

Changes of the Chilean telenovela industry in the Digital Age

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Summary

This research analyzes the transformation of the Chilean telenovela industry in the Digital Age (Bruun, 2019) through the case study (Yin, 2014) of *Al sur del corazón* (Rencoret & Ávila, 2024), the first Chilean telenovela produced for Netflix by the country's only key agent: Megamedia. After observant participation (Agüero et al., 2019; Seim, 2024) of one year, semi-structured interviews were conducted (Hernández et al., 2014) with sixteen industry experts. Through inductive and deductive analysis (Abreu, 2015), emerging themes and power dynamics were narrowed down, creating a conceptual map that highlights critical areas in the production of Chilean telenovelas in order to identify the significant changes in the creation, production, broadcasting, and reception of telenovelas due to digital narrative (Alexander, 2017; Lambert & Hessler, 2018). The results show how digitalization has introduced new tools and practices at narrative, distribution, and consumption levels due to its expansion to streaming platforms, with "digital tropes" that have redefined the industry, and presented new challenges in the production, distribution, and consumption of telenovelas in Chile.

Key words

"digital narrative"; "telenovela"; "soap opera"; "Digital Era"; "Digitalization", "digital tropes"

1. Introduction

In 2010, Televisión Nacional de Chile (TVN) took its first steps toward a digital narrative by complementing the telenovela *La familia de al lado* (Portilla & Rencoret, 2010) with a transmedia project. This included an online game, a video blog, and character profiles on Facebook and Twitter (now X); audiences began to follow them, sparking conversations that were accessible to anyone on those social networks (Bruna & Whittle, 2012).

This intersection between the digital sphere and the Chilean telenovela industry is the focus of this research. Little study has been conducted on the impact of digital media on television narrative structures, industries, or the audiovisual world—and even less so regarding telenovelas. Research into the changes caused by virtual platforms in television narratives is also largely limited to series (Álvarez-Rodríguez, 2019; Morazzo, 2018; Neira et al., 2021). Furthermore, there is little development concerning the current challenges facing telenovelas, and the effect of digital narratives or the current digital ecosystem within the industry or the Chilean telenovela itself has not been fully considered.

Given the cultural relevance of the telenovela worldwide (Acosta-Alzuru, 2015; Bruna & Antezana, 2022; Rincón, 2017; Mujica, 2017), it is essential to understand its current processes in the Digital Age (Bruun, 2019), taking into account the structural changes to which it must adapt due to digital narrative (Alexander, 2017; Lambert & Hessler, 2018). The Chilean telenovela industry is particularly important, as it is at a turning point, internationalizing exponentially on platforms such as Amazon Prime, HBO+, and—as recently seen with *Al sur del corazón* (Rencoret & Ávila, 2024)—Netflix.

2. State of the Art

To analyze the transformation of the Chilean telenovela industry in the Digital Age, we must first understand the digital shifts that have affected our society. From the daily use of new technologies to knowledge management through social networks (García Quintanilla et al., 2018), we are now immersed in an ecosystem where “consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” (Jenkins, 2008, p. 276). This does not only encompass emerging technologies (Azuaje Pirela, 2022) or the basic digital elements we have grown accustomed to; it merges with the “convergence era” (Jenkins, 2008) where diverse technologies, industries, and forms of communication converge on a single platform or device.

Digital transformation is “the most profound and accelerated transformation of activities, processes, competencies, and business models to leverage the changes in digital technology and their impact in a strategic and prioritized manner” (Hamidi et al., 2018, p. 723). Such transformation is relevant when rethinking the Chilean telenovela industry in the digital era; as Hanne Bruun (2019) notes, the television industry is adapting its production culture and professional programming practices to a television paradigm where different communicative and digital tools are incorporated into a volatile industry (Bruun, 2019).

Bruun argues that a new television paradigm exists due to changing viewer habits and the tensions between streaming platforms, digital TV, and broadcast TV. Television has evolved from a linear paradigm to a non-linear one, where the non-linear paradigm potentially disrupts the schedule as a point of connection between the communicative,

industrial, and politico-cultural dimensions of television (Bruun, 2019). This is evident in terms of consumption, viewer access, communication, textual characteristics of distribution, and textual characteristics of content, which will be the focus of the analysis of the Chilean telenovela industry. These paradigms refer to the difference between classic viewing (linear paradigm), dependent on a programming grid and schedule, and current viewing (non-linear paradigm) — see Table 1.

Table 1. Two television paradigms. Original from Bruun (2019)

Televisión Paradigm	Linear	Non Linear
Field of action		
1. Consumption	Central location and the television set	Multiple locations and digital devices
2. Viewer access	Time-structured access to content	On-demand access to content
3. Communication	Unidirectional and mass communication	Interactivity
4. Textual characteristics: distribution	Schedules and content reflect and organize the temporal structures of an audience's daily life	Spatial structures and database archives
5. Textual characteristics: content	Temporal normalization of content to adapt to distribution structures	No fixed time

Source: Own elaboration

The points raised by Bruun (2019) have given rise to what is known as "the new television" (Bastidas, 2021), where users have total control over what they want to watch, as well as when and where they wish to do so. This is also referred to as the "streaming era" of television, which in Latin America is marked by the arrival of Netflix in early 2010 (Straubhaar et al., 2021). We see how the development of digital elements and advancements impacts television in terms of its relationship with the audience, at an economic level (business models), a political level (corporate dominance in the streaming era), and in the way of storytelling, as these changes are linked to a new way of communicating and narrating: digital narrative (Alexander, 2017; Lambert & Hessler, 2018).

3. Theoretical Framework

Digital narrative is a difficult concept to define due to its constant evolution. It goes beyond the concepts of "hypertextual narrative" or "electronic literature." It implies...

a new way of narrating that would be taking shape thanks to the aesthetic utilization of digital communication technologies and, specifically, the use of hypertext, understood—following Landow—as a form of digital textuality in which electronic links join lexias, or fragments of texts, which can take the form of words, images, sound, video, etc., promoting a multilinear, multi-sequential, or non-linear reading. (Rodríguez Ruiz, 2006)

Digital narrative affects not only what we tell but also how and where we tell it. This change in narrativity and the reappraisal of the message is linked to technological and digital processes where communication—and, therefore, narration—is constantly intermediated by a digital device.

3.1. What is digital narrative?

Today, stories are created using virtually all available digital devices. These serve not only as means to access narratives but also influence their structure, format, and reach, becoming an inseparable part of the contemporary narrative process with a myriad of tools that are growing exponentially (Alexander, 2017).

The audiovisual industry “has benefited from these new ways of storytelling, particularly those that use different media and languages to build a unified account” (Costa Sánchez & Piñero Otero, 2012, p. 103). Blogs, forums, and chat rooms, in addition to the most popular applications created for generating digital content, have seen a surge since the 2000s. These elements, which on their own appear as social networks or apps that seemingly do not “narrate” a story, have become tools that converge into a new way of telling and a new way of viewing as well. This “digital narrative” is structured because...

new forms of relationship with existing screens emerge and, as a consequence, with the content disseminated through them, 'creating new ways of recording, sharing, and consuming stories' (Albaladejo & Sánchez, 2019, p. 14)

While, thanks to the taxonomy of media practices explained by Lambert and Hessler (2018), digital storytelling can be understood today as stories structured around digital languages and platforms/supports such as social networks—of “constructive consumption” (consuming but, at the same time, being able to build new content from the element being consumed; that is, co-constructing) and intermediated (developed within a context and facilitated by the possibility of doing it oneself)—there is a key point that it leaves out: the sequentiality necessary to unify and tell a story. An image, an object, or a phrase is not enough: there must be a sequence in time in order to speak of a digital narrative (Alexander, 2017). This would imply that a digital story needs a structure that develops over a period, with events that connect in a meaningful way, which is the focus of this research.

The narratologist David Herman proposes a more flexible perspective of narrativity where different levels exist, meaning that some texts can be more narrative than others and can be linked in an industry such as the Chilean telenovela. From his view, the interpretation of the reader or viewer plays a crucial role. A text or an image that, at first instance, does not seem to tell a story can be interpreted as such if the reader contributes their own knowledge and expectations. The reader's mind constructs the story based on expectations and context through the interpretation of the reader or viewer. The mind-narrative nexus...

continues to be an emerging trend within the broader field of narratology, encompassing multiple research methods, diverse analyses, and corpora. Relevant

corpora include printed fiction and non-fiction narratives; computer-mediated narratives, such as interactive fictions, email novels, and blogs; comics and graphic novels; cinematic narratives; face-to-face storytelling; and other examples of narrative text types. (Herman, 2014, pp. 46-47)¹

Under this perspective, in digital narrative, the story is not only built through the presented sequence of events but also with the interaction of the reader or viewer, who completes and gives meaning to the story in their mind. This reinforces the idea that digital narrative is an interactive and dynamic process, where consumption and interpretation play a fundamental role in the creation of meaning. We see, then, that the creation of narratives (for example, transmedia or transmediatic ones) not only moves beyond the fiction series to create parallel narratives manufactured through the contribution of digital elements (Cortés-Gómez et al., 2016) but is also completed by the users. As García-Jiménez and Sánchez Soriano (2017) explain, the audience “expanded the narrative by producing innumerable content, especially from wiki collaboration spaces” (p. 23).

This shapes the process and production, allowing the television viewer to influence this process in an oblique way beyond a focus group, survey, or interview. The underlying reason is that, like streaming platforms such as Netflix, it “relies heavily on social media and viral social media campaigns to increase audience engagement and expand its viewer base (Fernández-Gómez and Martín-Quevedo, 2018)” (in Straubhaar et al., 2021).

4. Methodology

The research was conducted with a qualitative approach using a multi-method methodology and taking the Chilean telenovela industry as a case study (Yin, 2014). For one year, the researcher participated in the production of *Al sur del corazón* (Rencoret & Ávila, 2024)—a project by Mega¹ (now Megamedia) for Netflix—through participant observation (Agüero et al., 2019; Seim, 2024). This served to identify sixteen key agents, including managers and executors, in the areas of consumption, viewer access, communication, distribution, and content, which are the focus of this research. These individuals were subsequently interviewed via semi-structured interviews (Hernández et al., 2014), serving as key informants (Mendieta Izquierdo, 2015) due to their expertise in the field, senior executive roles, or relevance in the industry based on their extensive track records. A discourse analysis was carried out (Narvaja de Arnoux, 2021) to elucidate changes in four areas: creation, production, broadcasting, and reception. Following this, a concept map was developed (Lune & Berg, 2017) to identify interaction levels, descriptions, actions, main contributions, profiles, and objectives of each actor within the system, as well as the impact of digital narrative within this context, thereby structuring the Chilean telenovela industry.

¹ Author's translation

5. Results

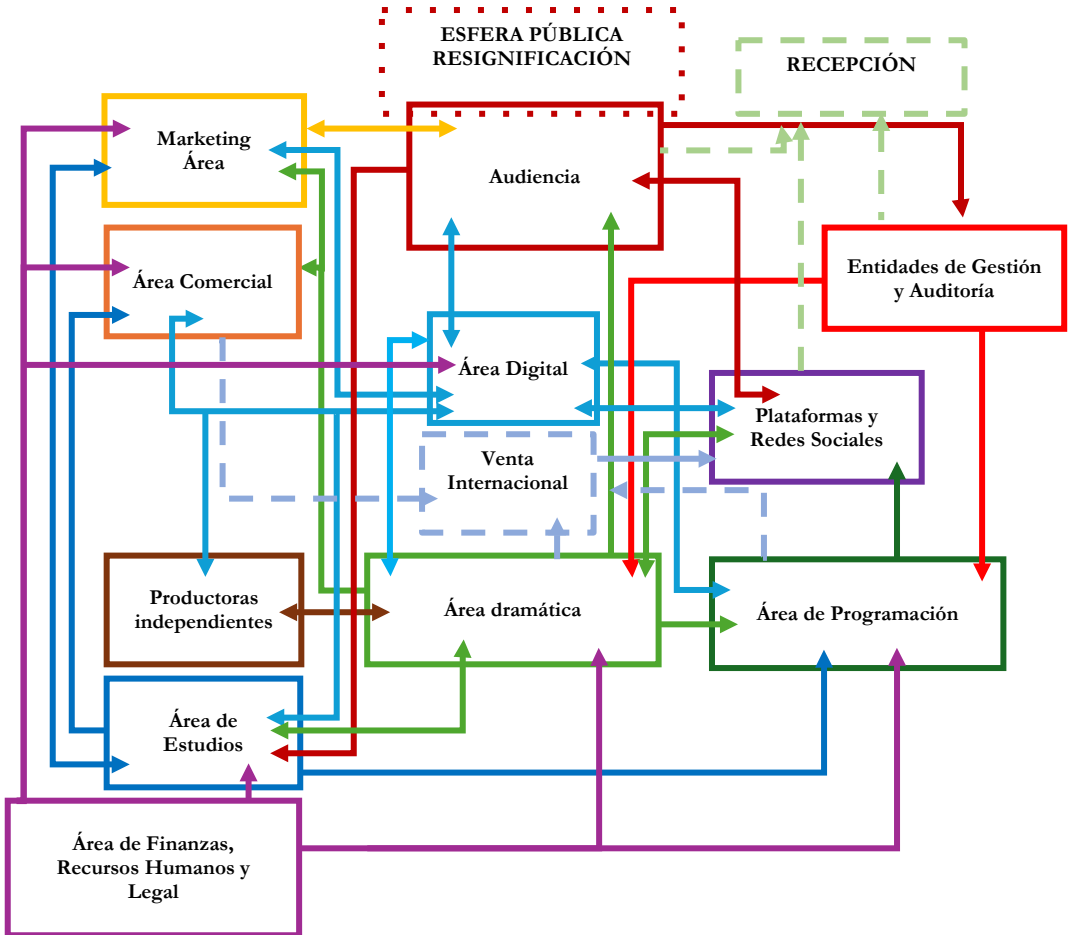
For many skeptics, digital storytelling and its impact on the Chilean soap opera industry haven't changed a thing. This is because the effects of digital narratives are much more obvious in other areas—news broadcasting, for instance, where

everything has to last a minute, it has to be very short. TikTok changed the video narrative a lot; I tell you everything very quickly, not even a single shot can last long. (...) [However] I imagine that scriptwriters aren't writing for YouTube now, they are writing a soap opera just like always, it's just that people watch it on YouTube. (D. Cartagena, personal communication, September 29, 2023).

This is far from the truth, as evidenced during the participant observation phase. This stage helped clarify power dynamics, systematize the industry, and identify key players across various sectors who were subsequently interviewed. By applying inductive and deductive analysis to these interviews (Abreu, 2015), a conceptual map was developed (see Figure 1). This map identifies the essential areas and nodes within the Chilean soap opera production system, narrowing down emerging themes and structured categories in relation to the theoretical elements of digital storytelling. The ultimate goal is to pinpoint the transformation of the Chilean soap opera industry in the Digital Age.

Within this model, digital storytelling has impacted every stage of the creation, production, broadcast, and reception of soap operas in Chile. In this context, the digital element 'has been the major game-changer in how the business model of free-to-air television is envisioned and how it is produced' (P. Ávila, personal communication, December 28, 2023).

Figure 1. Practical model of the Chilean soap opera industry system



Source: Own elaboration

5.1. Changes in creation and production

Digital storytelling has impacted the television paradigm proposed by Bruun, introducing a new field of action: narrativity. In the linear model, this is presented as a face-to-face narrative, where characters interact with each other in person. Conversely, in the non-linear television paradigm, characters establish their presence on screen through digital elements such as apps, text and audio messages, and social media—platforms where digital storytelling enables a non-face-to-face narrative.

Social media and new technologies are now integrated into the script to tell certain stories in different ways, establishing conflicts or presenting interactions—which would previously have been in person—through technology. Consequently, some scenes unfold entirely via WhatsApp or text messages, featuring emojis and voice notes. This affects acting performance, as the use of technology changes how characters react; we can witness internal conflicts where a character maintains a digital discourse while emotionally experiencing something entirely different (P. Volpato, personal communication, June 4, 2024).

the audience watches every episode. (...) Therefore, in a story written specifically for a platform, the way of narrating said story must be designed differently. Nowadays, in the digital world, there is no time for repetitions, or fat that bulks up the plot. You have to get straight to the point. (J.I. Valenzuela, personal communication, January 22, 2024)

This shift forces screenwriters to write and structure their work differently, going beyond merely seeking modern or current themes. This results, first, in a fifth aspect of the soap opera's melodramatic matrix (Fuenzalida et al., 2009). To the four existing axes—which include the juxtaposition of desire/impediment, civilization/barbarism or reason/emotion, ignorance/recognition, and distance/affection between social classes—the analog/digital axis must now be added. There is one narrative occurring within the characters' lives and another within the technological world.

Second, it affects the dramatic structure of the soap opera. In analog television, recap episodes were written periodically because, in a soap opera broadcast on "free-to-air" television, a "summary" episode had to be made every 15 or 20 episodes. "If I revealed an important secret in episode 3 of the soap opera, by the time episode 23 is aired, a month has already passed (...) There is enough time for people to forget what they have seen, and it is important to remind them," explains screenwriter José Ignacio "Chasca" Valenzuela (J.I. Valenzuela, personal communication, January 22, 2024). In a product exhibited on a streaming platform...

The soap opera, "in terms of perceptual hook, is much more powerful in the script construction" (P. Hernández, personal communication, November 17, 2023). Today, they start directly with the inciting incident, and "the story kicks off at a high point, in conflict, and little by little we will discover everything that belongs to the first act, which is now scattered throughout the second act" (J.I. Valenzuela, personal communication, January 22, 2024).

Social media has also influenced the narrative and the way stories are told, particularly in character structure and the creation of complementary spaces where the story is told across other platforms. In *Santa Diabla* (Guillén & Urbaneja, 2013-2014), Valenzuela completely changed a character based on comments he read on social media: Santiago (Aarón Díaz), the "good guy" hero; he fell in love with the protagonist and helped her achieve the vengeance she sought. But...

the audience, through Twitter and Facebook, began to speculate about Santiago. (...) The truth was that the character had been designed as the 'good guy' and that was it. But I

found it interesting that people were expecting something more from him. And that is why I completely changed the character, giving him a very unexpected twist in the final stretch of the story, which I did exclusively to please the viewers of the soap opera. (J.I. Valenzuela, personal communication, January 22, 2024)

Third, platform-based products allowed narrative themes to become increasingly specific and segmented. Originally, a soap opera broadcast on free-to-air television had to try and gather the largest possible audience, across all ages and genders. Today, it is possible to write “something just for men over 50, or for female adolescents under 18” (J.I. Valenzuela, personal communication, January 22, 2024). To give a recent example, in 2022, screenwriter José Ignacio Valenzuela wrote a soap opera for Netflix called *Highb Heat* (*Donde hubo fuego*) (Mejía & Valenzuela, 2022), where he was able to explore darker, bolder, and more groundbreaking themes, since...

streaming does not have time-slot or audience censorship. (...) [The] innovations are a result of the fact that the soap opera is now consumed from a cell phone, and not from a television screen. (J.I. Valenzuela, personal communication, January 22, 2024)

The Chilean soap opera faces a structural problem in terms of production; despite the existence of new technologies that facilitate processes, there is a “rigidification” of productive workflows. However, the development of series on streaming platforms has imposed higher quality standards regarding staging, filmmaking, and production values. Technological advances in digital storytelling are being integrated into visual narratives in terms of production and imagery, while, on the other hand, the success of certain formats influences how soap operas are filmed, increasingly striving to resemble cinema.

The pressure to improve soap opera filmmaking has been complemented by new technologies, changing the way audiovisual stories are told so that when a viewer “jumps from one platform to a Channel X, there isn't such a stark difference and they feel familiarized” (P. Ávila, personal communication, December 28, 2023). This effort extends to the technical side, which means production companies like Mazal must acquire new technologies, software, and, for example, Black Magic cameras, since “Netflix does have Black Magic cameras validated for the content they want” (P. Ávila, personal communication, December 28, 2023). This is vital given that the Chilean soap opera industry is built around production companies like Mazal.

5.2. Changes in broadcasting and reception

Today, everyone involved in the creation and production of Chilean soap operas must think about creating material so that the soap opera also lives in the digital sphere, which “gives more opportunity to create sub-products. You can make spin-offs, you can make webseries (...) you can 'butcher' the soap opera” (P. Hernández, personal communication, November 17, 2023). This implies releasing different products that are better suited to the Digital Age, with a narrative that “must consider all the necessary digital instances. (...) some pieces work, some don't, because digital consumption has its own logic, its own timing” (M. Bravo, personal communication, December 19, 2023).

This has affected the promotion of soap operas, changing the workflow of communication departments, as there is now an urgency that was not seen before: “digital is an almost immediate reaction (...) to the extent that you manage to reach people with your content, whether through playfulness or surprise, that immediately bounces back in the media” (M. Torres, personal communication, September 25, 2023). New departments had to be created to make the most of the soap opera in terms of broadcasting, such as the Digital Department. They must anticipate how the audience will receive not only the episode itself but also the digital complements created to enhance what has been broadcast and what is about to be aired from an on-line perspective, in order to avoid losing the “hook” with the audience at the moment the episode is broadcast.

Streaming changed the way we consume audiovisual products, giving rise to the concept of audiovisual “binge-watching,” where the ability to manage your own time defines the new audience, as it implies we have the power to decide what we are watching. This also generates indecision, because “you have to build your own schedule, and sometimes that is a benefit, and other times it is a chore” (D. Castells, personal communication, November 10, 2023). The soap opera helps avoid this anxiety, as the viewer has stable content available for 100 episodes or more.

On the other hand, the way reception is measured has also changed; it is no longer just about cable or free-to-air ratings, but also about “unreferenced content,” which refers to platforms. This also affects how audience studies and focus groups are conducted. “Ten years ago, each study cost 5 to 8 million [Chilean] pesos and took 3 to 4 weeks to produce results” (P. Santos, personal communication, September 8, 2023). Today...

each study should cost us around 600 thousand [Chilean] pesos, and it can take me a day to get a result. And the difference is the digital aspect; we have our own digital panel, that is to say, people who sign up at comenta.cl, on a website. (...) We have 5 thousand people. And if I send a question to that panel today, right now, in 10 minutes I have 200 people who have answered, and in 1 hour I have 600 people who have answered. (P. Santos, personal communication, September 8, 2023).

Additionally, there are new areas to investigate, as it is understood that there are multiple forms and devices for consumption, since “today we have multiple ways of [understanding] how the audience watches our products—that is, on their cell phones before going to bed—or also, who isn't watching us” (P. Santos, personal communication, September 8, 2023).

5.3. Challenges for the Chilean soap opera in the digital era

The transformation of the Chilean soap opera industry in the Digital Era has generated several challenges that were identified through participant observation and confirmed following the discourse analysis of the interviewees. These were narrowed down and structured into five axes: the need for “glocal” content and internationalization, the lack of content protection, the need for a new way to measure audience, the emergence of

new formats, and the inclusion of digital elements within the Chilean soap opera industry system.

5.3.1. The need for “glocal” content and internationalization

Today, the Chilean soap opera must be designed for global markets. This is the main challenge for the industry because global companies “understand that fiction creates the greatest loyalty (...) they need local content, there is nothing that surpasses local content in fiction, [but] it must be “glocal,” global and local” (M. Bravo, personal communication, December 19, 2023). It is “the most powerful change because, ultimately, platforms look for content that works very well locally, but at the same time travels very well” (D. Castells, personal communication, November 10, 2023).

Currently, despite having a clear understanding of the need to produce soap operas for an international audience, it is a challenge to find Chilean stories that are powerful at a local level and 'that manage to take flight regionally, which is something that platforms are very much looking for' (D. Castells, personal communication, November 10, 2023). For this reason, it is essential that from the initial stage there is

awareness of how I make this product travel everywhere and how I establish and design a business model that makes it likely for me to continue existing and ensures my product is consumed as much as possible. (...) Your business model will have to find the way in which you monetize it, because today it is increasingly difficult. (M. Bravo, personal communication, December 19, 2023)

The Chilean soap opera doesn't “travel” as much for two specific reasons. First, it still faces language problems as a barrier, since “no one understands how Chileans speak” (C. Salvatore, personal communication, September 14, 2023). Second, there are cultural issues, as Chile is much more culturally open than other countries that are more conservative, where topics like female empowerment or LGBTQIA+ themes are still taboo. Because of this, “there are soap operas you make in Chile that you cannot sell in other countries” (C. Salvatore, personal communication, September 14, 2023). Although the product is being adapted for this global audience, there is still a lack of interest from the platforms, and the Chilean soap opera has yet to satisfy the platforms' brief and editorial structure.

5.3.2. Lack of content protection

Another major challenge for the Chilean soap opera in the digital age is owning its own content, as “this practically doesn't exist in digital; everyone owns everything” (D. Cartagena, personal communication, September 29, 2023). This refers to the fact that material is no longer 100% owned by creators, producers, or screenwriters, as it

is easy to “steal” a video and generate other content from the original that sells more, from parodies to reacts².

This also influences how the audience is distributed and how that content is monetized; despite the existence of copyright protocols for uploading material, there are small details that content creators can change to evade copyright laws. Finally,

you depend on whether the platform regulates it for you or not. (...) I can tell YouTube that this right being uploaded by person X is mine, but I cannot tell TikTok that this right is mine. (...) On Instagram, it is more or less the same. (...) Also, Telegram groups, where episodes are disseminated. There is a whole issue there that is very complex to handle or put a stop to. (D. Cartagena, personal communication, September 29, 2023)

The Chilean soap opera is heavily affected by piracy. It is difficult to protect content on social media and platforms because OTT services are beyond the reach of the National Television Council (CNTV), which is looking for ways to expand its functions to oversee streaming platforms. This is a global problem, and it is not well known how to control or regulate it, except in Canada, because “the Canada Media Fund, which is like a regulatory body over there, is the only one that has managed to pass a law that regulates platforms” (F. Socias, personal communication, July 11, 2024).

5.3.3. The need for a new form of audience measurement

Ratings have been debated for years, from the validity of the sample to their objectivity and veracity. In general, all interviewees find that the rating is a very antiquated measurement given the technology we currently have, and that a much more massive and democratic system should be invented—one that compares the level of data available from online consumption at a digital level, or that is generated through smart TVs. In Chile, work is being done on a measurement that includes more devices and platforms in order to consider digital audiences within the viewership metrics. This implies including platform viewing, as well as social media monitoring to account for interaction and engagement with users

5.3.4. The emergence of new formats

In creative terms, the challenge lies in how to create parallel content for the soap opera in the new formats available; how to create interesting content that generates engagement with the actors while filming, the backstage, or how an important scene is told in a different way for the digital sphere. One of the proposals is to summarize episodes for Instagram or the various platforms and social networks. However, there is still a lack of focus on writing and inventing specifically for consumption on

²¹ The reacts are social media videos on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube where content creators generate audiovisual content by “reacting” to external content from a television program, series, movie, or video; for example, a reaction to the elimination of a contestant on a reality show.

electronic devices (cell phones, tablets, computers), targeting a very specific niche in various formats. Themes can be more hybrid, with more daring crossovers depending on the audience for whom the work is being written¹.

5.3.5. The inclusion of digital elements within the Chilean soap opera industry system

Curiously, the crossover with digital storytelling has not been very active in recent years. In the digital era, creators and showrunners still do not fully rely on digital elements to expand the universe of their creations. There is...

much that can be done in this area: character backstories can be developed; exclusive material that has no place on the screen can be shown; alternative endings can be presented; it can even support the story's narrative. (...) The entire digital world can, and must, be a significant contribution to creation. (J.I. Valenzuela, personal communication, January 22, 2024)

What is missing is for digital storytelling to fully enter the creative construction process, as they are still two very separate worlds from the perspective of creativity for the primary screen product. Regarding the second screen, in on-line, there are many ways to generate content, but the first screen remains analog. There is a questioning of how to create soap opera content with “digital heads,” but the industry, in general, continues to handle production with a much more analog perspective (D. Cartagena, personal communication, September 29, 2023).

In that sense, the theme of digital storytelling, in terms of digital inclusion and technological advances, is still in its infancy. Due to the urgency and speed with which a soap opera is produced, there hasn't been time to think, plan, or execute concrete collaborations between professionals from the world of soap operas and experts in digital topics. There are very few cases where that crossover has occurred, or where stories have been written specifically thinking about incorporating digital themes within the plot's conception. It is a subject that should be taken more seriously by producers and directors, so that they “understand the creative and technological reaches and opportunities that this offers for storytelling, and are able to extend that knowledge to the authors and writers working under them” (J.I. Valenzuela, personal communication, January 22, 2024).

On the other hand, possibilities for linking the analog and digital worlds are emerging, fulfilling the promise of interactive television (Lange, 2011), which is presented as a key factor for future audience loyalty (Pinto Gazón et al., 2018). For example, there could be a very concrete possibility that on Amazon, which has its X-Ray system¹, in the future one could hit pause and see what brand of wine a character is drinking or the wedding dress appearing in the scene and “click on it and go to the Amazon page to buy it. That is something that is definitely coming in the next two years, most likely, and it is a way of consuming audiovisual content that previously did not exist” (D. Castells, personal communication, November 10, 2023).

Although content creators currently cannot monetize on social media, the idea of generating income with content longer than 20 minutes has emerged. “Perhaps now, fiction creators will start generating content [recorded to be viewed] in vertical [and not horizontal] format, very much like the TikTok format, to see if it can be monetized or if something can be done” (D. Cartagena, personal communication, September 29, 2023). This would represent a paradigm shift in the industry, as, until now, the creation of 30-minute content in vertical format for platforms like Instagram has not been explored. Most soap operas and audiovisual productions still follow the traditional 16:9 format on these platforms.

In general, artificial intelligence is considered the next great revolution in content creation. At the production company Fábula, for example, they sometimes use ChatGPT as a tool to break “blank page syndrome.” If they need to write a synopsis for a very early idea and cannot think of how to start, they ask ChatGPT for an initial prompt. “We never do copy-paste, we see what works for us and what doesn't. It is like a tool, for now” (D. Castells, personal communication, November 10, 2023).

Finally, an additional change in viewing is on the horizon. “One thinks that with the proliferation of artificial intelligence, in the future there may be possibilities to navigate through a story” (D. Castells, personal communication, November 10, 2023). Netflix already conducted an experiment with an interactive movie called *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (Slade, 2018) and with the series *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend* (Scanlon, 2020); in both, the audience could select the story's progression and the twists the characters underwent. “I am sure that, in the near future, this will be a reality for television products like the soap opera. People will be able to decide the protagonist's future, their romantic relationships, or even the deaths of the villains” (J.I. Valenzuela, personal communication, January 22, 2024).

6. Conclusions

This research examines the evolution of the Chilean soap opera industry in the Digital Era, showing how digital storytelling has transformed the production, distribution, and reception of soap operas in Chile, and highlighting the challenges the industry faces in this new context. The results reveal that digitalization has substantially changed the Chilean soap opera industry, both at the level of creation, narrativity, and characterization of actors, as well as the operation of the industry as a whole. It has introduced new tools and techniques in production, adding new challenges such as the need for adaptation to new formats, content protection, and the redefinition of audience measurement. Furthermore, the way Chilean soap operas are distributed, with the arrival of streaming platforms and access to online content, has forced the industry to consider the creation of “glocal” content for its distribution and consumption.

The above implies that there is an effect of what I call “digital tropes”; that is, the rhetorical figures, discourse patterns, or linguistic techniques used in the digital sphere or in online communication. These tropes are similar to those used in traditional rhetoric but are adapted to the digital context and internet platforms. They can include the use of metaphors, irony, sarcasm, memes, emojis, and other resources to effectively convey meanings, emotions, or ideas online. Digital tropes are especially common on social media, where communication is fast and often conducted informally.

Digital tropes would impact the Chilean soap opera industry in all its areas due to their influence not only on platforms, creation, or broadcasting but also at the audience level and in the emotional engine. Ultimately, despite seeking the creation of a product, it is undeniable that behind this there are humans who relate through emotions and the playful-affective. The impact would be particularly felt by the audience, who receives the product and must integrate it into their being.

These tropes are key within digital storytelling and can be integrated into a television script in several ways. First, screenwriters can use digital language to enrich the story's narrative through dialogue, subtitles, or title cards. This helps tell the story in a deeper and more detailed way. Second, writers can use digital language to create a visual narrative. This could include the use of user-generated content, visual effects, animated images, and more to tell the story in a totally new way. Finally, screenwriters can use digital language to explore beyond the limits of the television screen. This could include the use of online content, mobile applications, and more to tell the story interactively.

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