The Agència Catalana de Notícies (ACN): Tenth Anniversary of an Innovative Model
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Tenth Anniversary of an Innovative Model

Multiformats, new technologies and versatility. These are undoubtedly the characteristics which define the Catalan News Agency (ACN) and which were the founding aspects of the project launched through the Internet in 1999. The tenth anniversary of ACN confirms the fact that despite the skepticism shown by many, the agency has proved itself to be an audacious and successful media enterprise. Ten years is enough time to allow talk of the consolidation of a solid journalistic project with a clear public service mandate. This decade represents the triumph of an agency and, above all, of an innovative model which is now a reference for many traditional companies which have come round to the conclusion that survival involves following the guidelines set out by ACN.

From the outset, ACN has been a modern and technologically advanced agency but also a no-holds-barred Catalonian project which offers information in the Catalan language and which aspires to explaining Catalonia to the world from this national perspective. It is the national agency of a stateless country where both Catalan and Spanish media co-exist and share between themselves the left-right ideological space and where information is projected from both a Catalan and Spanish viewpoint. Until ACN was founded, there was no news agency written and thought out in the Catalan language. Until 1999, all media both from within and outside Catalonia could only access news content written according to the Spanish state’s parameters.

With the transition to democracy completed, Catalonia has become a modern European country with a population of around 7.5 million people. After organizing the 1992 Olympic Games, Catalonia has consolidated itself over the ensuing years as an advanced country with its own personality, having undergone political changes which correspond to a phase of democratic maturity as shown by the passing in 2006 of a new Statute of Autonomy and the construction of new infrastructures such as the arrival of the high speed train from Madrid in 2008 or the New Terminal at Barcelona Airport in 2009. It has been actively present in the international news agenda thanks to stories such as the Universal Cultures Forum from 2004 or FC Barcelona’s triumph in the 2009 Champions League. ACN is the public news agency which explains this evolution from its own Catalan standpoint as well as informing its users of relevant news stories outside Catalonia, such as the March 11 train bombings in Madrid in 2004, the ecological disaster of the Prestige ship in 2002 or, in the spring of 2009, the first change of government in the Basque Country in 30 years.

With the aim of offering newsworthy global stories from a Catalan perspective, ACN’s editor, Saül Gordillo, points out that the most imminent challenges which lie ahead are internationalization and multilingualism in a framework of cooperation: “ACN already has its own fulltime staff in Paris, Berlin, London, Brussels and New York and thanks to alliances with other agencies it can offer global information.” In the meantime and thanks to an agreement signed with ANSAmed (established in 2004 by ANSA, the national agency of Italy), ACN is the agency of reference for this association which groups together 17 news agencies in the Mediterranean and Gulf regions. Also, an accord has been made with the Spanish news agency Efe to distribute videos to Latin America and USA. According to Gordillo, “the idea is to share information and the distribution platform in such a way that we can reach Efe’s clients through their platform and vice-versa. In Catalonia, we are their direct rival but outside, no, so we must set up alliances and go hand-in-hand".2

In accordance with this philosophy, ACN has created the website http://www.catalannewsagency.com in English disseminating its own version of life in Catalonia to a broader audience and acting as the agency of reference for issues dealing with Catalonia.

Multiformats and Multiplatforms

Versatility, understood in a wider sense, was one of the main tenets of ACN’s founding philosophy and over the years it has become the basis of the working system of the agency’s Newsroom: it is not just a question of technical skills for a multimedia model but also involves being able to

1. The population reaches 13 million if we include the inhabitants of all territories where Catalan is the official language and which go beyond the frontiers of Catalonia strictly speaking.

2. Interview with Saül Gordillo, 15/06/2009. The citations which follow refer to this conversation.
handle any news subject and having the capacity to adapt the information to different media and platforms.

Along with superior technological capacity, in today’s world a news agency with a public service mission cannot only concern itself with providing text content but should also take full advantage of new market opportunities. In the current communicative panorama, traditional format newspapers share the same space with the digital press which can of course also offer audiovisual documents as well as meeting the demands of radio and television outlets in need of sound clips or video images.

ACN therefore offers the news in multiple formats: text, sound clips, photographs and videos (most in unedited form and some with limited narration) to meet the demands of the huge diversity of subscribing media, taking into account that media companies increasingly include all kinds of digital audio-visual format supplements among their products. Not only through diversification of formats has the original product (news in text form) been improved but increasingly digitization subverts the traditional news model. This presented each news item as a separate entity, but the new digital model provides each story complete with corresponding documents attached, whilst maintaining journalistic unity. This concept has also been applied in order to link up different phases of a news sequence in such a way that, by entering any of its parts, the entirety of the news story can be recovered.

In 2009, ACN produced 51,000 news stories in text format, 47,600 photographs, 32,928 sound clips and 14,812 video clips. Video production has tripled in a year. The total is slightly less than in 2007 because of a change in ACN’s production criteria. It now gives priority to the creation and distribution of its own news stories rather than indiscriminately publishing press handouts, and has substantially increased video production and finished products. Early results indicate that despite a reduction of the total, subscribers’ consumption has increased. Each time a subscriber enters a news item through the headline this is registered, allowing the agency to monitor which news stories have generated the most interest and calculate the exact number of news items consulted. In 2008 there were 967,851 ACN-generated stories. Consumption figures for those direct services installed in some media are not included and should be added to the balance.

From the start, ACN opted for the multimedia journalism model and in the first years (1999-2000) journalists experienced the perplexity which greeted this new modus operandi from the curiosity shown in all the equipment each ACN journalist luged around in his bag to the jokes made when ACN journalists used laptops for note-taking at press conferences or even when these journalists insisted that press releases be sent not by fax but by e-mail. The closed-shop unionist attitude of photographers or the jealousy shown by television producers who considered these initiatives as an intrusion into their field of expertise, complicated initial implementation of the new model.

An ACN journalist comes to work with a backpack containing all his/her working tools: portable computer, mobile phone, digital recorder, microphone, digital camera and a video camera. An initial stage of adaptation is required to get to know the system and all the necessary equipment, although ACN offers on-going training to all staff journalists so as to guarantee the quality of the audiovisual product.

The generation of journalists who currently graduate from Communication Studies faculties has been trained in digital technique (ICOD network, 2006) and therefore acquires the technological know-how with surprising speed. They rapidly become multi-format reporters capable of elaborating and adapting information for different outlets (writing and editing texts, adding voice clips, photographs and, if necessary, registering a video clip and launching it on the web). All are capable of dealing with any news format and in this way, they assume roles which were previously reserved for technicians (Bandrés, E. et al: 2000). Digitization has made these technological processes so much easier. ACN is a young company which has not had to recycle pre-digital journalists because, from the very start, it has employed digital generation reporters, or at least professionals who underwent speedy recycling as the Internet took on a central role in journalistic production.

All reporters must be versatile. They must also know when it is necessary to run a story on all formats and when not to, when it is appropriate to do the job single-handedly, when to rely on support teams, when it is reasonable to use a source institution’s video feed and when doing so would compromise the final result. Knowing how to do everything does not mean always having to do everything. Rather, it means being able to take
on any role in the news process. This competency is of infinite value: it creates valuable room for maneuver and freedom of action. The ability to be able to offer a news story in all formats when appropriate, lends enviable professional freedom to the job and multiplies the potential of a journalist.

Versatility is not limited to technical aspects. A journalist must be mentally prepared to face the fact that this process of adaptation must also be expressive, requiring control and awareness when adapting language to each different form of media. (Micó: 2006). The journalist’s capacity must be exploited to the full and the intellectual effort behind his/her work should win exposure in the most complete fashion, in all formats and through as many platforms as possible. For that purpose, the Technology Department must be at the service of content developers to enable them to carry out their task in the simplest and most agile way possible. Automatic processes should ensure that journalists do not invest valuable time in duplicating processes or in performing routine tasks which do not require human talent and which can be de-motivating. This calls for solid determination and resources on behalf of the company and full awareness that this is an unavoidable investment that will guarantee permanent innovation and professional excellence.

The main platform which ACN uses to distribute information to its subscribers is the website www.acn.cat where one can find the news in text format complete with attached documents: sound bites, photographs and video images in high or low quality. The free access website offers a headline and lead paragraph for each of the most important news stories, with supplementary photographs and videos. From the homepage, a paying client can access the subscribers’ website by using a password to a site where news stories are revealed through chronological headlines with some icons on the right hand side of the screen which indicate which different formats are to be used. The user can choose if he or she wishes to consult all the stories which have been published or can select stories by applying a thematic or territorial filter. News stories go online once they have been edited and are linked to other items if they are the natural extension of the story. The original text is normally published first followed by sound bites, photographs and video material.

At the same time, the agency can disseminate by direct line so that i) subscribers do not have to go through the agency web itself but can receive news stories directly through to their own system of reception; ii) the line can automatically feed clients’ web-sites, inserting headlines and lead paragraphs; iii) the system ensures that news stories can be received through e-mail, in general or in specific bulletins; iv) the system can send selected headlines to mobile telephones. ACN is currently working on various projects for the distribution of news content through cell phone terminals. At present, ACN sends an SMS flash message advising the client of an important breaking news story and every evening sends a summary of the front page headlines of the main newspapers.

Technological advances suggest that this multi-platform panorama will go from strength to strength (Salaverria & Negredo, 2008) and as the logic of business imposes itself, human resources need not be doubled nor teams of journalists split up to meet an increasingly diversified demand. It would make no sense to set up a team specifically for the distribution of content through SMS messages that was separate from the journalists who originated the story. It would also be unprofitable to dedicate one person exclusively to search through all the news stories published in one day, wrap them up and send them through specialized bulletins. It is necessary therefore to bear this diversification of the news product in mind and facilitate its segmented diffusion as much as possible.

At ACN, it is the reporter himself who codifies each item of information to be distributed to the most appropriate outlets, using a simple computer program which carries out this function. This system departs from the classic news agency scheme in which the role of the journalist who wrote the story was somewhat alienated from the editing and distribution process (Gordillo & Nogue, 2008). In this sense, ACN is a modern agency with an innovative mission, living in the digital era free from the chains of the teleprinter.

The decision was made right at the start that journalists could sign their articles: asserting the authorship of news stories under the umbrella of the trademark contributes to the greater credibility of the news items and is a way of combating the historically unjust anonymity under which the news agency journalist has been obliged to work.
When an ACN journalist covers a news story, he/she does not only have to employ his/her acquired technical skills to do a professional job but also has to i) choose the appropriate headline and judge if an SMS alert is justified or not, with all the urgency that such a decision implies (a political resignation during a press conference, for example); ii) decide which sound bite to use for those radio stations interested in the story, and provide it on time so that it can be included in hourly bulletins; iii) consider which photographic image best summarizes the story and, depending on the story’s impact, be quick to offer it online given the extra speed that digital media are supposed to provide. In full coordination with the editor, the staff reporter is responsible for following such a process correctly in order to meet the needs of his/her clients.

Immediacy has always been a part of journalism but in the digital era, this is more relevant than ever. The agency journalist has to leave the press conference or any act he is covering and send the story as competently as possible. Technology makes this possible and clients demand no less. A journalist can be in contact with the news desk from the press conference room itself, from a fire scene or from the courthouse and can send the news story in real time through the mobile phone, a computer chat program or via a simple SMS message. An ACN journalist can publish it in real time through his portable computer thanks to mobile connection services.

The journalist must always be aware that his work will go directly and automatically to all ACN subscribers as well as to all those readers who access the agency’s open website (journalists and citizen information seekers) and those subscribers who receive the information by SMS through their cell phone terminal.

The widespread use of Internet and digital systems in general has permitted a new way of working, according to which the journalist accesses the news circuit from any telephone connection, whether mobile or fixed line. This allows staff journalists to move around the country under the same conditions as their colleagues based at the news desk, and eliminates the need for specific physical work locations: portable computers and Internet connections create a virtual newsroom, which substitutes traditional offices.

ACN’s internal structure is headed by the editor, Saül Gordillo, and financial controller Emili Mata. The agency has around 80 journalists on the payroll, the majority of whom have contracts. Aside from these two figures, the agency draws on the work of a small group of freelance journalists.

The remainder of agency employees (a dozen or so staff) include those who work in the Finance and Administration Department and the Department of Technology. This latter department has grown considerably, given the agency’s need to stay on top of the constant technological innovations. The company’s headquarters are in Barcelona, where a quarter of all its journalists are based as well as its management, communications, finance department, editing, technical services and administration. As well as this, the agency also includes delegations in the main Catalan capitals (Girona, Tarragona and Lleida) and does not exclude other support centres throughout the territory.

The agency’s news offices are designed to be eminently functional: few offices, the odd meeting room and free double desks which allow each reporter enough space to work with his/her PC and any other equipment used to gather the information in all different formats. In this way, the periods of inactivity and “dead time,” so typical of the traditional model, are a thing of the past. Usually, the journalist will have sent on at least half of the material from the same place where he/she has gathered the information and when he/she returns to the news desk, it will be just to add some details or carry out some administrative work. Those journalists who do not live close to an agency base finish off this process from home.

Journalists are spread out all over the country because the distribution of the journalists does not respond to a centralist logic nor is it proportional to population. The founding decision to guarantee complete territorial coverage is still very much alive. Combating territorial “news holes” is one of the mottos of the agency. Covering the whole of the country in an independent and fair manner necessarily involves employing journalists who know the area and do not act as mere distributors of information already drawn up by press offices or by ever-increasing private interest groups which, in professional fashion, may offer biased versions of events.
At a time when new technologies enable press releases to be sent to everyone whether through e-mail or through sources’ own websites, it cannot be the mission of a public news agency to merely distribute and pass off press handouts as bona fide “news” stories without reworking this information, even when this may involve publishing fewer news stories.

Once this model of proximity has been guaranteed, the evolution of the agency towards a genuine national model necessarily involves institutional growth in the Catalan capital, Barcelona, where all the main information hubs are concentrated and which represents 80% of the population. The key therefore is to make the offer of proximity compatible with a major national agency model, one which can comply with the objectives of a public news agency of any country. This involves reinforcing coverage in Barcelona in such a way as, without losing balance, the agency can meet those challenges which ACN faces as it reaches its tenth anniversary.

Journalists are allocated assignments by territory and by subject specialism. The professional category assigned to them, as well as the kind of contract and salary they have, does not depend on where they work but rather on the job and responsibility they carry out. In this way, all journalists have the same basic salary which can be boosted by territorial responsibility (area delegate for example) or by becoming section editor. Each journalist must edit and publish his/her news stories in order to speed up the process. This autonomous way of working does not depend on whether he/she works at the main offices or hundreds of kilometers away, but rather depends on the quality of work and the confidence editorial staff show in it. At ACN the word “correspondent” is shunned in favor of “staff writer” because Internet has no geographical centre and distance does not justify a different professional status.

Currently, ACN covers Catalonia as well as other Catalan-speaking territories such as the Valencia area, the Balearic Islands, the Catalan-speaking border area with France, the Catalonia-Aragon border area as well as neighboring country Andorra where Catalan is the official language. In this sense as from 2010, ACN has fulltime staff in other decision-making centers such as Madrid and Brussels and the main European capitals as well as New York.

The Internet not only provides the distribution platform for ACN content but the journalist’s workspace itself, and is also a virtual newsroom with all the instruments necessary for labor in a necessarily non-physical environment. For example, the editorial meeting is held every day, based on press conference releases and other proposals which journalists may have published on the internal web expressly designed for this function. Every afternoon, heads of content confer on this same web space and decide which of these ideas will be followed up the next day and in which format so that the reporters know under what terms they are to develop the stories. Once the parameters of a news story are decided, these are published on the web and sent to subscribers by email. Any unexpected developments are managed in real time via chat or telephone in coordination with heads of section.

Digital Origins

ACN was born on the Internet: there was no need to make a professional transition to the digital era because the agency was already tailored for new technologies and with the intention of contributing to the technological and democratic revolution which use of the Internet implies. When ACN began its trials, the Internet connection index in Catalonia in February 1999 was 7.1%. Press newsrooms typically had just one computer connected to the net and electronic mail was rarely used to send press notes. The fax machine was still king. In this context many were inclined to believe that the ACN model was an extravagance doomed to failure. However, the project pioneers were confident they had their fingers on the pulse of the future. “Technology developments were in our favor. It was possible to turn the historical demand for a Catalan news agency into reality,” explained ACN’s first editor, Carles Puigdemont.5

A Catalan national agency was a long-standing aspiration which sporadically rose to the surface. Ramon Barnils, journalist, columnist and scriptwriter, was the champion of the cause. An inspiration to many journalists, particularly throughout the 1980s, Barnils established the view that the concept of a Catalan agency was based on a compelling premise: all normal countries have a news agency that explains the world from their perspective (Barnils: 1986). “Barnils saw the need for any country to have a national news agency which forms part of its infrastructure; in
line with Barnil’s vision, we think it is essential that the basis of journalistic creation should be thought out from Catalonia and for Catalonia. It was very necessary to normalize the Catalan communicative space,” explains Xavier Fornells, the founder of ACN.6

It was basically a question of leveraging a leading technology that enabled staff to work on multiple platforms, and which incorporated two further innovations. On the one hand, there was the strategic question; monetization and commercialization on the Internet was different. On the other hand, there was a significant professional issue: the Internet provided many more organizational options. “Despite the short term cultural difficulties involved in convincing staff of the benefits of technology, we knew that the possibilities that were open to us were undeniable. We wanted to construct an instrument for the future in line with the modernist tradition so in line with Catalanism,” affirms Puigdemont.

As time has shown, use of the Internet was the perfect opportunity to avoid those heavy investments which traditional media demand and it allowed the agency to reach all kinds of media, including the mosaic of local media so deeply rooted in Catalonia and which until now had no possibility of accessing a news agency, for reasons of cost. Thanks to the Internet, a telephone connection was enough to receive agency material and so the Internet quickly became a perfect tool for the democratization of information.

To start out, the agency aimed high: the ideal scenario was a national agency with information from all fields and at all levels (local, national and international) in various languages and in all formats. But given that neither technology nor economic resources allowed for this, the decision was made to opt for information based on proximity because that was where the need was, where there was a market for content in the Catalan language and where there was no competition. “We set achievable goals without losing our ambition and with a very clear strategy: if we were strong at a local territorial level, if we became a genuine option, if we made the difference, there was no doubt that future growth would be easier. According to Puigdemont, ”making this journey the other way round would have been impossible”.

It was therefore an enticing opportunity to fill this “news hole” and respond to a real need of local media. It was a market which was still not a business opportunity, but it did exist and was growing, given that more media and more platforms were cropping up all the time: radio stations, newspapers, weeklies, television stations and the first Internet websites. At the same time, there was a great opportunity to be present in the Catalan communicative space and to contribute to greater territorial balance, increased plurality and better access to information generated around the country by those media interested in this option, without the restraints of technology or finance. Over time, this base has been consolidated over a wide, complex and diverse territory and this very same evolution has forced ACN to take on further journalistic challenges: namely those of increasing the amount of general information and converting the agency into a bona fide instrument for explaining Catalonia to the world.

The public service mission behind ACN forces the agency to take full advantage of all the possibilities that this channel offers and to constantly supply it with information useful for all kinds of media. This involves complementing the basic service with a subscription policy proportional to the resources and the diffusion of each news outlet. If the service was not accessible, the opportunity would not be real. Initially, users were billed according to specific consumption. Later, a flat rate was introduced for the basic service and clients were billed for specific contracted services and how often they were used, always bearing in mind the size of each media.

The Company

The owner company of ACN is Intracatalònia S.A., a public capital company belonging to the Catalan Government – which owns 70% of the shares through the Department of Culture and Media, with a minority participation of the Catalan Corporation of Audiovisual Media (CCAM), the public body which, under parliamentary control, manages the public radio and television.

Currently, ACN has a Board of Directors presided over by the Secretary for Media of the Catalan Government, currently Carles Mundó, and made up of eleven other members who have neither executive functions nor involvement in day-to-day editorial decisions. The members of the

6. Interview with Xavier Fornells, the first director of Intracatalonía. 02/01/2009. Further references to Fornells refer to this conversation.
When ACN began operations, it was already funded with public resources thanks to the initiative of public institutions of a local character which, through a public consortium, created the limited company Intracatalònia with the aim of managing the agency with a modest initial capital of 480,000 euros and twenty or so journalists. As well as launching a Catalan agency, the idea was to take advantage of this project in order to accelerate Catalonian and local media access to the information society, since it was becoming clear that if the local media sector did not undergo a process of technological re-conversion, it would face challenges to its very survival.

With the first stage successfully completed, and thanks exclusively to public capital, the decision was made to grow, and grant entry to private capital holders at a time when the agency had begun to arouse considerable curiosity. By demonstrating quite clearly that it was working, the project was by now showing itself to be a model for the future. “By the second year, the agency had a turnover of around 240,000 euros which at that time, was a considerable amount for Internet,” explains Fornells. It was a surefire product ready for introduction to the market in order to develop the project in all its facets.

In the year 2000, Intracatalònia became a mixed capital company and room was made for private enterprise, specifically through the participation of the company Planeta 2010 which entered with 75% of social capital. Later on, this company would sell 25% of the shares to the private company Invercartera. Private capital controlled the management of the company – Intracatalònia – and product exploitation. The original public consortium now held just 25% of company shares.

In 2002, the public CCRTV (Catalan Corporation for Radio and Television, now CCAM) became a shareholder through the affiliate company TVC Multimedia up to such a point that by 2005 it had become the only shareholder of the company with a fixed social capital of 850,000 euros.

In September of that year, the Catalan Government signed an agreement with CCRTV to guarantee stable financing of Intracatalònia for 2005-2007. The agreement included the presence on the Board of Directors of one member designated by the Presidential Department of the Catalan Government, specifically speaking, the Secretary for Communications.

The following step, taken in February 2007, was to pass over 70% of TVC Multimedia’s holdings to the Catalan Government, specifically to the Ministry of Culture and the Media. A three-year contract was drawn up with a 9.7 million euro funding plan. The 2010-2013 period is governed by a new contract programme between ACN and the Catalan Government. The aim of this accord, backed by 13,800,000 euros of public funding, is the consolidation of the activities of ACN after a period of growth in previous years, both regarding content production and their commercialization and technological aspects and associated management. The mission is to put at the disposition of the greatest number of media and other actors in both the national and worldwide communicative space a wide offer of products, services and news solutions through Internet which reflect reality from a Catalan angle and which at the same time help to improve the quality of contents and in a wider sense the media market in Catalonia.

Subscriber profile

As of the 1st of January 2010 ACN had 225 subscribers and over 30 sporadic clients. The profile of the subscriber is varied and complex: on the one hand we can find a combination of smaller and midrange media – basically the local and county press – and on the other, larger media groups both public and private. These include both Catalan media such as Avui, El Punt, Catalonia Television, Catalonia Radio, La Vanguardia and El Periódico as well as Spanish media such as Spanish public television (TVE), Spanish public radio (RNE), Cadena Ser and the newspaper Público. Given that ACN offers information in all formats, subscribers come from the fields of press, radio, television and digital press. Some 30% of ACN subscribers are public and private institutions, unions, companies, press offices and political parties interested in immediate access to news stories which may interest them. A very small but steadily growing percentage of subscribers are private consumers who wish to receive the information directly through the SMS headline message service.
Media needs and resources are different according to institutional size: whilst local media require detailed news regarding their particular area, the national media look for general news and tend to filter local and county news more heavily. Up until now, the latter did not require such elaborately detailed news because they tended to have the resources to further develop the news themselves and put their personal stamp on them. However media convergence, immediacy and the variety of formats which websites require is leading to a greater acceptance of finished news products among larger media.

Differences of use of news require different treatments. While the media commercialize the news which the agency offers them – therefore potentially benefiting economically – institutions, political parties, companies and especially individual subscribers use the information internally for private purposes. It should also be borne in mind that a small town hall does not have the same financial pull as that of a larger city, or that a national political party has greater financial resources than a local association and so on. Each type of institution has its corresponding tariff and this balance is essential for keeping the public service philosophy of the agency in harmony with its necessary commercial interests.

In 2009, ACN had revenue of 4.8 million euros of which 30% correspond to the sale of services and the rest to the contract with the Catalan Government. Earnings have tripled between 2006 and 2009. This indicated that as ACN consolidated into a national agency, it would continue to balance different revenue streams. The aim is not to reduce public participation as income increases but rather that this is to be maintained while revenue from commercial activities contribute to increasing the agency’s annual budget.

Perspectives for Agencies

The current context of crisis, which is leading to the closure or the merger of media companies is an opportune moment for rethinking the logic behind the service that a news agency should offer, especially when it is a public company. The difficulties which media are experiencing and their subsequent staff reductions serve to emphasize that a reasonably-priced news agency service can compensate for lack of personnel and resources.

It must also be borne in mind that the information business was already in crisis before recent economic difficulties. The alarm bells did not sound in an apparently healthy economy as demonstrated by the increase in advertising revenues. No contingency plans were made for the upcoming change in business model necessary to face the Internet era and the fact that media now needed to reinvent themselves in order to survive (Varela: 2009). Not all the blame for a fall in circulation figures and a reduction in advertising can be laid at the door of the economic crisis.

ACN has to analyze the future from this perspective of opportunity. Not only has a model which at first aroused so many suspicions and misunderstandings consolidated itself successfully, but its example has now been copied by competitors. As time goes by, it is being seen as a useful, valued and highly competitive instrument, and it is also considered to have a key role in the reinforcement of the Catalan communication sphere.

The versatile, multi-format model applied to a virtual journalistic environment has worked and has positioned ACN ahead of those longstanding agencies who are now facing serious problems of adaptation. ACN was born in 1999 into the digital age and with a multimedia character. Throughout this time it has developed its own system of video distribution by Internet protocol. It has embraced the Web 2.0 philosophy thanks to initiatives such as content syndication (RSS) and the diffusion of videos through a channel such as YouTube and a profile on Facebook. Now it continues to explore this horizon and further profile its products for every need. According to Gordillo, "we should be very sensitive to the new Internet reality and be especially aware of the social network".

This is ACN’s strongest card and sets it aside from the competition. After having pioneered the trail in Catalonia, the current crisis does not mean that ACN will run out of steam but rather exactly the opposite: the project is in a privileged position to adapt to the changing communicative landscape, to capture the needs of the information market and take advantage of the business opportunities through new products and the development of new strategies. The Internet forces constant transformations because it evolves continually and stamps on the illusions of stability or of a single surefire formula.
The evolution of Internet does not respond to a centralized model nor to any attempt at controlling the format or contents but rather just the opposite and this collides with the traditional vision of the media. Domínguez (2007) affirms that “neither its own dynamism nor technology allow for it, so it’s better not to try and resist it. If a web 2.0 motto existed it would be: share, collaborate and adapt yourself”.

As the public service it is, it is important to consider which model of content to offer, in which format, for which territory, how to manage the ever-growing public participation, and whether the information at hand should be left as raw material or refined into final product. The system of distribution is vital for reaching an information-hungry target.

It is a question of facilitating message distribution by taking advantage of the enormous potential of the new technologies in order to respond to market evolution. With the 2.0 philosophy the potential reader will not necessarily come to the media product but rather the product will likely find its target in the format, style and platform that it so wishes. Therefore, it is necessary to find the distribution platform which best adapts itself to the audience through content syndication, the creation of program interfaces (API), widgets or other artifacts. It is necessary for the user to be able to access the service anywhere and everywhere. ACN offers a direct news reception service adapted to each subscriber’s own system. In recent years it has also offered the Notiweb service which allows for the automatic incorporation of contents to its webs in terms of the predetermined profile of news items required and provided in real time.

The present – it is best not to think in terms of “the future” – has to run along these lines. The international media organization Ifra has published a guide to applications, implications and advice regarding this state of play on the Internet.

As a public agency, future policy must respect the need for efficient economic management while not necessarily predetermined exclusively by financial gain: it is precisely in times like the present that such a public service should guarantee that the right to be informed is not a victim of the crisis. According to Carles Mundó, President of ACN, “every euro spent has to be well thought out as we have to optimize our resources and be more professionally managed than ever. We have to be the most efficiently managed company because by virtue of being a public company, we cannot relax. However, the deficit cannot become an obsession or a barrier to guaranteeing the solid public service which is our raison d’être”.

In spite of everything, it would not be wise or realistic to confide only in public support in order to keep the agency up and running. As Boczkowski (2004) points out, it is important to search for alternative business routes and diversify sources of funding. First of all, in order to increase the quantity of resources and contribute to increasing the size of the company but also because competing in the marketplace, managing income and obtaining benefits consolidates the product’s credibility. A public service vocation implies guaranteeing plural and all-round information and assuring that all media have access to it. But this is not incompatible with business: it is essential that prices are adequate to the products on offer and the different uses made of them in order to get the maximum benefit from them.

Aside from strictly news-based products published and managed in the Catalan language, Saül Gordillo points out that ACN also wants to contribute to the consolidation of the Catalan communication sphere with other products such as the edition and publication of a style-book which could be useful for the larger national media outlets as well as for the wide range of those local media which do not dispose of economic resources to publish their own. Along these lines, Gordillo also highlights the agency’s open-door policy with local universities and welcomes all kinds of initiatives from the academic world “which make ACN a key player in academic, business and training fields.”

ACN has to consolidate its trademark, widen its territorial parameters and satisfy market demands by offering a flexible and ever-changing service and by remaining true to its three essential pillars which together have formed the company’s strategy: quality, innovation and difference.
References


