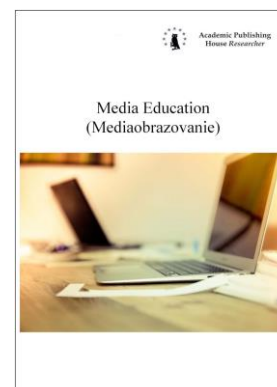




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A Media Format on the Rise. The Journalistic Investigation Documentary on *Netflix* and *Prime Video*

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Abstract

According to a study based on all the films indexed in the Internet Movie Database (IMDB, 2018), between 1990–2018, the documentary genre has experienced a growth in viewers' preferences never seen before, going from 5 % to 22 % of all films released. The key seems to lie both in being a cheap genre to produce in comparison with fiction, and in the rise of online platforms, where documentaries, especially journalistic documentary, are consumed as both news and a film product. The goal of this research is to analyze the growth in productions and number of viewers of the journalistic investigation documentaries, taking as a reference the offer of documentaries and series on *Netflix* and *Amazon Prime*, without neglecting the incidence of the COVID-19 pandemic in the consumption of the documentary in 2020. The results suggest that this growth shows an upward trend that must do both with a growing commitment of these online platforms for this type of content, as well as a change in the preferences of viewers regarding content news consumption in audiovisual format.

Keywords: journalistic investigation documentary, non-fiction, online platforms, *Netflix*, *Prime Video*, VOD, documentary, COVID-19, user, viewer.

1. Introduction

The documentary has established itself as a multiform tool for the exploration of reality, which yields more than interesting results in terms of information efficiency (Aparicio, 2014). It is, above all, from the first decade of the XXI century that the documentary opens up to new expressive perspectives that are linked specially to discourses of an investigative or journalistic nature. Cases of Spanish documentaries such as *Balseros* (Directed by Bosch and Domenech, 2002); *Winter in Baghdad* (Directed by Corcuera, 2005); *Las alas de la vida* (Directed by Pérez Canet, 2006), or *Los ojos de la Guerra* (Directed by Lozano, 2011), are examples of how documentary expands in cinemas with unprecedented public success. It is not an isolated phenomenon of the Spanish filmography, but the reflection of an evolution that had already begun, with the United States at the head, in the rest of the world: *Bowling for Columbine* (Directed by Moore, 2002); *Capturing the Friedmans* (Directed by Jarecki, 2003); *Inside Job* (Directed by Ferguson, 2010); *Presumed Guilty* (Directed by Hernandez and Smith, 2008), etc.

The increase in documentary productions so far this century, pushed in recent years by a more than incipient interest in this genre of video-on-demand (VOD) platforms, have consolidated the investigation documentary as one of the most effective journalistic formats. According to the study conducted by Bo McCready based on data collected by the *Internet Movie Database* (IMDb) on the

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evolution of the popularity of film genres between 1910 and 2018, the documentary genre has experienced a growth in viewer preferences never seen before, going from 5 % of total productions in 1990 to 22 % in 2018 of all films released (McCready, 2018). As an interesting fact to understand this unprecedented growth, in 2014 the premiere of documentaries reached 26 % of the total, above comedy (24 %), becoming the film genre with the highest number of productions that year.

Informative discursive strategies appear with more and more weight in the documentary genre. The longer time of preparation of the topics (research and documentation), as well as the exposure of these (duration of the story), usually results in a very fertile deepening in the topics. To all this we can add the effectiveness of the different styles of presentation and the intelligent use of strategies to obtain information (Aparicio, 2014). The success of the genre lies in the quality of the information provided by these productions, accessing interviews, documents, recordings, and archives that allow the viewer to fully immerse themselves in the small universe that surrounds the story.

The worldwide implementation of video-on-demand platforms has only increased the interest of the viewer and the supply of documentaries at their disposal. In addition, its demand has increased dramatically in 2020 following the start of quarantine due to the coronavirus pandemic, to the point that, according to *Netflix*, in March 2020 147 million households worldwide had watched at least one of its documentaries during the previous year (Netflix, 2020). Documentaries like *The Last Dance* (Directed by Jason Hehir, 2020) or *Leaving Neverland* (Directed by Dan Reed, 2019), have become massive cultural events. In December 2020 *Netflix* announced the creation in the UK of the *Documentary Talent Fund* with the aim of supporting the talent of young documentary filmmakers and, incidentally, getting hold of low-cost original content made by them thanks to a system of grants ranging from £ 20,000 to £ 40,000 per documentary short film (Netflix 2021).

Therefore, the documentary in general and the journalistic research, has not been able to adopt the technical novelties that technological evolution has brought to audiovisual productions, creating content of enormous quality. Joining these other factors such as interesting topics adapted to the demands of the audience, the situation of confinement generated by the coronavirus pandemic and the growing commitment of digital platforms to these contents, documentaries are increasingly valued, both by the viewer and by professionals in the sector.

The general objective of this work is to analyze the offer of journalistic research documentaries on VOD platforms, taking as a reference *Netflix* and *Amazon Prime Video*, the two platforms with the highest number of subscriptions worldwide. The specific objectives analyze the weight that these productions have in the whole of the offer of these platforms and the popularity that they have acquired during the last years. Based on these objectives, the following hypotheses and research question are raised:

H1: since *Netflix* and *Amazon Prime Video* have been implemented worldwide, the growth in the offer of journalistic investigation documentaries, both through own productions and the purchase of rights has not stopped growing.

H2: this increase in supply occurs because there is a growing interest of the user of these platforms for this type of informative content. The number of viewers has increased, considering the journalistic investigation documentary as a more reliable and objective informative reference than the formats of news or audiovisual reports available in the traditional media and, especially, in televisions.

H3: The COVID-19 pandemic may have had some kind of influence on the results of this analysis, increasing the confinement of the hours that users of these platforms have spent watching content. Given the lack of direct access to the immediate reality, many users have chosen to approach current issues through journalistic investigation documentaries.

Q1: After analyzing the data obtained, can any trend of consumption of this type of informational content be established on VOD platforms?

Delimitation of journalistic investigation documentary

Historically the documentary has been a *totum revolutum* (in which all kinds of audiovisual productions have had a place, especially those that were outside of fiction and experimental cinema) (Weinrichter, 2010: 17). This is probably because each definition of documentary makes a distinctive contribution and helps to identify a different set of issues, considering it from the point of view of the filmmaker – his production techniques –, of the text – his narrative forms – and of the viewer – the objectives and purposes of the product –, which sometimes tends to confuse and combine indiscriminately (Barnouw, 1997).

Many of the most recent and most successful journalistic investigation documentaries are based on today and aim to bring to light a certain cause or injustice, in the hope that it will help spur the masses to demand change. This is the case, for example, in *The Cove* by Louie Psihoyos (2009), which seeks to raise awareness in society to end the killing of dolphins in Japan. Documentaries have never been as popular as they are today, and this opens up the possibility of filmmakers abusing in the form in the name of entertainment (Funt, 2020).

In the early years of the genre most documentaries presented an exotic content (*Nanuk the Eskimo*, directed by Flaherty, 1922), experimental (*Apropos de Nice*, directed by Vigo, 1930) or propaganda (*The Triumph of the Will*, directed by Riefenstahl, 1934). Reality was almost never captured through a journalistic narrative, not even during coverage of armed conflicts. The propaganda tasks of the Second World War were followed by a restructuring where the large production companies that dominated the film industry and made film newspapers for prestige or to carry out their own indirect advertising, imposed themselves on the world, controlling all the stages of exploitation (Pazy Montero, 2002). However, it is observed in the United States, during the decades of the 1930s and 1940s a proliferation of documentaries of political and social commitment that begin to use a markedly journalistic language.

Thus, “arise production companies such as *Frontier Films* ... it focuses on denouncing the working conditions of fishermen and peasants, or on uncovering racial abuses, but always landing the issues in concrete consequences for ordinary people. Here, therefore, new and important steps are born in the long road that the informative documentary has traveled until today, both in the contents and in the creative aspects” (Aparicio, 2013: 145)

J. Grierson (1898-1972) and the British school of documentary are the best exemplify the trend of journalistic commitment to society in documentary genre. Paul Rotha (1907–1984), another of his promoters, appealed that he should look for techniques so that the viewer was able to understand reality and thus overcome the problems of his environment. Thus begins a path that will lead to the use – and abuse, sometimes –, of storytelling as a journalistic technique. Supported by the technological advances that allowed to record audio and image in a synchronized way, little by little the focus of attention is focused on the humble people, filmed in situations of stress. This material could be revealing, reflecting the pressures of society on the individual (Barnouw, 1996: 217).

From the mid-twentieth century onwards, there has been a decline in film news due to the introduction of television in homes. The first major change that led to the journalistic documentary home took place in 1951, when F. Friendly and E.R. Murrow created for CBS *See It Now*, the first television documentary series about current events and pushed television networks, in the interest of increasing their informative credibility to provide viewers with documentary programs of public interest.

Television allowed an emerging journalistic activism to flourish in the documentary, seeking to denounce information and, at the same time, experiment with audiovisual content and language. Then trends arise such as New Journalism or Hunter Stockton’s Gonzo Journalism, journalistic genres in which it seeks to “build stories as entertaining as fiction does” (Palacio, 2005: 177).

The beginning of the XXI century entails a rebirth of the documentary in cinemas, thanks to the work of directors such as Michael Moore. With *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), winner of the Oscar that year, he carries out a personal investigation against firearms in the United States and begins a narrative form that will have a huge journey to the present day, the so-called “performative style”, in which the process of itinerary and the search, the realization of the film and the paths followed by the director are the axis of central articulation (Ortega, 2007). M. Moore constructs his documentaries through a “dialectic of materials”, mixing all kind of elements, and formats.

With the rise of VOD platforms and, especially, with its worldwide extension in 2016, a gradual but unstoppable process of documentary production and increase of the offer to subscribers begins, with a clear preference for those topics that are treated from a perspective of journalistic investigation, whether a crime, a biography, a social issue, or ecological denunciation. In addition, more and more these documentary contents are consumed through mobile devices and the Internet, which has forced its creators to adapt to the medium and has built a type of documentary use accustomed to interactivity and networks, expert in fragmented textualities and transmedia, and who seeks to inform himself with formats that inspire greater confidence than traditional media.

2. Materials and methods

To address this research, and specifically to classify by genre the documentaries available on the platforms, the techniques of qualitative content analysis, widely used in the field of communication research, are applied (Bryman, 2016). In addition, an analysis of the quantitative data related to the offer of journalistic investigation documentaries and the year of their premiere is carried out. This methodology seeks, therefore analyzes the growth in productions and number of viewers of the documentary and, within this, that of journalistic research to, with the aim of establishing if this genre has become an informative reference worldwide, if the COVID-19 pandemic has been able to have any kind of influence on the results, and the possible trend in the evolution of the consumption of this informative format.

Although some previous data are taken into account, the analysis has been carried out mainly since 2016, the year in which both platforms are implemented worldwide, which means, de facto, that the number of subscribers has increased exponentially from that date to the present; *Netflix* (2020) went from 89 million subscribers in 2016 to 208 million in 2021 (44.5 % plus 5 years), and *Prime Video* reached 200 million in 2021, of which more than 175 million have played movies and series during theyear. In addition, the total hours of streaming of the service has increased up to 70 % in 2020 compared to 2019 (Amazon, 2021). This last data relative to 2020 has been mediatized, logically, by the effect of the pandemic of the COVID-19 and the confinement that has been experienced in most of the world, and one of whose consequences has been the increase in the consumption of video on demand. In fact, *Netflix* went from just over 148 million users in 2019 to nearly 183 million in 2020, an increase of 18.6 % in a single year. We are still immersed in this dynamic, with partial figures for 2021.

To collect the data related to journalistic investigation documentaries on these platforms available, an analysis and classification of all the offer of this genre available to subscribers in Spain on both platforms, has been carried out on May 22, 2021. The need to carry out this analysis taking as a reference a specific date is due to the fact that both platforms update and renew the titles available to their users constantly. In addition to their own productions, they license series and films from studios around the world, so thereasonswhy a series or film becomes unavailable is due to factors such as the availability of title rights, the acceptance of the product in relation to the cost of renewal of rights and also seasonal and regional factors (Netflix, 2020).

Finally, we have analyzed both the data published by the VOD platforms themselves on the number of viewers of documentaries and journalistic research series, as well as the list of most popular documentaries according to the *Internet Movie Database* (IMDb, 2020) and the data of the study carried out by *Rotten Tomatoes* (Rotten Tomatoes, 2021) about the positive ratings by viewers. This last fact is especially interesting to obtain information regarding whether documentaries released on these platforms are ousting in popularity and awards to those released in cinemas.

3. Discussion

In the case of *Netflix* (Figure 1), on May 22, 2021, a total of 158 documentary films (80) and documentary series (78) were available in Spain. By genre, the most numerous is, by far, journalistic investigation (76), followed by social issues (16), musical (9), biographical (9) and historical (7).

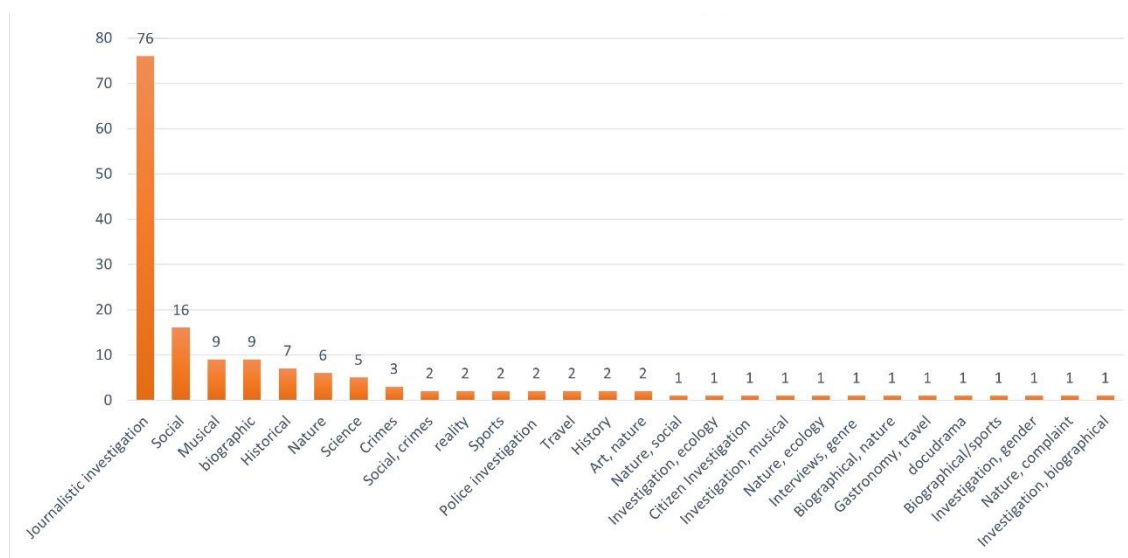


Fig. 1. Netflix, classification of documentaries by genre (22/05/2021). Own elaboration

Regarding the analysis of the number of premieres of documentaries and documentary series (Figure 2), it is from 2016 (14) that Netflix, with the increase of own production, which also gradually increases the number of premieres, until reaching in 2019 the 32 and the 33 in 2020, with a significant fall so far in 2021 (14).

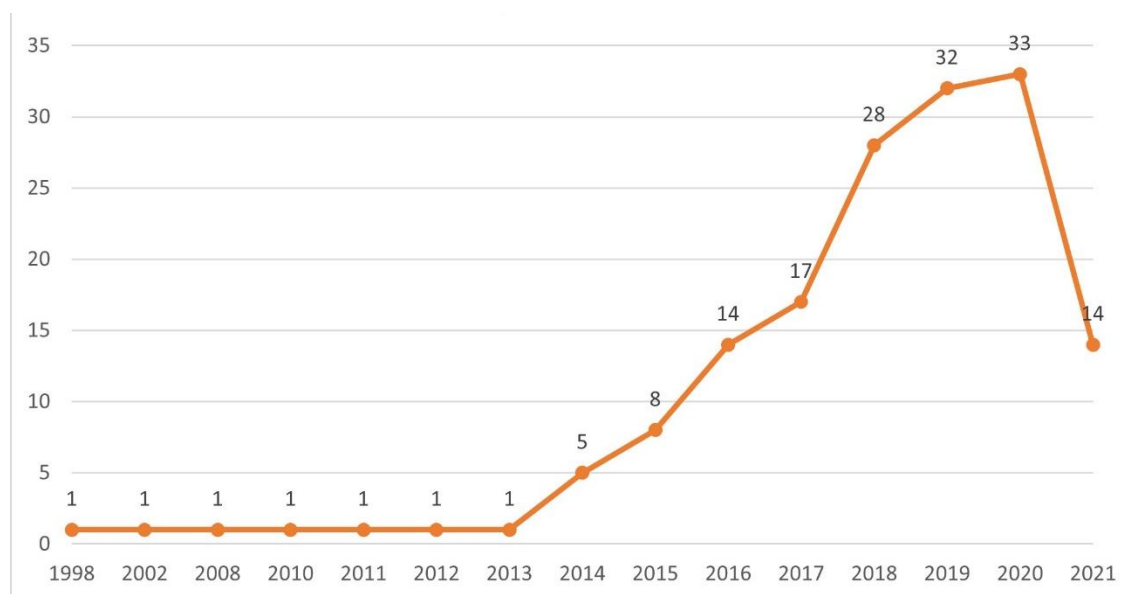


Fig. 2. Netflix. Year premiere documentary or documentary series (22/05/2021). Own elaboration

If we focus on the data related to documentaries or documentary series of journalistic investigation (Figure 3), we see how again in 2016 there is a significant increase in premieres (goes from 2 to 7), until reaching 18 in 2020.

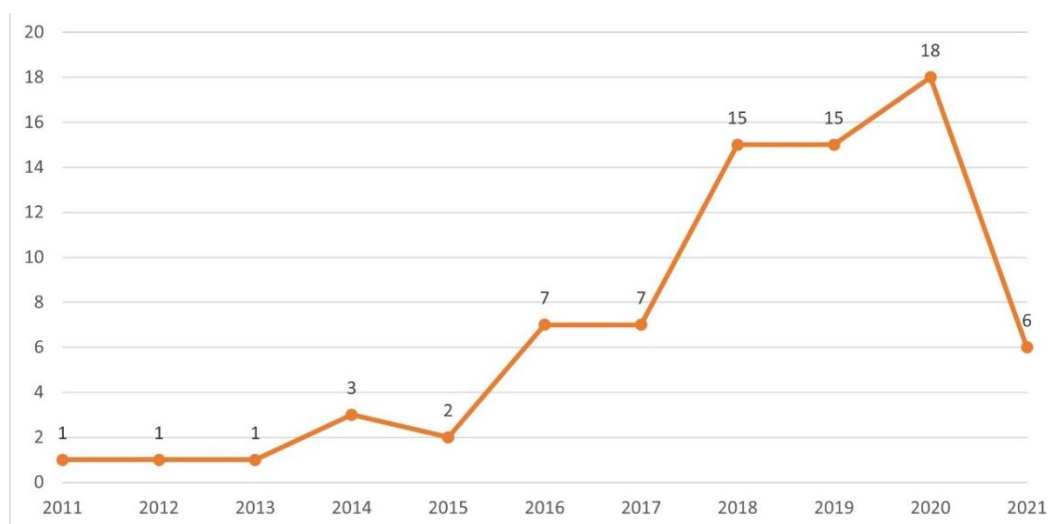


Fig. 3. *Netflix*. Premiere year of journalistic investigation documentary or documentary series (22/05/2021). Own elaboration

Regarding *Amazon* data, although *Prime Video* is positioned as the VOD platform with the largest offer for its subscribers, 17,400 films, the number of documentaries and documentary series available on the same date, May 22, 2021, is much lower than that of *Netflix*, with only 42 titles (Figure 4). Of these, the genre of journalistic research is again the most numerous (17), followed by the biographical (9), the social theme (5), and the musical (5). Unlike *Netflix*, on *Amazon Prime Video* the entirety of the documentary offering is based on feature films, not series.

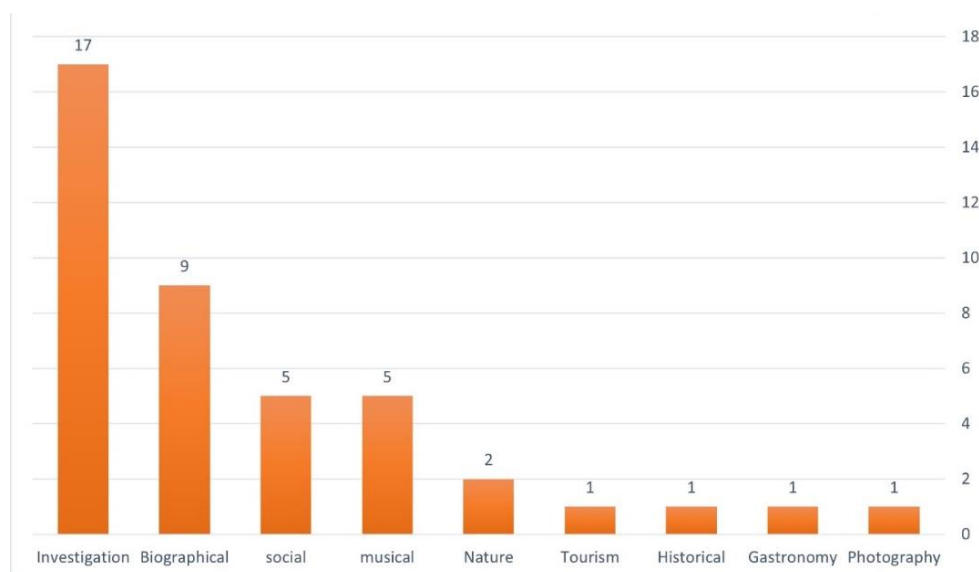


Fig. 4. *Amazon Prime Video*. Classification of documentaries by genre (22/05/2021). Own elaboration

Regarding the analysis of the number of documentary premieres (Figure 5), there are an uneven growth, with the years with the most premieres being 2014 (5), 2018 (7), 2019 (7).

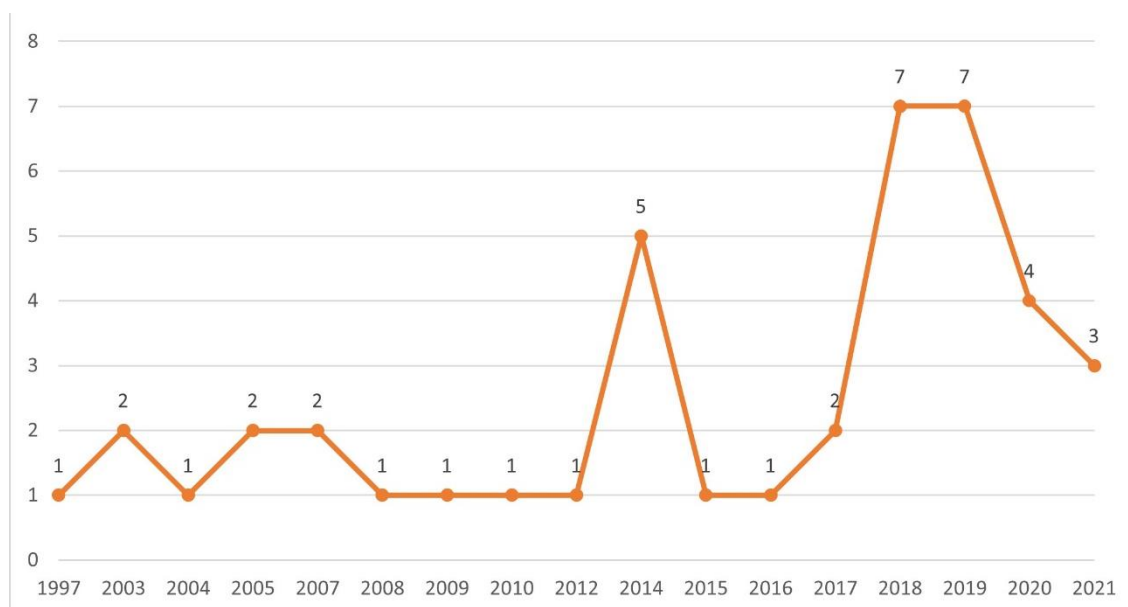


Fig. 5. *Amazon Prime Video*. Premiere year of the documentary or documentary series (22/05/2021). Own elaboration

Regarding the release years of the 17 documentaries classified as journalistic investigation (Figure 6), most of the premieres took place in 2019 (5), followed by 2018 and 2020 with 2 premieres, respectively.

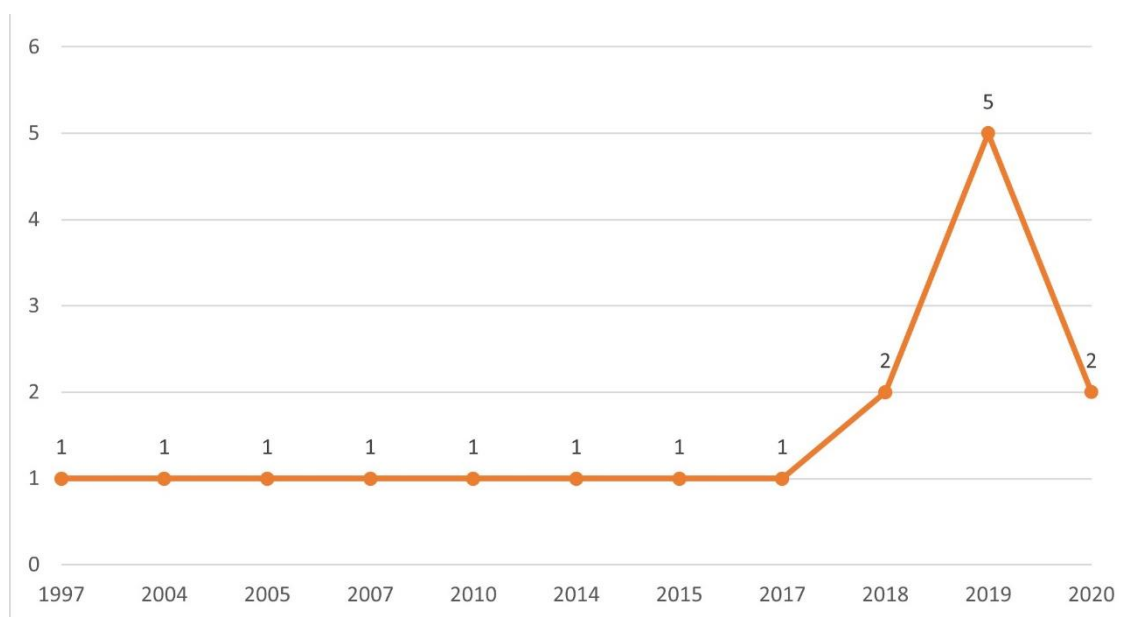


Fig. 6. *Amazon Prime Video*. Premiere year of journalistic investigation documentary or documentary series (22/05/2021). Own elaboration

4. Results

Analysis of the offer of the journalistic investigation documentary on Netflix and Prime Video.

Both *Netflix* and *Amazon* offer journalistic investigation documentaries is the most numerous within this genre. In *Netflix* accounts for 48.1 % of the offer of documentaries and documentary series available, in the case of *Amazon Prime Video* drops to 40 %. In any case, it is by far the most numerous documentary genre on both platforms. We did find significant differences in what was available; On *Netflix*, of the 158 titles analyzed, 76 belong to the genre of journalistic research, while on *Amazon* they are 17 of 42 titles. The sample on the latter platform is

smaller because unlike *Netflix*, where all titles are available whatever the type of subscription chosen, in *Prime Video* much of the documentary offer is accessible only upon payment through rent, purchase or additional specialized platforms such as *Mubi*, *Flix Olé*, *Planet Horror* or *Qello Concerts* by Stingray.

Although the analysis of the data clearly reveals a growth in the supply of informative research documentaries, if we focus on the six-year period 2016-2021 – without forgetting that the data of this last year are still partial –, we find clear differences between both platforms. In the case of *Netflix* (Figure 3), the growth is continuous since 2016, going from 7 premieres that year to 33 in 2020. At *Amazon* this growth, as shown in Fig. 6, is much more uneven, with a single peak of productions in 2020. On both platforms there is a clear decrease in productions released so far in 2021 (6 and 2 respectively). *Netflix* has announced to its investors through its website that to compensate for the decline in production throughout 2020, it will spend more than ever to offer its subscribers as many products as possible in the second half of 2021. That record figure amounts to 14,000 million euros (Netflix, 2021).

There are also differences in the number of own productions of documentaries of journalistic investigation, with a much higher bet of these in *Netflix* than in *Amazon Prime Video*, whose catalog of original titles of this genre is much lower than that of *Netflix*. *Netflix* has opted for its own productions largely because of the savings it represents in acquiring rights. As the popularity of this genre increases, profit margins are reduced; making a journalistic investigation documentary is becoming less expensive overall, as far as exploitation rights fees are concerned (Funt, 2021).

Analysis of the number of users who consume this content through VOD platforms

In the period 2016-2021, the increase in the number of *Netflix* and *Amazon* subscribers consuming documentaries and journalistic investigation series has gone hand in hand with the increase in the supply of titles on these platforms. There has been an increase in the number of viewers who consider the journalistic investigation documentary as a more reliable and objective informative reference than the formats of news or audiovisual reports available in the traditional media and, especially, in televisions. This type of documentary also clearly involves us as viewers, we are encouraged to adopt a more complex relationship with the representational dimension of reality (Nash, 2011).

Some premieres of journalistic investigation documentaries have reached the top ten of the platforms. Among these, especially those related to crime investigation, they have experienced a great boom and even a significant social impact. This is the case of the *Netflix* title *Jeffrey Epstein: Filthy Rich* (directed by Bryant, 2020), which reached number one on the list of the most viewed titles in the days after its premiere in June 2020; or the series *Murder Mystery*, which according to *Netflix* data (2021) has had 83 million views, or the media hype that raised *The Alcàsser Case* (directed by Campos and León Siminiani, 2020), which follows one of the crimes that has most shocked the Spanish population and that became a trending topic in the networks on the day of its premiere (Romero-Domínguez, 2021); *American Murder: The Family Next Door* (Directed by Popplewell, 2020), is considered the most-watched investigation journalistic documentary on *Netflix*, with nearly 53 million views in its first month. It also highlights *The Social Dilemma* (directed by Orlowski, 2020) with more than 38 million views in its first month.

In this success of the documentary of journalistic investigation influences, especially in the series, the launch in block of the chapters that propels the so-called *binge-watch*. Marathons generate much more loyalty because they lead to more hours of service. They favor much more visceral reactions if the series is well received. People want to comment on the content, and they generate a lot more resonance in the audience (Neira, 2020).

The quality and popularity of documentary content has also been a factor to be considered in the growth of viewers of this genre. According to the *Internet Movie Database* in 2012, none of the ten most popular documentaries were on VOD platforms, although they have subsequently been added to the *Filmin* catalog or *Youtube* rental; in 2017, they had become 8, some recognized with awards as coveted as the *Bafta*, *Emmy* or the *Oscar* for best documentary, as is the case of *Icarus* (directed by Fogel, 2017), available on *Netflix*; in 2020, the most ten popular documentaries were only available through *Netflix* and *Amazon Prime Video* (IMDb, 2020), including the *Oscar* winner of that year, *My teacher the octopus* (directed by Enrich and Reed, 2020).

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the consumption of journalistic investigation documentaries in 2020

According to the National Commission of Markets and Competition (CNMC, 2021), in September 2020 we have seen in Spain on average 3 hours and 36 minutes of television a day, 18 % more than at that time in 2019. Faced with this medium and before the pandemic, four out of 10 households in Spain had contracted some video-on-demand platform. Given the lack of direct access to the immediate reality due to confinement, many users have chosen to approach current issues through journalistic investigation documentaries.

Netflix and *Amazon Prime Video* subscriptions have dropped dramatically once pandemic restrictions have been relaxed. In the first quarter of 2020 with the start of the near-global lockdown due to the health crisis, Netflix added 15.8 million subscribers globally, its highest ever growth (Netflix, 2021). In contrast, in the first quarter of 2021, it had just added 500,000 new customers in the United States. According to the report with data from the consultancy Ampere Analysis (2021), 140.7 million Europeans were subscribed to some video-on-demand service in 2020, a figure much higher than the 103.2 million in 2019 and the 73.6 million in 2018. This increase seems to have stalled in 2021, pending definitive data by the end of the year.

What does seem clear is that the pandemic has led to a change in users' habits when it comes to informing themselves of reality. The growth and alarm aroused by the huge amount of fake or unreliable news that has appeared in some media has caused a desape go to the traditional information formats and television news casts. The media have sometimes acted more as a transmitter of disinformation in an environment where scientific knowledge based on facts and evidence was not always regarded by the public as the only truth (Catalán-Matamoros, 2020). Hence, many users are attracted to journalistic investigation documentaries, beingan informative format far from traditional media and whose process of research and creation implies certain guarantees of objectivity and depth.

Trend in the consumption of journalistic investigation documentaries through VOD platforms

According to the data analyzed, during 2021 the premieres of documentaries and journalistic investigation series have suffered a significant decrease, going from 18 in 2020 on *Netflix* to only 6 premieres in 2021. In *Prime Video* the trend has been very similar, going from 5 to 2 premieres so far this year. *Netflix* and *Amazon Prime Video* have announced that production delays caused by COVID-19 in 2020 will lead to an increase in resources in the second half of 2021 to fund new productions of both fiction and documentaries. You can not know yet if this will be a growing trend, we only have partial data for 2021 (Castro, Cascajosa, 2020), it seems that it is still early to know if it has reached the ceiling or not, although it is reasonable to think that it is reaching the peak in what in number of VOD productions. While the production of televisions and free-to-air channels has remained stable in recent years, the growth in video-on-demand platforms has been, on the other hand, dizzying, mainly due to the lack of a catalogue. To date, with more than 17,000 titles available on *Amazon* (including all platforms additional to *Prime Video*), and nearly 5500 on *Netflix*, that need has disappeared. These are already consolidated offers that do not require so much a new production as a productive reorganization.

5. Conclusion

Therefore, the data analyzed leave no room for doubt: the offer of documentaries and journalistic research series available on these platforms has experienced a higher growth than any other documentary genre.

According to *Netflix*, in 2020 all its users have enjoyed a documentary. In addition, the average hours per user spent watching documentaries have tripled in the last five years (Netflix, 2020). The problem is how reliable is the way in which *Netflix* measures the number of views. Both *Netflix* and *Amazon Prime Video* have their own measurement systems to analyze their subscribers' data (user profiles, content consumed, or time spent), and they are not public. Based on those same data, they decide what is produced or what is more profitable and, and everything points, given the increasing weight of the documentary and the journalistic research series in the offer of these platforms and the increase of own productions, to which in recent years users demand more and more this type of content.

Everything points to the fact that the increase in viewers of documentaries and journalistic investigation series was already an unstoppable trend, and that these types of changes have been

accelerated because of the confinements and the pandemic in the case of the consumption of video on demand; but they are ultimately part of a gradual process that is nothing new.

In that sense, the journalistic investigation documentary becomes a safe and low risk bet in terms of investment by the platforms. This factor, together with the fact that this type of content is increasingly accepted among subscribers, suggests that the supply of securities available to subscribers will continue to increase. The trend also suggests that journalistic investigation will increasingly be based on a dialectic of materials and formats in order to attract the viewer: archival, photography, audio, music, fictional treatment, recreations, graphics... While any journalism implies an implicit quid pro quo, journalistic investigation documentaries will only continue to be harmful to platform users if they believe they are watching an informative work that seeks the truth objectively.

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