

THE ATTACHED TRANSCRIPT WAS TYPED FROM A RECORDING AND NOT COPIED FROM AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT. BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF MISHEARING AND THE DIFFICULTY IN SOME CASES OF IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL SPEAKERS, BBC MEDIA ACTION CANNOT VOUCH FOR ITS COMPLETE ACCURACY.

**BRAVE NEW MEDIA - EPISODE THREE – TAKING ON THE ALGORITHMS
TRANSCRIPT**

00.00

[STING: BRAVE NEW MEDIA.]

[STING SETTLES INTO INTRO BED.]

00.09

MAHA TAKI

WELCOME TO BRAVE NEW MEDIA – A PODCAST SERIES WHERE PUBLIC-INTEREST JOURNALISTS AND EDITORS, FROM AROUND THE WORLD, TELL THEIR STORY, SO WE CAN UNDERSTAND THE CURRENT INFORMATION LANDSCAPE AND THE LIKELY FUTURE OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

IN EACH EPISODE, WE HEAR FROM ONE MEDIA OUTLET AND WE LEARN FROM THEIR SETBACKS AND BREAKTHROUGHS IN DELIVERING TRUSTED INFORMATION IN THE MOST CHALLENGING OF ENVIRONMENTS.

AND WE TALK TO A MEDIA SPECIALIST TO REFLECT ON EACH STORY.

IN THIS EPISODE, WE HEAR FROM JAZMIN ACUNA - WHO CO-FOUNDED THE PARAGUAYAN MEDIA OUTLET, EL SURTI.

00.47

JAZMIN ACUNA

People are getting tired of reading bad news. It's understandable, they're starting to look away. There's plenty out there for people to get entertained, for people to replace the work of a journalist.

And we shouldn't... we shouldn't just offer the look of a dying civilisation to our readers.

I'm not saying that we should sugar-coat reality. But the thing is that, if we don't tell the stories of resistance, the stories of organisation and all the collective efforts to make our communities a little better, we're hiding them from the whole truth. Those stories exist, they're important, they're real. And I think that people deserve to learn about them.

[SFX TRANSITION.]

01.39

MAHA

THAT WAS JAZMIN ACUNA ON HOW PARAGUAYAN AUDIENCES AREN'T ENGAGING WITH NEGATIVE NEWS STORIES. AND HOW EL SURTI HAS RESPONDED TO THAT BY SHARING UPLIFTING AND POSITIVE CONTENT.

AS YOU WILL SOON DISCOVER, THAT IS THE GREAT THING ABOUT EL SURTI... THEIR WILLINGNESS TO ADAPT THEIR DIGITAL CONTENT TO ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE MORE MEANINGFULLY.

BUT, GIVEN HOW INFORMATION FLOWS IN PARAGUAY ARE CONTROLLED BY MAINSTREAM MEDIA AND BY ALGORITHMS, EL SURTI'S JOURNEY HASN'T BEEN – AND STILL ISN'T - EASY...

NOW, EL SURTI'S STORY STARTS IN 2016, WHEN JAZMIN WAS WORKING AT AN NGO THAT DEFENDED THE DIGITAL RIGHTS OF PEOPLE IN HER COUNTRY.

AT THAT TIME, JAZMIN KNEW SHE WANTED TO CREATE MEDIA CONTENT THAT WORKS IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST AND SPEAKS TO PARAGUAY'S LARGE YOUTH POPULATION.

BUT SHE DIDN'T ACT ON HER IDEA, UNTIL SHE AND HER COLLEAGUES AT THE NGO WON A COURT CASE, WHICH GAVE THEM A HUGE CONFIDENCE BOOST TO GO AND CREATE EL SURTI TOGETHER.

[MUSIC RISES.]

02.43

JAZMINI met the other two cofounders during the campaign that we launched the, at the Digital Rights NGO, against the bill that they wanted the Congress....well the politicians, they wanted to get meta data from all communications and store them for years.

They said that the bill was necessary, that we needed to have a normative framework for that, on security reasons.

So we launched a campaign against it. Because we found it to be against the Constitution, against our Bill of Rights. And we won. And my colleagues were key.

They're graphic designers, and they're great at communicating as well. And they help us they help us design all of our, you know, flyers, that we spread on, on social media against the campaign.

That was the first time that I felt, wow, we can actually do things. It's like, yeah, we may be young, but we can actually do things.

And it sounds cliché, but I felt so, so powerful. I remember walking out of Congress when that bill was rejected.

[SFX: LEAVES COURTHOUSE. CHEERING.]

And I couldn't believe it. And I was, I felt like I was floating on the streets. I'm like wow, what did we do.

And then we said hey, we can do this. This can be good, a news, an independent news media outlet – let's just go on social media, let's take advantage of that. We can do it, we're good at, you know, graphic design, and, and writing, we can learn as well, we can for sure, learn and now we're here.

[MUSIC FADES. EL SURTI STORIES RISE AND BECOME A BED UNDER THE NARRATION.]

04.53

MAHA

RIGHT NOW, YOU CAN HEAR SOME OF EL SURTI'S STORIES.

STORIES THAT SPEAK ON THE CHALLENGES PARAGUAYANS FACE AND HOW COMMUNITIES ARE TRYING TO OVERCOME THEM.

FROM STORIES ABOUT COMMUNITY EFFORTS TO SAVE WATER SOURCES FROM CONTAMINATION... TO DIFFICULTIES IN ACCESSING CONTRACEPTIVES ... AND COMMUNITY ACTION TO REDUCE THE DEFORESTATION TREND IN PARAGUAY.

EL SURTI SPECIALISES IN VISUAL JOURNALISM, WHICH THEY DESCRIBE AS THE COMBINATION OF QUALITY REPORTING WITH STRIKING AND ENGAGING GRAPHICS, IMAGES AND MEMES.

THEY PACK ALL TEXT AND IMAGES ON JPEG FILES, WHICH ARE EASY TO SHARE ON SOCIAL MEDIA.

ALL OF THIS CONTENT IS CREATED BY A MULTI-SKILLED TEAM INCLUDING GRAPHIC DESIGNERS, JOURNALISTS AND RESEARCHERS, WHO FOCUS ON FEATURE STORIES, AND ON BREAKING DOWN COMPLEX ISSUES SO THEY ARE EASY TO UNDERSTAND AND SHARE.

TO LEARN ABOUT EL SURTI, ITS TEAM, THE STORIES IT TELLS AND ITS AUDIENCE, CHECK OUT THE SHOW NOTES.

NOW, ONE OF THE REASONS EL SURTI MOSTLY USES VISUAL JOURNALISM IS SO THAT THEY CAN SPEAK DIRECTLY TO PARAGUAY'S YOUNG COMMUNITIES. JAZMIN EXPLAINS.

06.03

JAZMIN

A lot of Paraguayans and I think most citizens actually access the internet via mobile. And they use social media a lot, thanks to free basic plans. I don't know if you heard about free basics. It's when telephone companies provide free access to people to certain social media platforms. So for some people, access to the internet actually means just having access to WhatsApp or Facebook.

To us, this has meant that we need to adapt all of our content for mobile and social media, where young people are known to engage, and mobile data cost and low bandwidth also limit access. So despite the growing trend of reporting with video or live streaming, we choose less data heavy formats, like the JPG file, or scrolly telling.

Scrolly telling is another, less data heavy format that allows users to navigate information and, you know, graphics, our graphics, at their own pace with a gesture that I always like to say this that defines generations, especially millennials, you know, the up and down movement of the thumb that we all know and we all do on social media

[SFX TRANSITION.]

07.31

MAHA

WHILE SOCIAL MEDIA HELPS EL SURTI REACH ITS AUDIENCE, USING IT AS A DISTRIBUTION TOOL ALSO COMES WITH RISKS... AS ALGORITHM CHANGES CAN MEAN POSTS WON'T SEEN BY AUDIENCES.

LIKE WHEN EL SURTI FIRST LAUNCHED ON FACEBOOK, THEIR AUDIENCE KEPT GROWING... BUT THAT CHANGED IN 2019..

[SFX TRANSITION.]

07.49

JAZMIN

That year was when the platform decided to boost even more content of, you know, family and friends over other types of content, including news. And I noticed that change because before, in 2017, we used to reach an average of 20,000 readers per post. And by 2019, our reach decreased to 15,000 readers per publication on Facebook.

Also people that I know from the audience, they kept telling me that they just couldn't see us on their feed. They will say things like you just don't show up on our feed anymore, what's going on.

[MUSIC FADES.]

08.36

MAHA

WHILE EL SURTI'S CONTENT CAN OFTEN BE SIDELINED BY ALGORITHM CHANGES... MAINSTREAM MEDIA, WHICH IS MOSTLY OWNED BY POWERFUL BUSINESS GROUPS IN PARAGUAY, HAVE THE RESOURCES TO CUT THROUGH AND REACH AUDIENCES - OFTEN BY PROMOTING INFLUENCERS AND BY PLACING ADS.

ALL OF THIS MEANS THAT SOME MAINSTREAM OUTLETS ARE ABLE TO DOMINATE THE CONVERSATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA, WHICH GIVES THEM CAPACITY TO LAUNCH DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS...

ONCE THE COUNTRY'S SCIENCE FUND, AN INDEPENDENT THINK TANK, WHICH WAS SET UP TO COLLECT DATA TO INFORM POLICIES, WAS TARGETED.

[MUSIC RISES.]

09.06

JAZMIN

I remember a couple of years ago, there was a disinformation campaign that started on social media. And they were targeting the science fund in the country. And I remember different accounts just started to accuse scientists of publishing false information when, when they [the account] were doing that.

One of the victims of this disinformation campaign was a doctor. She was accused of, of lying about the effects of agribusiness activities on children's health from nearby plantations. They also accused some research centres of mismanaging funds that they had received to do research.

[SFX OF THUNDERSTORM RISES.]

What these thinktanks had in common is that their work put into question the policies that actually benefit powerful economic groups in the country.

And finally, the campaign had a tragic effect, really. So they, they got they got the president out of the public fund, and they put another one that was somebody that the private firms prefer a lot more, even though he said that he had no experience in research. So one of the few independent institutions in the country fell again in the hands of powerful economic interests.

So a disinformation campaign like that was just terrible. It has been terrible. So that was a time when I felt it's, it's so hard to, to yeah, to challenge this information. I mean, disinformation and misinformation on social media, and the platforms do so little to, to counter this phenomenon. So yeah, I felt very powerless.

[MUSIC ABRUPTLY STOPS. SFX OF THUNDERSTORM RISES AND FADES.]

11.19

MAHA

TO TRY AND COMPETE FOR THE ATTENTION OF ITS AUDIENCES, EL SURTI NEED TO ENSURE THEIR CONTENT IS RELEVANT AND INTERESTING.

JAZMIN AND HER COLLEAGUES PUT A LOT OF TIME, ENERGY AND RESOURCES INTO UNDERSTANDING AND TRACKING AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT. SOMETIMES THE RESULTS ARE SURPRISING.

[SFX TRANSITION.]

11.35

JAZMIN

Well, what we do is that every month we have a team, two amazing, wonderful women who are in charge of community. And they keep track of engagement numbers, and you know, the comments, the feedback that we get from the audience, and every month they come with a report and they tell us how we're doing and what kind of content has worked.

It has happened to me that we have had a great story. We have managed to uncover details about mismanagement of funds or corruption, and I thought that that will get the audience really interested and, and, there will be an outcry. And then nothing happened.

And then I thought that some content that we prepare, especially the ones that explain things....I will read our publication, and I will say, but who doesn't know this, who doesn't know how to vote, for instance? Or who, who doesn't know that they are allowed to vote since they're 18 years old. And then I see that that kind of publication has a lot of engagement. And, it's surprising how many things we journalists take for granted.

[SFX TRANSITION.]

12.57

More and more people want to understand the news, and they're actually looking away and they're tuning out of following the news. Because they say we don't get them, we don't understand them. They're too hard to understand. So I think that it will be good if we, if we put more more effort into explaining things.

[SFX TRANSITION.]

13.22

We know that sometimes those terrible corruption findings, they're not gonna get very far. But they have to be out there. It's important that they're out there. Yeah, maybe people are not going to engage as much with that, because they don't want to read another bad story about corruption in our country. But they have to be out there. Because if it's up to people.... yeah, we all just publish kittens, and I totally understand them. Because I, I like kittens a lot. So yeah.

13.57

MAHA

EL SURTI DOESN'T BELIEVE THAT SERIOUS CONTENT HAS TO BE BORING OR DULL. THEY KNOW THAT THIS KIND OF REPORTING CAN BE ATTRACTIVE, ENGAGING AND EVEN FUNNY.

[MUSIC RISES.]

14:07

JAZMIN

So yeah, we fact check the president speech, and we use memes to fact check him. We - it was, it was a very, very effective way of, of, you know, telling people that he was lying, that he was right, that he was exaggerating, and we use memes for that. We had so much fun doing it, we laughed a lot picking the memes that we will use to fact check him. And I think that, yeah, that's a good indicator that the audience is gonna like it.

[MONTAGE OF EL SURTI STORIES. MUSIC FADES OUT.]

14.48

MAHA

NOWDAYS, EL SURTI ARE INCREASINGLY USING OTHER MEDIUMS TO CONNECT TO THEIR AUDIENCES. MEDIUMS THAT AREN'T CONTROLLED BY ALGORITHMS, LIKE WHATSAPP AND PODCASTS.

AND TO BUILD A REAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEMSELVES AND THEIR AUDIENCES, THEY HOST MONTHLY EVENTS THAT TAKE PLACE ONLINE AND IN PERSON.

[ATMOS OF PARAGUAYAN COMMUNITY.]

15.08

JAZMIN

Those are strategies that give us a lot of strength. When we gather with audience members who are so happy to read us, they're so interested, they're so enthusiastic, we will remind that there's a world out there also, beyond, you know, the algorithms.

Also, social media environment can be very hostile. It's easier to get angry on social media, at other people and other people's points of views and opinions, because you don't see them and you feel like the cost of just being mean to somebody is not so high on social media, but it's a lot harder to just have a very disrespectful discussion with somebody that you're actually seeing in front of you. So that's why we really like to actually you know, have these safe spaces every month.

[TRANSITION TO BNM MUSIC.]

16.13

MAHA

FROM SPEAKING TO JAZMIN, IT'S CLEAR THAT WHAT IS SO SPECIAL ABOUT EL SURTI IS THEIR APPROACH TO AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT.

WHEN THEY'RE NOT GETTING THE KIND OF AUDIENCE REACH THEY WERE ANTICIPATING, THEY DON'T JUST CONTINUE WITH THE SAME METHOD - THEY TRY DIFFERENT THINGS... THEY GET CREATIVE... AND THEY HAVE FUN.

BUT DESPITE ALL THE BRILLIANT WORK THEY HAVE DONE TO BETTER CONNECT WITH PARAGUAYAN COMMUNITIES, JAZMIN BELIEVES THAT THERE ARE STILL WAYS FOR THEM TO IMPROVE-

ESPECIALLY WHEN THE COMPETITION FROM MAINSTREAM MEDIA IS SO STRONG AND WHEN CHANGES IN SOCIAL MEDIA ALGORITHMS CAN MAKE IT A REAL STRUGGLE FOR THEIR CONTENT TO BE SEEN.

TO HELP EL SURTI AND OTHERS STRUGGLING WITH SIMILAR ISSUES, I CONSULTED WITH MIJAL IASTREBRER, CO-FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR OF SEMBRA MEDIA, WHICH IS A NON-PROFIT ORGANISATION DEDICATED TO SUPPORTING DIGITAL MEDIA ENTREPRENEURS.

17.08

MAHA

MIJAL, WHAT WOULD YOUR ADVICE BE TO DIGITAL MEDIA OUTLETS, LIKE EL SURTI, WHO WANT TO STRENGTHEN THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH AUDIENCES?

17.15

MIJAL IASTREBRER

My advice for digital media and independent media in general is to find a way to have conversation with your community.

Successful media have a clear purpose, and they have no problem communicating it. This consistent mission, usually a social impact, builds trust with their audiences. You have no idea how many media haven't even thought about their purpose.

17.48

MAHA

CAN YOU GIVE SOME EXAMPLES OF WHAT YOU MEAN BY SOCIAL IMPACT? AND WHAT SORT OF RESOURCES DO YOU THINK YOU NEED FOR THIS?

17:55

JAZMIN

So it's actually about communicating to your team, how you want to impact the society and providing examples-

Like maybe a local media wants to make changes in the government behaviour, they want to make changes in the police, maybe they want to make changes in the educational aspect.

But basically having an internal report of the changes you've made in society makes you create a space where you can not only let people know how you impacted the community, and how relevant is your reporting, but you also can assess the work... you have to do better, or you have to do more or less. It could be an Excel document, it could be a form, it could be done in a more sophisticated way.

And that system can change with time, but it shouldn't be changing because you want to win a grant or you want to take on a client, it should be really clear and specific to your organisation so you can be consistent with yourself.

I do think that builds not only trust, but also a more engaging relationship.

19.27

MAHA

SO I KNOW THAT JAZMIN, AND EL SURTI'S OTHER CO-FOUNDERS, ARE FOCUSED ON AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION... AND THEY HAVE A TEAM THAT MEASURES HOW WELL THEY ARE DOING AT THAT... WHICH NICELY LEADS ME ON TO MY NEXT QUESTION, HOW IMPORTANT DO YOU THINK HAVING A MULTI-SKILLED TEAM IS TO INDEPENDENT DIGITAL MEDIA OUTLETS?

19:44

One of the biggest issues independent digital media face is the lack of a diverse team. A media is a business and it needs to be a sustainable social oriented business. And if you try to avoid that problem, it becomes worse.

And sometimes, journalists tend to think that the most valuable thing is to have a lot of journalists. But if you have a lot of journalists and nobody is building a relationship with the audience, nobody is distributing the content strategically, that content - if nobody, nobody is thinking about the sustainability aspect - it won't last long.

And this is not my opinion. This is what we have been studying in the Latin American region. We've seen the sustainability of the media improve six times or six to nine times when they have at least one paid person in sales.

21.00

MAHA

JAZMIN SPOKE ABOUT HOW MAINSTREAM MEDIA GIANTS WITH THEIR HUGE RESOURCES CAN LAUNCH DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS ON SOCIAL MEDIA. DO YOU KNOW OF ANY WAYS THAT INDEPENDENT MEDIA OUTLETS ARE TACKLING THIS ISSUE?

21:14

I think it's really interesting how the alliances between media have been proved to be very effective on fighting misinformation. We've seen El Surti align with CeroSetenta, in Columbia and distribute information around events happening in both those countries.

And we also see networks like LATAM Checquea that was founded by Checquea in Argentina that provides training and also communication channels between fact-checkers around the region to help each other and to exchange sources and resources to fight misinformation. I don't think one specific media can change the entire problem of disinformation campaigns, but they can fight misinformation inside their communities.

I think a lot of El Surti's growth has to do with smart alliances, and they actually have like internal processes to assess what is a good or a bad alliance. And they really look into what type of resources they are missing and what they can offer. And this is a really sustainable way to grow.

22.50

MAHA

SO WE GOT JAZMIN TO THINK OF ANY QUESTIONS THAT SHE WANTED US TO ASK YOU... AND SHE WANTED TO KNOW HOW YOU THOUGHT EL SURTI CAN STOP SOCIAL MEDIA ALGORITHMS FROM BECOMING THEIR EDITORS... I MEAN, THEY ALREADY USE OTHER MEDIUMS NOT CONTROLLED BY THE ALGORITHMS OF BIG PLATFORMS, LIKE WHATSAPP, PODCASTS AND MEETING EVENTS, BUT WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO JAZMIN?

23:10

MIJAL

What I will say to Jazmin is that they are in the right direction, using different platforms, reinforcing the relationship with your community outside the grid is also super important.

And there's also the you need to check the level of interest from your audiences to towards your different formats and platforms you use. It's better to test it yourself that rather than depending on the algorithm.

23.47

MAHA

AND DO YOU HAVE FINAL THOUGHTS ON EL SURTI'S STORY THAT YOU WANT TO SHARE?

23.53

MIJAL

El Surti is a great source of inspiration for me, they are super impactful.

They innovated in different platforms in different formats for the reporting. And for me, the most interesting thing is that they, even though they are in a small country, I hate to call it small, but in a, in a limited environment. They got to teach and share so much with the entire region. They added value not only in Paraguay, but also in the entire region, and far more.

[THEME MUSIC RISES.]

24:48

THAT'S IT FOR THIS EPISODE, AND FOR THIS SERIES...

IF YOU ENJOYED SERIES ONE OF BRAVE NEW MEDIA, PLEASE DO RATE AND REVIEW US.

AND DO GET IN TOUCH WITH BBC MEDIA ACTION ON TWITTER TO SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON WHAT YOU'D LIKE US TO COVER IN SEASON TWO.

THIS EPISODE WAS A HOLY MOUNTAIN PRODUCTION FOR PRIMED.

PRIMED IS LED BY BBC MEDIA ACTION, THE BBC'S INTERNATIONAL CHARITY.

IT WAS PRESENTED BY MAHA TAKI AND PRODUCED BY SASKIA BLACK.

THE EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS WERE MAHA TAKI, BOZ TEMPLE-MORRIS AND PAUL HARPER.

THE SERIES MUSIC WAS CREATED BY ALASDAIR MCGREGOR.

THE CLIPS WERE PROVIDED BY EL SURTI.

[BNM IDENT.]