

# Institutional Arbitrageurs: The Role of Product Managers as a Locus of Change in Journalism

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## Abstract

The modern news industry demands a continuous stream of products ready to meet audience needs; the emergent newsroom role of product manager serves to prioritize them by providing a holistic perspective on an organization’s goals. Product professionals bring in new skill sets and help to bridge the divide and align the priorities among editorial, business, and technology functions, serving as a locus of change in journalism. This sets the stage for institutional complexity where actors struggle to make decisions due to competing logics, which are socially constructed rules created to normalize behavior. This article thus focuses on the dynamics of change in a complex environment by examining news product professionals as institutional arbitrageurs, which are actors who bring competing logics together to create value during a time of complexity. This framing raises questions regarding the locus of change in journalism and aims to further understand the tactics used by actors in a complex environment such as the field of journalism. A qualitative study using interviews with digital journalism’s product professionals is used to address this phenomenon, which allows for a theoretical contextualization of the dynamics of change in journalism and specifically, how product managers act as a locus of change using their roles to manage complexity by bringing incompatible logics together to leverage differences between them.

## Keywords

innovation; institutional arbitrage; institutional change; journalism; news product manager; news professional; product managers

## 1. Introduction

The modern news industry demands a continuous stream of products ready to meet audience needs, which sets the stage for institutional complexity where actors struggle to make decisions due to competing logics. The emergent newsroom role of the product manager serves to prioritize these competing needs by providing a holistic perspective on a news organization's goals. Product managers help bridge the divide and align the priorities among editorial, business, and technology functions, serving as a locus of change and innovation in journalism. They do so by introducing techniques and processes focused on the needs of users, in cooperation with an organization's mission and goals. Product managers introduce new skill sets, more associated with software development and different than the traditional skills of reporting and editing, in strategizing, prioritizing, developing, testing, and measuring the effectiveness of digital offerings (Royal et al., 2020). It is the intersection of these responsibilities within the product role that drives the need to assuage these inherent tensions.

Technological developments, coupled with associated economic realities and social changes, continue to disrupt the established practices of the news industry creating an institutionally complex environment. Within these complex contexts, actors struggle to make decisions or take action due to multiple institutional logics with incompatible prescriptions (Greenwood et al., 2011). Institutional logics are socially constructed sets of rules that social actors create and recreate to normalize behavior and perspective (Jackall, 1988).

Within the context of journalism, this is evident as the rise of big data and ubiquitous internet necessitates more efficient, effective, and personalized news, which implores news organizations to move away from big, expensive tech projects and toward new ways of creating smaller, more agile, and more audience-centric products. Product managers have thus reframed news as an array of digital products, and they work across functions to bring new skill sets into the newsroom as they develop the strategy, define the requirements, and monitor their ongoing delivery (Royal et al., 2020). This article focuses on the dynamics of change in a complex environment by examining news product professionals as institutional arbitrageurs, which are actors who bring competing logics together to create organizational value (e.g., profit, efficiency, legitimacy, knowledge) during a time of complexity (Perkmann et al., 2022).

This framing raises questions regarding the locus of change and innovation in journalism and aims to further understand the tactics used by actors in a complex environment such as the field of journalism. We build on Perkmann et al.'s (2022) theory of institutional arbitrage and apply it to the context of product managers in news to examine the ways in which actors leverage the differences between institutional logics and address the question of how they do so and what benefits the arbitrage generates for the organization. A qualitative study using interviews with news product professionals is used to address these questions and provide a theoretical contextualization of the dynamics of change in journalism and specifically, how product managers act as a locus of change using their roles to manage complexity by bringing incompatible logics together to leverage differences between them. As such, this work provides insight into the different motivations, strategies, processes, and effects of news product managers as arbitrageurs within a complex institutional setting.

## 2. Institutional Arbitrageurs: Institutional Logics, Complexity, and News Product Managers

We build on the literature of institutional arbitrage and institutional logics in an effort to understand how news product managers act as a locus of change in using their roles to manage complexity by bringing incompatible logics together and leveraging differences among them. We begin with a summary of the research on institutional logics. This is followed by an overview of Perkmann et al.'s (2022) theory on institutional arbitrage. Finally, this section concludes with an examination of the research context and an explication of product managers in news.

### 2.1. Institutional Logics

An institutional approach is often used to better understand the dynamic between stasis and change and why some organizations change and others do not. Lowrey (2011), for example, found that news organizations tend to reinforce institutional norms while struggling to innovate during complex times. Research similarly found that legacy news organizations struggled to incorporate new digital processes into their work (Naldi & Picard, 2012) and to adapt well to innovation because of strong institutionalized norms that often conflicted with change (Ryfe, 2012).

A common thread throughout this scholarship is a focus on the way that journalism changes (or doesn't change) with regard to the external environment and specifically, how certain actors are able to change institutions in spite of the strong disposition toward uniformity. This is explained through one of the guiding tenets of the institutional logics perspective: the notion of embedded agency, which refers to the ingrained nature of actors' interests, values, and assumptions and the enabling and constraining nature of the relationship between agency and institution (Ocasio & Thornton, 1999). According to Thornton et al. (2012), institutional logics are socially constructed patterns of symbols and material practices that provide meaning to daily activity. In other words, they provide the basis for the assumptions, values, and beliefs that organize experiences within an organization. An institutional logics perspective is increasingly utilized in journalism research to attend to the adoption of new practices like newsbots (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2020) and fact-checking sites (Lowrey, 2017). This perspective accounts for the agency, change, and diversity within a field (Ocasio & Thornton, 1999), which is a semi-autonomous and specialized area that can share resources, culture, and power (Ryfe, 2018).

Similarly, Latour's (2007) actor-network theory also sets out to explain journalism in terms of its network of relationships among actors both human and non-human (Schmitz Weiss & Domingo, 2010). The actor-network theory enables an understanding beyond the conflict of institutional pressure to maintain the status quo, and the strategic choice and freedom of managers within an organizational field (Steen et al., 2006). An institutional logics perspective thus expands on these ideas by drawing attention to the overarching belief systems—the "preconscious understandings that actors share" (DiMaggio, 1988, p. 3)—that guide these relationships and provides opportunity for actors to change or maintain their institutional arrangements (Hardy & Maguire, 2017). In the context of institutional logics, actors refer to the individuals acting within or on behalf of their organizations; they have agency but within the context of benefits to the organization, which provides the necessary connection to the organizational level of analysis (Perkmann et al., 2022). An institutional logics perspective is thus useful for attending to how journalism's product managers act as loci of change while bringing together multiple, and perhaps competing, logics.

### 2.1.1. Institutional Complexity

One strand of the work on institutional logics focuses on the challenges that arise when actors face competing logics or a context of institutional complexity. According to Schildt and Perkmann (2017), in response to institutional complexity, actors can create new ways of operating by adopting practices and values of logics differing from the dominant one in their field; this can offer new capabilities and the pursuit of new goals. One such example is a hybrid organization, which is characterized by complex demands from competing logics (Santos et al., 2015) and from which the goal is to achieve value not ordinarily achievable by the accepted norms of organizing within the field (Jay, 2013). Microfinance organizations, for example, are guided by the dual—and often competing—goals of profitability and development in emerging economies, and due to this institutional complexity, microfinance organizations can operate in markets outside the norm of for-profit organizations (Pache & Santos, 2013) and achieve synergies between their social mission and profit proposition (Perkmann et al., 2022). In other words, complexity allows for a context in which actors can combine elements of oft-competing logics in order to achieve desired organizational outcomes.

### 2.2. Institutional Arbitrage

Existing research, however, has yet to focus on how actors actually leverage competing logics or how competing logics combine to generate organizational benefits such as profits, efficiency, legitimacy, or knowledge (Perkmann et al., 2022). As such, in an effort to address that research gap, Perkmann et al. (2022) propose a theory of institutional arbitrage in which actors seek to deliberately bring together different and competing institutional logics in an effort to achieve value for an organization. According to Perkmann et al. (2022), actors are culturally competent and able to recognize institutional differences well enough to engage with them. They create new ways of operating by adopting practices and values from logics that differ from the dominant one (Schildt & Perkmann, 2017). This is the idea of institutional arbitrage, which is the purposeful deployment of multiple institutional logics by an actor to achieve valued organizational actors (Perkmann et al., 2022).

There are four tactics used to achieve institutional arbitrage. Each tactic is related to a specific way in which institutional logics differs and can thus be exploited for benefits: differences in the valuation of resources, differences in purpose, differences in practices, and differences in the criteria for legitimacy judgments (Perkmann et al., 2022).

Institutional arbitrage through differences in resource valuation occurs when actors create benefits by combining logics that have differing values. Institutional logics provide a cognitive map that gives meaning to social activity and defines the value of the outcomes of that social activity (Thornton et al., 2012), while also prescribing practices that best create value.

Outcomes, or resources, can range from status and legitimacy to time and knowledge. Due to the differences between logics as to what is valued, resources are unequally distributed across fields governed by different logics and a specific resource might be readily available in one domain and lacking in another (Perkmann et al., 2022). In other words, one tactic of institutional arbitrage exploits the differences in value that resources have according to different logics and allows the mobilization of a resource that is otherwise unobtainable. In the context of journalism, institutional arbitrage through resource valuation differences might occur when

news executives—perhaps rooted in a market logic—access innovations generated by product managers with different standards for evaluating value from a traditional reporter.

Another tactic of institutional arbitrage occurs when actors create benefits by combining logics characterized by differences in each's definition of purpose. Institutional logics govern various social systems, prescribes various value systems, and enables actors within each system to internalize the applicable norms and rules (Pache & Santos, 2013). This, of course, leads to interest in differing objectives (Wang et al., 2019). This tactic of institutional arbitrage is thus grounded in the exploitation of the differences in purpose that actors governed by different logics pursue and may result in the ability to benefit from the certainty that an actor governed by a different logic will behave differently from the dominant logic of the field (Perkmann et al., 2022). In the context of journalism, institutional arbitrage through purpose differences might occur from tensions between the pursuit of the story and the pursuit of the audience and what actors could exploit from the differences between those two purposes.

The third tactic of institutional arbitrage relates to differences in organizational practices across fields governed by different logics. Practices are the relatively coherent and established sets of meaningful activity and are fundamentally intertwined with institutional logics (Delmestri & Greenwood, 2016). Institutional logics shape patterns of shared routine behavior within a given social system (Thornton et al., 2012), and practices are thus developed within the context of a logic. In other words, different logics espouse different principles that inform different practices and the differences provide opportunities for institutional arbitrage that may result in the production of outcomes not typically available in the field (Perkmann et al., 2022). Within the context of journalism, institutional arbitrage through practice differences might occur when news organizations adopt product-oriented practices (e.g., scrums) that adhere to a technological logic thus offering new benefits to the organization.

Finally, institutional arbitrage through differences in legitimacy occurs when actors create benefits by associating with an additional logic that comes with additional audiences. Logic-specific audiences perceive the actions of an organization as appropriate based on the norms and values of that logic (Suchman, 1995); they make legitimacy judgments about an organization based on the standards associated with their governing logic (Bitektine, 2011). In other words, this institutional arbitrage tactic is grounded in the exploitation of differences between what is considered legitimate according to a specific logic and allows for new legitimacy from new audiences (Perkmann et al., 2022). Within the context of journalism, institutional arbitrage through legitimacy differences might occur with the integration of product managers within the organization as this signals legitimacy to technology and business functions.

### **2.3. Research Context: Product Managers in News**

Product managers in news are the focus of this research, as they are an emerging role that sits at the intersection of technology, business, and editorial aspects of a news organization (Kosterich, 2021). The field of journalism makes for a particularly interesting context in which to study institutional complexity as journalism is a mature, legacy field known for its permanence and resistance to change (Kosterich, 2022; Usher, 2016). The role of product manager—or those with other titles, but who are tasked with the management, development, testing, and launching of digital products—is an area that has grown in importance, but also complexity, as more sophisticated products are developed in the news industry

(Kosterich, 2021; Royal et al., 2020; Royal & Kiesow, 2021). Media products can include an organization's website, mobile applications, special project or event sites, commenting systems, podcasts, newsletters, games, chatbots, and presentations using augmented and virtual reality features. Internal digital products, including content management and analytic systems, influence and adapt journalistic work processes and routines. The competencies associated with these positions are different, yet built upon those of traditional journalists, thus creating challenges in hiring and professional development.

Program, innovation, and digital strategy managers are among other positions that can be considered product functions, and many organizations now have product directors and product officers in their ranks. The competencies required of product managers may include coding, design thinking techniques, experience creation, empathy, prototyping, and cross-functional collaboration. These roles often have a training function in introducing the organization to digital product processes, creating implications for hiring and career development, as well as journalism education.

### 2.3.1. Product Managers in News

Product management has a long history in other domains, with a specific origin in software development (Royal et al., 2020). The concept of product management was formalized as a business process in the 1930s, when consumer-goods companies like Procter & Gamble made brands the center of organizational strategy (Eriksson, 2015). The rise of the technology and internet industries in integrated product development and product management processes supported their alignment with customer needs. The product manager role in media, however, can be conceived with its roots in the early products of data journalism when the rise of big data and ubiquitous internet wrought a business imperative to more efficiently and effectively target multiple audiences in a personalized way (Royal et al., 2020).

A preeminent theme in the literature on product managers (and other new entrants) in the news industry is the tendency for new actors with new areas of expertise to be met with resistance and tension in several important ways. New actors are often questioned if they can properly fulfill the role of a journalist (see Zelizer, 2005, on the introduction of photojournalism). Tensions also emerge concerning subgroup status and who has the power to make decisions in the news production process (see Lowrey, 1999, on the rise of visual journalism). Resistance is also apparent in the devaluation of new expertise as "non-journalistic" (see Christin, 2020; see also Petre, 2015, work on web metrics and analytics). There is indeed an increasing influence of actors that do not fit into the traditional definition of journalist, yet are still involved in the production processes of journalism such as interactive journalists (Usher, 2016), data journalists (Hermida & Young, 2019), and editorial technologists (Lischka et al., 2021) who all merge storytelling and computational skills into the news production process.

Recent lines of research, however, demonstrate that in a digital product environment, those with technology skills become more central to the mission of the organization, and their contributions should be valued as such: "Afterall [sic], these are still news workers, and they contribute critical newsroom functions that ultimately direct how audiences interact with the news" (McMullen Cheng & Belair-Gagnon, 2022, p. 12). Other researchers have studied the positions and institutional influence of technology roles in media organizations (Ananny & Crawford, 2015; Kosterich, 2022).

The existence of boundaries can imply a need to be bridged and often renegotiated. Even the longstanding journalistic tradition of keeping separate the roles of editorial and business is challenged:

The new norm is based on combining established editorial values with values such as collaboration, adaptation, and business thinking, and it is already playing an important role in legitimizing new practices that are based on frequent exchanges between editorial and the commercial teams. (Cornia et al., 2020, p. 172)

A study of journalists' perceptions identified a bridging theme related to innovation in newsrooms: "The findings indicate a growing salience of hybrid roles in newsrooms that serve as linchpins to connect divergent professional fields, and more importantly, as bridges between tradition and innovation" (Chua & Duffy, 2019, p. 112). Thus, in an effort to understand how product managers act as bridges, or as loci of change, to manage complexity through leveraging incompatible logics, we offer the following research questions:

RQ1: How has the process of institutional complexity occurred within the field of journalism? In other words, which institutional arbitrage tactics are used?

RQ2: What are the professional implications of the various ways institutional arbitrage plays out in the field of journalism?

### 3. Method

The current study uses interview data to uncover the tactics of institutional arbitrage utilized by product managers in newsrooms. We chose this method for three reasons. First, interviews engender the exploration of emotion, perception, and attitude more distinctly than other methods (Jackson & Trochim, 2002). In addition, we build off of Oborn et al. (2021) who note that conducting interviews offers an analysis of the institutional logics that shapes responses during a time of complexity. Finally, these efforts encompass open-ended questions that allow for theory-building, which is one of the goals of this study.

The purpose of this study is to understand the process of institutional complexity in journalism by interrogating the tactics used by product managers in news organizations. As product managers are considered institutional entrepreneurs and tasked with implementing and upholding change from within the field of journalism, they possess an understanding of their organization's goals, internal processes, institutional culture, and degree of openness to change. We are interested in learning about the role of actors whose designed role puts them in everyday contact with multiple institutional logics and the processes used to manage resulting institutional complexity.

In total, 17 interviews were conducted over a period of four months (September 2020–December 2020). The objective in selecting interviewees was to recruit participants in product positions from a wide array of news organizations. Interviewees represented a range of news sectors including print, broadcast, and digital native news organizations. Interviewees represented a range of firms from legacy news organizations such as *The Washington Post* to newer entrant news organizations such as *The 19th*. Interviewees also represented a range of organizational sizes from regional news firms such as the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*

to larger news firms with international operations such as *The New York Times*. Although all interviewees were in product positions, titles still varied across specialties and levels including vice president of product, director of innovation, and product manager.

Semi-structured interviews included both grand touring questions and planned prompts since they both offer detail, depth, and an insider's perspective (Leech, 2002). The open-ended aspect of these questions allows respondents to answer in their own words and thus supply salient answers relative to the tactics of institutional arbitrage utilized by product managers in newsrooms. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and aggregated into a database for coding. Initial interviewees were strategically identified based on a wide network of professional contacts; subsequent subjects were identified based on recommendations from the initial interviews, which enabled a snowball sampling process. On average, interviews lasted 60 min and were conducted and recorded on Zoom. Interviewees were initially contacted via email. Subjects were not offered compensation but were assured anonymity.

### 3.1. Analysis

The coding process was iterative and reflexive. Interviews were transcribed and entered into a dataset that was read and coded iteratively according to both data and theory with the goal of identifying emergent themes and meaningful theoretical dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013) to contextualize the various tactics of institutional arbitrage used by product managers in news. A grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) is employed to look for emergent themes that were guided by the theory of institutional arbitrage. This approach emphasizes constant comparative analysis of the data, which is a method of joint coding and analysis in an effort to create general categories (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Transcribed interviews lend themselves to grounded theory analysis, which is designed to elucidate understandings from the data by systematically going through the documents, allowing categories to emerge and ensuring each is grounded in the qualitative data (Tracy, 2013).

Interview transcripts were coded and categorized according to the literature on institutional arbitrage, which allowed for a theoretical contextualization of how product managers manage complexity by bringing incompatible logics together to leverage differences between them. Two coders tackled coding of the transcripts, which were first split to code for assertions related to the four institutional arbitrage tactics. Next, the data was coded by both coders for subcategories.

Specifically, interviews were first coded as one of Perkmann et al.'s (2022) four institutional arbitrage tactics (e.g., differences in purpose, practice, resources, and legitimacy). Next, they were sub-categorized into groups based on the specificity of the tactic itself. For example, a quote from one product manager discussing their role on "leaderships and synthesis and narrative and organizing people and ideas into some kind of coherent path" was coded as the institutional arbitrage tactic rooted in differences in practice and sub-categorized as role description. Another product professional described their role as "thinking about how to align our journalism with our business goals and meet audience needs," which was coded as the institutional arbitrage tactic rooted in differences of purpose and sub-categorized as aligning goals. These examples highlight how different logics are demonstrated even in the most basic ways when product professionals describe their roles.



## 4. Findings

To address RQ1, the following section illustrates how product professionals in journalism manage complexity by acting as a locus of change and bringing incompatible logics together to leverage differences between them in an effort toward innovation. The context of institutional complexity sets the stage for multiple competing institutional logics through which actors struggle to make decisions and take action (Greenwood et al., 2011). Within such a context, Perkmann et al. (2022) explain that actors often purposefully bring these competing logics together to achieve value for their organizations. These activities are called institutional arbitrage and can be categorized as four different tactics rooted in the specific ways in which logics differ: in resource valuation, in purpose, in practice, and in legitimacy. It is through the exploitation of these differences that actors can create benefits for the organizations during a time of complexity.

The findings from this analysis are thus structured and presented according to the four arbitrage tactics. In focusing on these tactics, this research furthers understanding of how differences between institutional logics can generate opportunities for actors and organizations undergoing institutional complexity. As such, these findings provide an industry-level contextualization of how product professionals act as a locus of change in journalism by managing institutional complexity and competing logics through institutional arbitrage.

### 4.1. Resource Valuation

The institutional arbitrage tactic based on differences in resource valuation occurs when actors create benefits by combining logics that differs in what is valued according to that logic (Perkmann et al., 2022). In the context of product professionals in journalism, this tactic was most commonly exemplified through the differences between the value of profit and revenue, and another more traditional journalistic value of audience needs and efficiency. As one product professional from a regional print publication explained:

We're at that pivotal moment where now we can actually take information that we've collected for years and act on it and really give them [audiences] experiences that they want, experiences that they see value in paying for. And it's such a key moment right now because we're also seeing business models change. We're seeing shifts, and advertising is not as profitable as it once was, of course. And we're seeing digital reader revenue models ramp up. But now we need to move to use the information that we have about our audiences and create products that people pay for before it's too late.

Here we have this idea that product work can not only serve traditional journalistic values of information needs and audience engagement, but it is also an avenue for the generation of revenue.

Another product professional from a digital-first news organization similarly exemplified the institutional arbitrage tactic rooted in resource value difference while discussing their news organizations' advertising business line. Advertising not only brings value to the organization as an efficiency tool, but also brings in income and thus serves as an instance of bringing two differing values together in an effort to create innovation at the organization. They go on to explain:

We're a digital media company. We make a lot of money off of advertising. So we build up advertising systems for ourselves to help us create campaigns, manage campaigns, create ads that are more

performant and more effective, etc. We have a product team dedicated to thinking all of that through and using data effectively to manage all that sort of stuff, and then we were able to translate those capabilities into our business line, which is doing that on the behalf of a publisher lead ad network that folks can join.

A frequently mentioned tension dealt with the lack of resources available to achieve product goals within a media business model. A product professional from a media company described the continuous cycle of raising funds as a means to better serve customers:

I think one challenge that a lot of media companies experience, unless you're a large company with a lot of resources, is just having enough development support or funding to move quickly. We may have great ideas for our roadmap, but we may be unable to move quickly because of lack of resources. And I think it's a cyclical thing. We need more funding. We need to fix the business model. We need to get more customers.

A lack of human resources can specifically cause negotiations within product features that may conflict with the ability to support community goals over time. A product professional in a digital-only organization said:

An example might be that we've chosen to not launch with comments, because we can't moderate them. We just don't have the bandwidth to do that. We're being careful about creating community and creating engagement opportunities that we actually can resource.

Product professionals sit in a precarious position in a media organization balancing the organizational goals supported by products with the resources at their avail. A product professional in a digital-only organization described their role in advising leadership on decisions about not only what to build, but also what not to:

Leaders in the organization look to me to understand how feasible is this thing that we want to build. How much time will that take? Can we do it? How about this other thing? What are we capable of? I'm usually the one that's also thinking should we be doing this? Do we have the data we need to be able to make a decision about this?

Product professionals, however, have options in the job market. The skills and experiences they possess may be more financially gainful in other industries. So, media product professionals must negotiate their revenue incentives with other forms of social capital, as a product professional at a legacy media organization described:

If you are a product person, and you choose to work in a news organization, when you have the option to work in any other startup, and maybe get paid more money for it, you're doing it for a reason. You're doing it because it aligns with your values and your mission, because you believe in what you're doing.

## 4.2. Purpose

A second tactic of institutional arbitrage is rooted in the differences among purposes that actors adhering to differing institutional logics would follow; pursuing these differences generates benefits (Perkmann et al., 2022). Our data show this to be the most common institutional arbitrage tactic discussed by journalism's

product professionals. In this context, the tactic of differences in purpose is most often associated with the idea that product professionals bridge the space between the varying logics of editorial, audience, business, and technology.

According to the data, it is in this space of differing purposes that product and innovation succeed as a locus of change. In other words, it is in their descriptions of purpose that subjects were able to move beyond the revenue incentive of resource valuation to represent a focus on user needs. As one product professional in a digital-only organization said of the role, “I’m in charge of the user experience of our website and newsletters, strategically what are we building to make our journalism and to deliver the journalism better.”

Another digital-only product professional emphasized their focus on community, “We are an organization that decides to use product in a unique way, to serve audiences that people often ignore in journalism. I think that is where any notoriety we have as an organization, it comes from that.” As one product professional at an international news organization explains:

As a product person, you’re the link between everyone else, and if people get a better understanding of how that magic turns the product into something that’s better and more efficient, then you automatically create way more opportunities of bettering your product and bettering your processes and innovating.

Echoing a similar sentiment, another product professional at a digital native news organization explained product professionals as the “meeting of editorial values and goals and business requirements and technology choices into some kind of synthesis to be able to make decisions and drive the success for an organization.”

This idea of product professionals as being the bridge among typically competing roles, purposes, and departments was a common sentiment among interviewees. Take this anecdote from one product professional at a legacy print news organization, for example:

I remember talking to a headhunter years ago as [the news organization] was setting up their design function. She said, “You know, we’ve got one side that speaks duck and we’ve got the other side of the house that speaks chicken, and we need somebody to come in and teach them both to speak goose. And that particular case, that wasn’t duck and chicken. They were speaking duck and Farsi, and one wanted to eat the other.” What it really takes is people who can bridge the disciplines, people who can speak multiple languages, and understand the value of news values, but also understand the value of the dollar.

One product professional at a legacy print news organization goes on to explain how this tactic of institutional arbitrage can be a challenge, but even so, exploiting different purposes of different institutional logics can generate positive outcomes:

You need to keep the core values of journalism front and center and that sometimes creates tension with the planning and the organization and the sprints, and the scrums and the methodology of product. And you can’t expect to bring product methodology into a newsroom and have the whole newsroom

conform to how product works. There has to be a negotiation and kind of a meeting in the middle where you can apply product thinking to developing news products and product thinking to developing storytelling formats and an understanding of the audience putting the news gathering and putting the journalistic values in the center of it...and that's something that we're not used to traditionally in newsrooms.

### 4.3. Practice

The third tactic of institutional arbitrage relates to differences in organizational practices governed by varying institutional logics, the divergence of which generates opportunity (Perkmann et al., 2022). Similar to differences in purpose, by exploiting differing practices from editorial, business, audience, and tech logics, product professionals can generate opportunity, innovation, and even success. According to one product professional at a digital native news organization, for example, the practices of product professionals are a “real mix of editorial work and design work.”

This idea of integrating skill sets and practices from various logics was echoed by another product professional who explained that their practices cross the lines of storytelling, technology, and product by “asking good questions and learning things.” They go on to explain:

If you need to learn about a particular technology in order to solve something, we're going to evaluate if it's the right one. It's a matter of gathering lots of ideas and facilitating the right narrative around them. It's the product management of storytelling.

As another product professional at a legacy print organization explained regarding their product professional practices:

I wanted to do audience engagement, and I really saw a need for some sort of bridge role between the two worlds, because it was very much church versus state. And there was a lot of information that we had in the audience and the audience side that the newsroom never talked about. There's so much more data that we have. And I had never understood the separation of those two things—the separation of the news from sales to an extent. I was able to pitch and get that role where we started to bridge those worlds and had a cross-functional team that worked closely with the editors.

It is important to note that within the product function, broad differences in practice exist, demonstrating a wide range of skill sets and emphases. A product professional at a legacy media organization described various product emphases in their company:

I focus on our web and off-platform properties. We have a mobile app product manager who focuses on or mobile applications for iOS and Android. We have a data and API product managers thinking more around personalization and AI and how all that ties together. We have a product manager that focuses on advertising and one that focuses on our conversion and subscriptions. We have another product manager that just started more focused on storytelling in tooling for internal purposes.

While some organizations may have a range of product areas, others may demonstrate a limited product function initially tasked with introducing product concepts:

I actually spend a ton of time on our internal process of working together, anything that has to do with how are we collaborating, how are we communicating and how are we making decisions about our priorities. I'm the one building all the infrastructure for that. I don't know if other organizations do that. I mean, we're a startup.

#### 4.4. Legitimacy

The final tactic of institutional arbitrage relates to differences in legitimacy. Here, legitimacy is rooted in the perception of appropriateness based on the norms and beliefs of a specific logic (Suchman, 1995). In exploiting the differences between what is considered legitimate according to different institutional logics, product professionals can gain legitimacy with new audiences.

Within the context of journalism's product professionals, institutional arbitrage based on differences in legitimacy was most commonly referred to in instances of background, skills, training, and education. In other words, legitimacy according to a journalistic logic involves education and training in newsroom skills; whereas, legitimacy according to other logics (e.g., business, design, programming) would involve background and training in those associated skill sets. Product professionals in journalism perform institutional arbitrage by exploiting those differences in an effort toward development and innovation.

One product professional from a regional print news organization, for example, explained that a successful product professional is one who:

If they're in journalism, [they] have to get comfortable with the tech stuff—learning to code, fluency in data and data manipulation. If someone is coming from the tech side, the flip side is true: they need to learn storytelling and journalistic ethics.

Another product professional from a digital native news organization echoed this sentiment in explaining that product professionals sit at the “intersection of a bunch of things,” so, “hard skills are involved; you need to know how to program, build things with code, be familiar with design concepts, etc. But you also need the soft skills, which differentiate [journalism's] product folks.”

Another product professional at a local news organization discussed journalism's product professionals enacting institutional arbitrage by exploiting differences in legitimacy in this way:

They're going to learn the news in the newsroom, they're going to learn storytelling, editing, all of the different things that you learn about telling a story. You also need to learn about product management, advertising, audiences. You need to learn about the worlds of all the different departments in these organizations, not just one.”

These comments demonstrate that product professionals negotiate legitimacy by learning a broad range of newsroom functions. They feel to be taken seriously in a media organization, they must understand the

mission, values, and practices of journalism, as well as the technical and business aspects. They struggle with identity in an organization that values reporting and editing but are desperate to have their expertise recognized within an editorial culture. As a product professional in a digital-only organization described, positional power is often more influential than resource limitations:

You can give people all the tools and resources that they could ever ask for, but you cannot make them use them. I think there's always going to be this struggle with editorial wanting to work at their own pace on their own timeline, and they want everybody else to work around it. But they forget that the SEO headline, and the social headline, and the art and all these things are what gets their thing to people.

The editorial culture can exert what some may consider undue or unnecessary influence in product hiring. A product manager at a media chain explained:

I would love to hire someone outside of journalism, but I can't for this role because we're specifically looking for somebody with newsroom credibility. The fact that I didn't work for my college paper is legitimately a problem when I talked to some editors, so we need somebody that has a newsroom background for this. But my dream candidate is somebody who maybe went to journalism school, but didn't go into journalism and went to work for a tech company.

## 5. Discussion

With this research, we sought to understand how differences between institutional logics can generate opportunities for actors and organizations within a complex environment. The findings in Section 4 provide an industry-level contextualization of how product professionals act as a locus of change in journalism by using their roles to manage complexity and bring incompatible logics together to leverage differences among them. In doing so, this work provides insight into the different tactics used by actors in a complex environment such as the field of journalism.

This study identifies important trends associated with the emergence and adoption of product management competencies as media organizations embrace innovation and strive for sustainability. To address RQ1, we applied the institutional arbitrage tactics identified by Perkmann et al., (2022) to form a better understanding of the negotiations and challenges of product professionals working in media organizations. Each of these tactics introduces the inherent tensions associated with integrating product practices in journalism but also represents potential opportunities for driving necessary change that is relevant to both theory and practice.

For one, the findings demonstrate the constant negotiations of product professionals related to resources. They often advise leaders through data and expertise but rely on leadership to provide the resources to achieve and sustain goals. They may be in competition for resources with other organizational units. While the product mission is often aligned with organizational goals, product professionals may not yield the organizational power to attract the resources they need. The ability to do this is often comingled with the location, size, and proximity to key leadership of the product team. This scenario may be subject to change as product teams become a more central, rather than periphery, role.

In addition, there is an assumption in many of the findings related to institutional arbitrage based on differences in purpose that the product teams work within traditional journalism values, not trying to adjust or overturn them. These assumptions can serve to reduce the organizational power of product teams. They negotiate this scenario by expressing value related to the bridge role of joining disparate purposes. This presents challenges in a media organization that has traditionally kept a firm separation between business and editorial functions.

With regards to institutional arbitrage based on differences in practice, the findings demonstrate product functions negotiating breadth of practice. What one organization deems a product practice may be markedly different from another. Skill sets vary based on the product type, organizational needs, and available resources. This presents challenges for hiring, professional development, and media education that will need to be addressed.

Finally, legitimacy negotiations may be less obvious but are present nonetheless as media organizations integrate product roles and concepts. This can affect the way professionals feel about their role in an organization and the authority in which they are able to carry out their responsibilities.

Indeed, product professionals described competing tensions associated with differing business goals amidst a lack of resources to achieve those goals. Their purpose of responding to user needs can be overlooked as they work to provide the technical infrastructure and processes needed in their organizations. They do this in an environment in which the skills they bring are unfamiliar and may lack legitimacy related to power and decision-making within the culture. Over time, these tensions may change or subside, but as these comments suggest, it will require attention from leadership and a better integration of product goals with organizational mission.

RQ2 dealt with the professional implications associated with the ways institutional logics plays out in the product role. The comments by professionals in these roles indicate that they are charged with moving their organizations forward by managing innovative digital products while they are negotiating institutional logics of resource valuation, purpose, practice, and legitimacy within a long-standing, legacy industry. The results outline a field in need of structure, but reliant on the flexibility and agility required to embrace the opportunities that innovation presents. As product roles become more central functions in media organizations, they may create organizational tensions, and these dynamics must be negotiated for successful product implementations.

Product management encompasses a range of positions and functions focused on understanding audience needs and providing solutions. Organizations must consider tactics associated with recruitment, hiring, retention, and career paths for product professionals to ensure their effective integration into organizations (Kosterich, 2022). As such, these trends will also serve to drive innovation in academic curriculum and faculty development (Royal, 2017). How organizations adopt and adapt to these trends will be important to their future sustainability and that of the journalism industry.

### **5.1. Limitations and Future Research**

While the results here make important contributions to theories of institutional and organizational change and the practice of journalism, there are, of course, a number of limitations. First, the interviews were limited

to a pool of 17 participants. As such, a more comprehensive sample would capture a wider range of management perspectives and strategies. An important next step in this research arena would be to collect a more comprehensive sample of journalists from more diverse backgrounds across the globe in an effort to capture a wider range of arbitrage experiences and allow for cross-country comparisons, thus more accurately reflecting the global industry.

In addition, the next stage of this research will further investigate the outcomes of institutional arbitrage tactics. A natural extension of this study is to consider the effects of institutional arbitrage on outcomes such as the fates of news organizations and product managers themselves. The net effect on the role of media has yet to be determined.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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