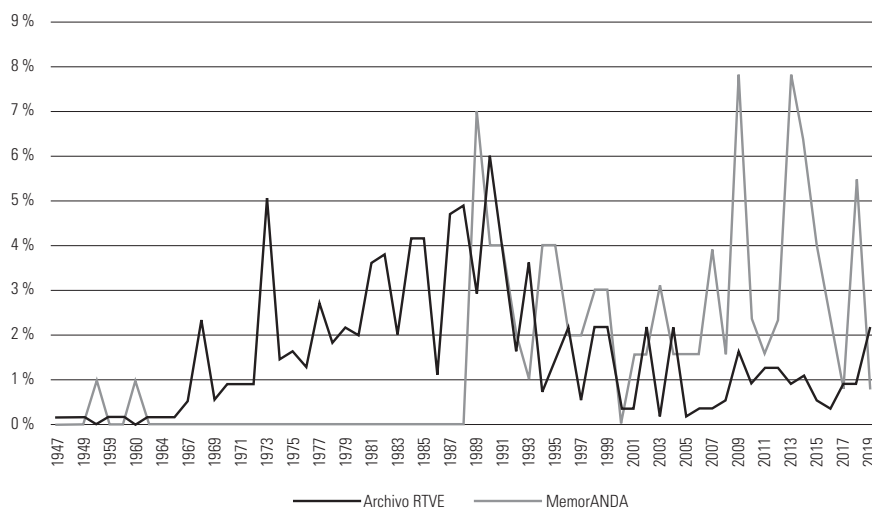
most diversified is Archivo RTVE, which is present on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, but did not join YouTube until June 2019. On the other hand, the project to disseminate the RTVA archive, MemorANDA, opted from the outset for a combined presence on Twitter and Google's video platform YouTube.

As regards the staff responsible for managing these networks, RTVE, as the main Spanish public broadcasting company, has the most resources at its disposal. Specifically, the team in charge of the Archivo RTVE profiles is made up of three people. This means that Archivo RTVE is far more active on social networks, they have a greater number of different profiles and post far more information than MemorANDA, which has only one person in charge of managing its social networks.

The analysis carried out also shows how national public television is committed to a strategy of making the content of its archive more visible on social media, which it achieves by presenting a series of programmes or series during the week that are uploaded in full to its website. From these, videos of a few minutes duration are subsequently extracted and posted. These posts have their corresponding link to the full audiovisual document available on the website. In contrast to the RTVA MemorANDA portal, in which the use of a list of selected anniversaries is the central axis to recall historic events or characters, in Archivo RTVE there is a clear strategy of publishing television contents that are more varied and are updated on a daily basis.

The interaction or engagement they carry out on all their social network accounts is perhaps one of the most outstanding aspects of the planning of Archivo RTVE. The study of their network accounts allows us to conclude that posts that open with a question or invitation addressed to the audience with the clear objective of obtaining feedback and interaction with them are the most common. One feature that stands out immediately is the casual, close and direct discourse, which is an essential aspect to attract the attention of younger viewers, as opposed to the more impersonal and static content that has been identified in MemorANDA.

Figure 1: Original date on which Archivos RTVE's and MemorANDA's archival contents on Twitter were broadcast



Source: Author's own.

In this latter case, its central strategy is based on a list of selected anniversaries, and all its narrative discourse on social networks is developed around it. This means that the strategy followed by the Andalusian public television archive is much better adapted to Twitter than to other social networks, given that the tags, or hashtags, are a perfect way of reminding their audience of notable past events and anniversaries. Part of the strategy MemorANDA follows is due to the lack of human resources with which it works, with only one person responsible for it. As explained by its coordinator, María Ángeles Martín, “MemorANDA is not a project that has people assigned to it. It was born from within the department, I am the head of department and I coordinate MemorANDA and well... I basically do it whenever I can find some spare time. What we do is a bit opportunistic” (M. A. Martín, personal communication, 16 June 2019).

4.2 How engagement increases through nostalgic, stereotyped and viral archival contents

One of the key aspects of the strategy followed in the two cases analysed in order to approach the youngest viewers (or social media users) is to show TV footage that arouses their nostalgia, despite the fact that in many

cases the material was perhaps not originally broadcast during the childhood of the members of this population group, although it has been repeatedly released on their on-air channels.

The original date on which the television contents included in the profiles of the social network Twitter were broadcast is affected by the birth of the two channels: RTVE, in 1956, and RTVA, in 1989. In the first, the material that is shared the most belongs to the period from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s. After these dates, the rate of posts referring to this period drops considerably, so that the television content from the childhood of the youngest viewers, or at least the programmes or series that they may know about, are the ones that Archivo RTVE shares the least. The highest peak of posts refers to 1990, followed by 1973 (see Figure 1).

The trend of the MemorANDA archive is slightly different. Two peaks can be detected, one in 1989 and the other in 2009 and 2013. The case of 1989 coincides with the year the channel was launched, which also celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2019, so a lot of content is retrieved from this time. In short, for both archives, the 1980s represent a rich audiovisual heritage to be shown on Twitter.

The programmes most shared on social networks are entertainment formats, follo-

wed by news programmes; both archives devote almost half of their content to entertainment programmes. The only differences are found in the case of fiction, which for Archivo RTVE is a central part of its commitment but this is not true for MemorANDA.

In the latter case, the study reveals the repetition of regional and national clichés in the most posted television contents. In RTVA, among the sub-themes analysed, the enormous presence of flamenco stands out above the rest. Ninety-two per cent of all the tweets about music posted by MemorANDA refer to this musical genre. This is to some extent worrying because of the reiteration of regional clichés or stereotypes in the new digital social media. The presence of flamenco in Archivo RTVE, for example, appears more balanced (it represents 8% of the tweets posted with a musical theme) and responds much better to the national reality of Spain in relation to this kind of music. The reinforcement of this sort of content in social networks is striking because it perpetuates the same television strategies that this regional channel has been practising for years, which have been criticised by researchers of the Andalusian channel (Gutiérrez Lozano, 2010).

The incorporation of an image and especially a video in each post significantly improves its chances of reaching a larger audience (Carrasco Polaino, Villar Cirujano, & Martín Cárdbaba, 2019, p. 10) and in this case we can see how Archivo RTVE, by using images and video in all its social media posts, achieves a much greater impact than MemorANDA. MemorANDA, on the other hand, does not include videos in its tweets, and the person responsible for the archive explains the reasons for this: “Videos embedded in social networks do not count in the number of views on YouTube, and this aspect is paramount” (M. A. Martín, personal communication, 16 June 2019).

When analysing the interactions that the posts on social networks receive from the audience (comments, likes, retweets or views), Archivo RTVE is the platform with a greater and more powerful engagement in social networks, which is logical given that it is a national television channel and that in the analysis we have carried out it is compared with a regional channel that, in theo-

ry, is bound to have less coverage. Hence, it has been found that including videos in the tweets of Archivo RTVE boosts their impact. The average number of views of its audiovisual documents is 10 000. Two of the main examples of this could be found in the videos entitled “El momento feminista de Rocío Jurado” [Rocío Jurado’s feminist moment] and “El casting secreto de Verano Azul” [The secret audition for *Verano Azul*]. The latter is about one of the most famous series about teenagers in the history of RTVE premiered in 1981 but constantly rebroadcast over the years. The first one responds to a certain extent to the current concerns of young people, where feminism is of paramount importance. In it, Rocío Jurado (1946–2006), a Spanish copla singer from Andalusia, responds in 1995 to a sexist question (specifically, the presenter asked her about her bra size). This tweet has gone viral on social networks due to the significance of the artist’s answer. Although it has “only” reached 231 000 views, the impact of this video has been huge, and it has gone viral on social networks. This type of audiovisual content retrieved by the archives is possibly one of the best examples of how to attract the attention of young people by showing the struggle that women have maintained in order to reach some degree of equality and shows how those women who achieved greater success were continually harassed by questions such as those shown in the video.

In MemorANDA, the posts with the most interactions are a list of selected anniversaries. The head of the archive herself, María Ángeles Martín, expressed her doubts about the low impact of the archive on Twitter. Possibly the scarce interaction with the user and the insufficient use of images and videos are the causes underlying the low impact of MemorANDA and the very limited innovation it carries out.

Despite this, MemorANDA does manage to reach this segment of the population through certain YouTube videos that go viral. The strategy followed by the archive of the Andalusian broadcasting company of highlighting small fragments of programmes achieves its objective and the number of views and the rate at which some of its audiovisual documents on Google’s platform go viral is

tremendously high. Among the most viewed videos in this period of analysis, we find once again the repetition of regional topics, and flamenco or copla (a more popular variant of the former) rank in a predominant position.

But among MemorANDA's videos there are two that have gone viral, one of them in the form of an international meme. It is the video: "El ataque de risa de El Risitas al hablar del fin del mundo" [El Risitas' laughing fit when talking about the end of the world], with two million views. The other is a very harsh testimony given during a Canal Sur programme in 1997 by a woman who was victim of abuse. Some days later that woman was murdered by her abuser, in this case, her ex-husband. Her name was Ana Orantes. The video of that television intervention that was uploaded to the networks, "Ana Orantes relata los malos tratos sufridos durante 40 años" [Ana Orantes talks about the abuse she suffered for 40 years], also went viral with 3.3 million views. What is it about these fragments of television programmes that attracts the attention of younger viewers?

Among the two videos that have stood out, "El ataque de risa de El Risitas al hablar del fin del mundo" is perhaps the strangest case, as this Andalusian character has gone viral even beyond the borders of Spain, turning him into a meme with an international scope. Juan Joya, nicknamed El Risitas, was a character who first appeared in June 2007 in the programme "Los ratones coloraos" (2002–2005 and 2007–2010) for his peculiar way of laughing. The success of the character was such that he became part of the television memory of Canal Sur, and from there he went on to gain popularity throughout Spain. Young people have included El Risitas in the world of memes, his nickname has been translated as the "Spanish Laughing Guy", and there are a multitude of montages on the Internet of this and other videos that demonstrate the impact this character has had on the network. The videos featuring this character have become an international viral meme that has been a tremendous success in countries such as France and Finland (Aragón, 2019) as well as in the United States (Peinado, 2017; Parkinson, 2015). However, once again, a regional cliché, that of the Andalusian as a funny, humorous character, becomes the

most successful video among young people of those taken from the Andalusian corporation's archive. This reiteration of regional and national clichés is not surprising because of the ability of these stereotypes to persist over time and to reproduce themselves even beyond their national borders.

Another of the most relevant audiovisual archival documents, as mentioned above, is the case of Ana Orantes. This woman explained in a talk show on Canal Sur, in 1997, the abuse she had suffered for 40 years at the hands of her partner, from whom she was recently divorced. Thirteen days after telling her story, she was burnt alive by her ex-husband. The importance of Ana Orantes today is essential to understand the fight against male violence in Spain, as she changed society's perception of violence against women and it connects very well with a young audience that is very concerned about feminist issues.

Why have these specific YouTube videos by RTVA and RTVE gone viral? The root of the success of the television appearances of El Risitas, Ana Orantes or Rocío Jurado can be explained by the fact that they meet the main characteristics that make a video go viral: They are usually short in duration, they are content taken from television broadcasts, they contain humorous or violent elements, they appeal to the most basic emotions, and they usually also include the presence of famous people and have an obvious emotional tone (Dafonte Gómez, 2014, p. 204–205). It could be stated that there is a close relationship between videos that go viral and current debates in society. As has been explained, in these television archives young people can find a way, whether through memes or not, to give meaning and an explanation to their current reality and to the issues of interest that concern them. In this way, and even if it is through unplanned or unforeseen ways, the archives of these public television channels can be revived in the digital context due to the new uses given to them by their younger audiences.

5 Conclusions

Both Archivo RTVE and MemorANDA manage to reach young people, especially through the fact that some of their posts go viral. Possibly the most successful strategy in this respect is the one followed by Archivo RTVE, with the backing of a greater availability of human resources dedicated to the management of archival content on the networks. The constant interaction with the public through its posts by means of questions and invitations improves its engagement with the audience. As a result, the national public broadcasting corporation has managed, through its archive channels, to make several of its posts go viral during the period analysed. The aforementioned videos entitled “El momento feminista de Rocío Jurado” [Rocío Jurado’s feminist moment] and “El casting secreto de Verano Azul” [The secret audition for *Verano Azul*] stand out in this respect.

MemorANDA makes a huge effort to keep its Twitter and YouTube profiles afloat, which is noteworthy considering its limited human resources. In the period analysed, only one person oversaw content management. However, the strategy followed by the Andalusian public broadcasting company’s archive in its constant use of lists of selected anniversaries means that its messages are disjointed and lack a clear direction. The almost non-existent interaction with its audience (such as the disabling of comments on YouTube) seems to lead to the absence of any impact on young people. Despite this, and due to the success of some of its videos on YouTube (which have well over a million views), some of the fragments it shares do manage to reach young people because they go viral or are converted into memes. Therefore, although their strategy is perhaps not the most appropriate for bringing audiovisual content to the younger generations, on some occasions they do manage to include part of their content in the collective imagination of young people. However, it can be observed that the name of the company that originally broadcast these videos is lost in the process of going viral.

Content with political or social relevance is almost non-existent in the most viral posts, although cultural content does occupy a

slightly prominent position. The repetition of regional clichés is detected, especially in the case of MemorANDA. Canal Sur has a rich audiovisual heritage that perfectly reflects the heterogeneity of Andalusian and Spanish society, but it seems that the broadcasting company insists on its social networks constantly repeating the clichés for which Andalusians are renowned.

In any case, in the complex world of the survival of traditional television with the new multiscreen consumption, the presence of television archives in social networks must be very careful, especially in the profiles of public television channels. In addition to being able to foster greater engagement with youth audiences, the content they transfer must be carefully selected and accompanied by contextualisation policies that do not pervert the origin of these TV archives. Although memes can be a very useful weapon for the resurrection of some of this content, it should always be borne in mind that such public services should aim to expand knowledge of the past among audiences, and not just become a tool for entertainment.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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