

“It’s New to Us”: Exploring Authentic Innovation in Local News Settings

Ragnhild Kr. Olsen ¹  and Kristy Hess ² 

¹ Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway

² School of Communication and Creative Arts, Deakin University, Australia

Correspondence: Ragnhild Kr. Olsen (ragols@oslomet.no)

Submitted: 28 July 2023 **Accepted:** 3 October 2023 **Published:** 29 February 2024

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Unpacking Innovation: Media and the Locus of Change” edited by Scott A. Eldridge II (University of Groningen), Frank Harbers (University of Groningen), and Sandra Banjac (University of Groningen), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i397>

Abstract

Many local newsrooms across the globe have been forced to re-assess (and re-assert) their value and function during a period of intense digital disruption. “Innovate or die” has become an accepted mantra as governments, policymakers, and academics focus on shifting, for example, traditional newspapers into the digital era to maintain their perceived relevance. This article argues the need to understand and learn from the experiences of traditional commercial local news providers who have been encouraged to consider innovative solutions for their businesses. The article adopts a pooled case comparison approach, drawing on data from two separate studies examining media innovation in Norway and Australia. We outline three specific themes that appear to shape localized innovation practices: there is ambivalence or challenge to innovation discourse; introduced innovations are done so incrementally and re-contextualised to adapt to a local setting; and there is an authentic approach to innovation that prioritizes change aligning with local journalism’s social and community values.

Keywords

authenticity; localized innovation; local journalism; local news; media innovation

1. Introduction

The many-faceted crisis facing the local news industry has prompted a growing sense of urgency and expectation that local news media can, will, and must innovate to be sustainable in a rapidly advancing digital environment. In countries such as Australia and Norway, governments have provided significant grants and subsidies to struggling local news providers to innovate and invest in technologies, software, and

equipment to propel them into the digital age (see Australian Government, n.d.). However, innovation and how it is understood through the lens of those living and working in local areas is seldom explored, discussed, or problematized (see e.g., Morlandstø, 2018; Waschková Císařová, 2023). When it comes to scholarship on media innovation, researchers have largely focused on technological advancements for “big media” or new start-up ventures whereas studies of how established local news media view innovation remain relatively few. Consequently, the research literature risks applying conceptualizations of innovation that do not fully acknowledge or capture what local media innovation looks like “on the ground.” There is a risk of succumbing to a digital imperative around innovation that may eclipse important social and cultural changes creating new and improved value for local audiences. Further tensions can emerge between “old” ways of doing things and how digital technologies and practices can best complement, recreate, immerse, and/or reinforce a news outlet’s connection to the community (Gulyas & Hess, in press).

Against this background, the central question guiding this research article is how innovation is understood and implemented in local media contexts. We wanted to examine how traditional commercial local news providers view innovation and its value in the specific place-based contexts where they operate. This research draws on a pooled case comparison approach which makes use of pre-existing raw research data from interviews and focus group transcripts in two separate studies on local media innovation in Norway and Australia ($N = 72$). While there are differences in the media and political landscapes between both countries, the Norwegian and Australian governments’ financial incentives to encourage digital news innovation in recent years, make these countries especially fertile ground for exploration. It is widely acknowledged that innovation means to introduce something new into the socioeconomic system (Storsul & Krumsvik, 2013). Our research found local news providers adopt a conservative rather than radical approach to innovation in both countries. This was, in part, due to a lack of available resources and expertise to innovate and experiment but more importantly, because news producers were careful not to impose change for change’s sake. We argue innovative ideas in these local environments are seldom “new to the world,” rather they are “new to context” and tend to prioritise content over digital technologies that align with local journalism’s social and community values.

2. The Ongoing Crisis in Local News and the Push for Innovation

Local newspapers have traditionally filled important roles in local democracies by providing news and information to the public, generating a sense of community and belonging, and serving as an arena for local public discourse (e.g., Skogerbø & Winsvold, 2011). As such, local media create social, cultural, and democratic values. However, terms like news deserts and news gaps have emerged as part of the global media lexicon amid growing concern that the institution and practice of local newsmaking may collapse. Many local news media outlets (commercial local newspapers in particular) have struggled to cope with the structural transformation of the news business, from shifting advertising revenue to centralisation of news services and adjustment to the digitized news environment (e.g., Waschková Císařová, 2023). The deepening crisis among local newspapers has spurred a growing sense of urgency to develop solutions to ensure the long-term sustainability of this democratic infrastructure. There has been increasing expectation among industry, social media, and policymaking circles that local news media should innovate to cope with the crisis, with innovation portrayed as a panacea to local news media’s many problems. The push for innovation has influenced government policies and subsidies designed to support the sector (Ots & Picard, 2018). In several countries, like Australia, the UK, Canada, Denmark, and Norway, governmental support has been promoted or even implemented to stimulate local media innovation. For example, in Australia, digital

innovation influenced a major subsidy scheme in 2018 which showered small-town print publishers with equipment from software and website development to drones and computers in the interests of making the news business more sustainable (Australian Government, n.d.). In Norway, a media innovation support scheme was implemented in 2018 specifically targeting small local news outlets (Olsen, 2022).

Innovation, as described by Creech and Nadler (2018, p. 187), has thus become an ideal which “offers the promise of harnessing an unknown future while eliding obstacles to that future” for news media. Innovation is seen as imperative for news operations which have no choice but to transform themselves and improve their editorial processes and products, as well as their business models and organizational structures to survive in a fast-changing technological environment (García-Avilés et al., 2018). This imperative also permeates the research literature on innovation among local news media as a certain logic of how news organizations ought to navigate. For example, Heckman and Wihby (2019) frame the lack of local media innovation as a missed opportunity and local media as laggards when it comes to the adoption of new mobile technology. Jenkins and Jerónimo (2021) conclude that local news organizations should invest in “completely new and innovative processes for content creation and monetization” to ensure these media continue to serve their communities (p. 1237), whereas Wilczek et al., (2021) and Lowrey et al., (2023) describe innovation enablers which could facilitate the digital transformation of local journalism. Meanwhile, Waschková Císařová (2023) examines the tension between digital disruption and old ways of doing journalism by exploring attitudes to digital innovations and argues that in some contexts there is resistance to rapid digital transition. She suggests news producers are challenged by an emphasis on digital innovation and technological transformation and are more nostalgic for the old times.

3. Techno-Economic Ideals of (Media) Innovation

Since the arrival of the internet in newsrooms in the 1990s there has been a significant increase in organizational research on journalism innovation. Belair-Gagnon and Steinke (2020) identify dominating types of innovation discussed in this expanding research field: process, i.e., improvements in journalistic working methods; audience engagement, referring to new ways of fostering compelling user interactions; structure which encompasses innovations in how news media organize and align talents and assets; product system capturing the introduction of new journalistic products and services; and network, typically new connections with external players, such as social media platforms. A recurring topic in this research is how newsrooms have responded to, and resisted, change, and how difficult it is for established news organizations to adopt technology (Boczkowski, 2005; García-Avilés, 2021). A wealth of studies have explored factors that stimulate or impede digital innovation among news media (Paulussen, 2016) such as: professional culture and values (e.g., Ekdale et al., 2015; Porcu, 2020; Porcu et al., 2022); recruitment (e.g., Broersma & Singer, 2021) and individual agency among news workers (e.g., Steensen, 2009); organisational networks and team structure (Koivula et al., 2020, 2022; Lewis & Usher, 2016); management, strategy, and resources (e.g., Boyles, 2016; García-Avilés et al., 2019; Lehtisaari et al., 2018; Villi et al., 2020); as well as exogenous influences such as market opportunities and user behaviour, the behaviour of competitors, regulation, and industry norms (Storsul & Krumsvik, 2013).

A key characteristic of this diverse and flourishing research field is that innovation is mostly defined in terms of technology and business, omitting the socio-cultural component of innovation (García-Avilés, 2021). Innovation largely connotes either technical changes in news production and distribution or changes in

funding models for journalism (see e.g., Creech & Nadler, 2018) whereas the value that technological advances represent for communication in society, has received less attention. The emphasis on newness at the expense of a deeper understanding of the value of the new, has been described as a “Shiny Things Syndrome” which takes away from storytelling and overshadows the purpose of news reporting (Posetti, 2018). The relentless pursuit of new technology without a clear understanding of how the new technology will make journalism better is seen to create frustration among news workers and to serve as substitutes for financial investments or structural changes which many within journalism believe are required to improve the profession's performance and standing among the public (Bossio & Nelson, 2021).

Moreover, market success persists as a dominant ideal for innovation without sufficient attention to ideas and solutions that may not be successful in the marketplace but enhance the quality of journalism. Journalism scholars often cite the seminal work of economist Joseph Schumpeter as an anchoring point for studies of media innovation. Schumpeter, concerned with the role of innovation for long-term economic change, defined innovation as the introduction of a new good, a new method of production, the opening of new markets, the conquest of a new source or the supply of raw materials or half-manufactured goods, and the implementation of a new form of organization (Schumpeter, 1934). This and other more recent contributions to economic innovation models (see for an overview e.g., Storsul & Krumsvik, 2013) are useful for understanding the business side of innovation such as the economic interests involved and who succeeds and who fails in the market. Economic perspectives are, however, less suitable to capture the non-economic dimensions of innovation in the media sector, such as local media entrepreneurship committed to social change (e.g., Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022) and the well-being of local audiences and environments.

4. Social and Cultural Innovation in Incremental Steps

As noted by Bossio and Nelson (2021) there is no doubt that the epistemological frame for innovation has often been set too narrowly and too focused on business or technological change. Trappel (2015) provides a compelling case for a broader understanding of innovation in media and journalism arguing that the emphasis on technological newness and market success as key characteristics of innovation runs the risk of overlooking how innovation should primarily create social value. He describes how an innovation that represents technological advancement and serves the economic interests of news organizations does not necessarily provide better services to the public. Trappel suggests that innovations are essentially ideas and solutions that are new and offer something better. Ideas and solutions which are new, better, and successful in the marketplace qualify as innovations too. But those which are just new and pushed into markets without improving the public sphere do not (Trappel, 2015).

This definition provides an alternative to a narrow techno-economic understanding of innovation by emphasizing how news media's focus should be to serve the public interests in new and better ways. However, determining how new something must be in order to qualify as an innovation, is not straightforward. Media innovation could be incremental as well as radical, ranging from gradual improvements in existing services to large-scale changes that profoundly alter news media operations, services, and markets (Storsul & Krumsvik, 2013). Most media innovations are incremental (Storsul & Krumsvik, 2013). However, over time these small steps could result in radical changes in the practice and institution of journalism. As noted by Paulussen (2016) “while news organizations seem to adapt slowly on the short term, their incremental evolution over several years is significant and fundamental” and the

changes in the news industry are radical and disruptive when assessed in retrospect (p. 193). This processual nature of innovation suggests that if the bar for newness is set too high, scholars risk overlooking small adjustments which accumulated over time represent considerable media innovations. Incremental innovations are particularly relevant on the local level where changes in practices and products may seem insignificant compared to the technological advances of larger media outlets. According to Morlandstø (2018), local media innovation is committed to a set of values that relate to the “specific needs of the community in which they operate” (p. 12). Local news media’s small innovations could create substantial social value by responding to specific community needs even though these changes do not adhere to the grander ideals of “big media” innovations. This suggests that the newness, as well as the value of local media innovation, is contextual and that research on local media innovation needs to be attentive to the conditions that characterize “true innovations” in local media contexts.

5. Local News and Authenticity

Understanding media innovation at the local level, then, requires understanding the differences in news practices between big and small media. It is widely established that journalists working in small towns and cities have an arguably closer, more intimate relationship with audiences—Reporters often regularly talk about needing to be accountable to sources they run into at the supermarket after work (Bowd, 2021). Key themes which resonate in much of the global scholarship about local news outlets are that they take pride (or strive to) offer continuity, commitment, and develop a sense of community in the places they serve (Gulyas & Hess, in press). Gulyas and Hess contend finding a balance between new and old ways of doing local news is a key challenge for the sector in the digital environment. The tried and tested approach of building local knowledge through practices of embeddedness (Usher, 2021) enables news producers to develop social and cultural power in a given context that is considered by some scholars to be central to its very legitimacy (Hess & Waller, 2017).

Of course, in a digital environment, local news operations are increasingly interconnected with wider digital flows and nodes of power with many owned by major companies or reliant on third-party platforms to share the news. This can create opportunities to build connections and economic opportunities outside of the place but can also risk weakening the close social ties journalists have in the community and their understanding of audience needs and wants. For this reason, we suggest local news practices that are closely connected with local communities’ values, traditions, and needs resonate with the concept of “authenticity.” In scholarship about digital journalism, authenticity has been used in different contexts but in broader terms, as described by Dutch linguist Theo van Leeuwen (2001), authenticity is ultimately an evaluative concept with multiple meanings: Something could be called authentic because it is genuine, i.e., it is not an imitation or copy, it applies to faithful reconstruction or representation of something, and it refers to being true to the essence of something. Our application of the concept aligns with the latter understanding of authenticity. We use the term here to understand approaches to innovation that are true to the essence of local journalism as a social institution and the rich, historic body of literature that connects it to notions of community and social connection. Importantly, some scholars suggest authenticity is only materialized within a given context—It is a relative concept that if taken away from its intended audience can become less authentic (Shomoossi & Ketabi, 2007).

In the sections that follow we draw on the perceptions and experiences of local media practitioners to unpack how innovation is understood and implemented in local media contexts and how localized innovation practices fit into the techno-economic innovation discourse that dominates the research field.

6. Methodology

To explore our central research question of how local media innovation is understood and implemented in local media settings, this study adopted a pooled case comparison approach (see Heaton, 2004; Oldfather & West, 1995). Pooled research is a form of secondary data analysis that has emerged in more postmodern qualitative studies (Heaton, 2004). It makes use of pre-existing raw research data (in this instance interviews and focus group transcripts) for the purpose of investigating new questions or verifying previous studies (Heaton, 2004). Oldfather and West (1995) argue that “pooled case comparison” is based on the informal sharing of qualitative data, and is beneficial in the interests of theory and concept development. The new analysis begins with a “clean slate.” Raw data from separate studies are literally pooled to create a new data set from which fresh categories and properties are derived. The approach is similar to the “amplified sampling” form of secondary analysis (Thorne, 1994) in which comparisons across two data sets are used, each of which was originally collected by one or other of the secondary analysts.

Oldfather and West (1995) posit that the pooled case comparison is most useful because “in analyzing their own data, researchers have the advantage of deeper knowledge of the contexts from which the data was derived” (p. 456). In line with this argument, we see value in incremental research (Heaton, 2004) that provides scope to acknowledge how researchers might draw upon and compare knowledge and experiences that have been accumulated over time. For this reason, reflexivity is an important consideration to provide openness and transparency about the research process and the shared construction of meaning. Reflexivity challenges the ideas of science, which favour professional distance and objectivity over engagement and subjectivity (Finlay & Gough, 2003).

In the present study, this reflexivity guided a series of in-depth conversations between the two researchers who are the primary researchers of each of the data sets that form part of the pooled case comparison here. We are both widely published and recognized for our work on theorizing changes in the local media landscape and researching local media in our respective countries, Australia and Norway. Unbeknownst to each other, we had both been involved in qualitative research with local newspaper staff to explore the challenges and approaches to media innovation. During our conversations, we discovered responses from participants in our separate studies about media innovation did not fit the digital, “shiny things” mould that has come to dominate literature and policymaking directions about news innovation. Through these discussions, moving between (media) innovation theory and an analysis of the pooled data, the concept of authentic innovation emerged.

6.1. About the Studies

Specifically, we draw on two individual local media studies in Australia and Norway that drew on qualitative methods to gain insights into media innovation. Data collected from the first study drew on transcripts from six focus groups involving newspaper staff as part of an Australian Research Council Linkage project examining local newspaper futures. The participants included editors (some of whom owned the news outlets) who were interviewed between July 2021–February 2022. The purpose of this qualitative research was to gain a

multi-perspectival view of the challenges and opportunities facing local newspapers and covered a variety of aspects from challenges affecting sustainability to the role of innovation. The study focused on small-town newspapers across Australia, mostly independently owned (that is not owned by major conglomerates). Two focus groups were conducted in person in Queensland, but due to Covid-19-related travel disruptions, other sessions in Victoria, South Australia, and New South Wales were held in digital space via Zoom. The focus groups covered a range of questions around news sustainability, innovation, and challenges facing the sector but only questions about innovation were included in the pooled-case analysis.

The second study involved transcripts of interviews with 16 local media managers (chief editors, news editors, and development editors) and four top-level media managers in Norway's two leading local media groups, Amedia and Polaris. This purpose sample aimed for diversity in terms of newspaper size (circulation app. 3,000–75,000) and geography covering the country from the north to the south. The interviews were conducted from March to May 2021 as part of the Media Innovation Through the Corona Crisis project funded by The Research Council of Norway. The interviewees were invited to discuss local media innovation amid the Covid-19 pandemic focusing on how these local newspaper organizations responded to the crisis in terms of new journalistic practices and products. All interviews were conducted via Zoom.

The two countries under study represent different media systems, Australia belonging to the Liberal Model and Norway to the Democratic Corporatist Model, as per Hallin and Mancini's (2004) media system typology. These countries share some synergies in the struggles experienced across the media ecosystem, but Norway has a much stronger, long-standing history of providing subsidies and government intervention to support diversity in the local news sector. The countries also differ in terms of local media structure. While Australia is experiencing accelerating local newspaper extinction and growing local news deserts, the number of local titles has remained stable in Norway. Thus, the local newspaper crisis could be described as more acute in Australia than in Norway. On the other hand, the two countries also have important similarities such as the aforementioned state-funded support schemes aiming to promote innovation among local media. Moreover, both countries are characterized by decentralized population patterns and large, thinly populated areas where local newspapers are typically the only source of originally sourced local news and information.

7. Findings

7.1. Challenging Innovation Discourse

A key theme to emerge from the combined data was that local journalism practitioners had a certain ambivalence regarding the meaning of innovations as well as their applicability in the context of their local news organizations. This surfaced in questions to us as researchers when approaching the interviewee's experiences with innovation: "What do you have in mind when you ask about innovation in my news organization?," "what do you mean by innovation specifically" and "innovation? We've done nothing that's wildly amazing or that someone hasn't done somewhere else before." There was a sense of defensiveness, even frustration in some of these responses; a tendency for interview subjects to assume that innovation was something they ought to be doing but struggled to realize. To some of the interviewees, it was evident that the changes and developments within their local news organization did not meet the standards of technological inventiveness and advancement that they associated with "real" innovation. As expressed by one of the Australian editors who worked for a news outlet that maintained steady circulation and growth:

“I don’t know if we’ve done anything innovative. I really don’t know....I think the government expects us to and you [academic interviewer] probably do too.” This editor highlights that definitions of “good” or “real” innovation are imposed by others outside the local news environment. Supplementing this observation, the editor of a small local newspaper in Norway said:

One could readily think of innovation and digitalization as something that is essentially about technology. But I’m in a position where I have to work with what I’ve got at hand. The only kind of innovation I can do is simple content things but I can’t....I don’t have any developers. I can’t really do anything with [the publishing] framework.

It should be highlighted that interview participants did not express resistance towards technological innovation but as demonstrated in the quotes above, there was a tendency to detach oneself and the local news operation from the development of new digital tools or products. While there were some accounts of inhouse technology development at the local level, (e.g., development of local news and information apps and computer-generated audio versions of online news stories using software from overseas), technological innovation was often described as out of reach, requiring skills and resources beyond the capacity of the local news organizations. For the Norwegian news organizations which were all part of large conglomerates, technology development was mostly described as a corporate responsibility; something which happened at a distance before being rolled out in local settings. In this respect, we identify a distinct division of innovation labour whereby technological innovation was considered the domain of those at company headquarters leaving little room for experimentation on the local level. Although centralized development of digital tools and services was mostly described as a necessity and a benefit to these local newspapers, there was some frustration regarding the pace of technological advancement on the local level. The challenge of innovating to keep up with the fast-changing technological environment (García-Avilés et al., 2018) was succinctly expressed by one of the Norwegian editors who described how he felt like his news organization was “running behind the bus.” Both the Norwegian and Australian interviewees expressed a push towards what we observe as a narrow technological interpretation of innovation—of implementing “shiny new things” (Posetti, 2018, p. 15)—while simultaneously feeling unequipped to live up to these expectations.

7.2. Incremental and Re-Contextualised Innovations

The accounts of lack of technological innovation could be seen as a failure to live up to the innovation standards and imperatives that permeate current media policy and research discourse. However, we observed from the interview data that local news people in Norway, as well as Australia, were continuously yet cautiously modifying and renewing their content, often by drawing inspiration from or borrowing existing ideas and adjusting them to suit their own niche environments. This is an important finding at a time when there is increasing syndication and aggregation of information on local news platforms creating more homogeneous content, especially among those outlets owned by bigger corporations (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, 2022). Rather than simply importing a “one-size fits all” approach, the introduction of existing innovations had been adapted to suit their local context. When describing these processes, interviewees embraced a much broader definition of innovation, by highlighting examples of practices, services, and software that were “new” to their local context, but not elsewhere in the broader news media industry or among other local news producers. For example, one Norwegian editor described as “innovation” the introduction of online news studios and live trackers which provided updated information about Covid-19 in

the locality amid the ongoing Covid-19 crisis. While these were not “new to the world” services—similar services had already been tried and tested in many larger outlets prior to the pandemic—they were perceived as innovative by the local news organization and their audiences. When describing these services, the local editor expressed a distinct sense of ownership of the innovation concept: “A lot of people will say that innovation is so big, and—hey, are we really doing that—but I would say that we have managed to create some completely new, genuine, practical, solid and useful services.”

This editor also added that these services were similar to what they had launched themselves in the past. As such, innovation was considered to be new configurations of existing services which responded to new audience needs in the specific place-based context where the news organization operated.

The local newspaper editors often prided themselves on being inventive when it came to developing new types of journalistic content—from podcasts and online documentaries, to the streaming of concerts and religious ceremonies which they had introduced mindfully and incrementally without losing focus on core business—providing essential local content. The data revealed many instances where newspaper editors had incrementally introduced new sections, columns, and content into the news to enhance community-oriented information. Of particular note in the accounts from the Australian interviewees was the revitalisation of sections that had previously featured in newspapers prior to the rise of social media and the internet, but which had disappeared during the onset of digital disruption. These included local identities sharing their favourite recipes, historical features, and introducing series’ such as “my unusual hobby.” Some news outlets had opted to introduce these sections after learning from their colleagues in other towns about how well-received they were. These examples can be described as retro-innovations, i.e., “new products and services designed to connect us with the past in ways that are both nostalgic and interactive” (Leberecht, 2013). Specifically, these new “old” services represented iterations of local newspapers’ traditional social glue function whereby familiar elements from the print world were given a new life in digital spaces to tie people and places together.

In sum, these accounts demonstrate how innovation—doing “new things” in the local journalism context—typically entails a combination of copying, modifying and translating already existing services to meet local audiences’ (new) needs. Importantly they are oriented towards content rather than digital innovation. These adoptions and adjustments are arguably dwarfed by large-scale technological innovations among big media corporations and could easily go under the radar or be written off as “non-innovation.” However, bearing in mind Paulussen’s (2016) description of innovation as a gradual process which, as noted by Boczkowski (2005), is being shaped by local conditions and contingencies, we observe how participants in our research promote services that are experienced as new within their given local context. This is an essential aspect of localized innovation, which is mindful of the conditions, resources and objectives that shape local newspaper operations.

7.3. Authenticity

While newness in context is arguably a key aspect of the innovations reported by the local news people under study, newness alone as noted by Trappel (2015) does not necessarily create any real value for the people and places that local news media serve. Among our interviewees, innovations that created social value were frequently portrayed as the core objective of their operation. A desire to be authentic and

genuine in approaches to innovation was apparent across the shared data set. As highlighted earlier, authenticity captures practices that are true to the values and ideals of local journalism as a social institution and the rich, historic body of literature that emphasizes notions of local knowledge, community, and social connection. The interviewees emphasized the importance of being able to understand what makes the local audience tick (Hess & Waller, 2017) as important to guiding innovation. Some editors highlighted how audiences were like a barometer to determine the value and need for change, that innovation had to be responsive to community needs rather than be enforced. In the words of one of the participants from Norway: “We have to identify audience needs before any of our readers have actually identified the need themselves. It’s about this ability to listen with your ear to the ground and understand your audience.” As noted by Hess (2016), this ability to create new content in line with audiences’ needs is a specific local competency or form of cultural capital.

Proximity was described as a unique value that could not be substituted by national news providers and required a sensitized approach to innovation in local settings. One of the Norwegian editors elaborated on this specific sense of the local and how the news organizations had worked on finding their own “voice” when communicating with the audience:

I think we manage to address our subscribers in a way that they understand. We have our own language. It’s not like everyone up here is the same. And it’s not about us using dialect and things like that. It’s about us having a tone and appearing in a way that is very distinctive to us, and which people recognize and appreciate.

This comment aligns with the very notion of authenticity, to be true to the essence of the newspaper’s original focus of serving the local community (Shomoossi & Ketabi, 2007). The editor described how the newspapers’ deep local roots, the specific sense of the heart and soul of the local place where they operate, permeated the news organization’s innovation efforts. When new content services were developed—from live streaming of local bird hatching to an app-based community information centre—local identity and needs served as guiding principles.

Relatedly, the public sphere role of local newspapers was emphasized as a guiding principle for innovation. An Australian editor highlighted that any digital innovation at his newspaper should complement the social and democratic function of local newspapers. This editor said if he was able to create anything new for his news outlet it would be digital software to enhance the traditional town square conversation function:

We used to have the town square back in the old days where everyone got their information from, and then we moved to newspapers, but I’ve sort of wondered, how do we get that town square by online? I guess there’s so much noise online, but we just need to find a way to sort of create a space where young people, businesses, everyone can sort of come together, and sort of engage with the news that we provide, that’s not [just] Facebook.

There is a sense of urgency in this quote that points to local newspapers’ appetite to engage in digital innovation to preserve while simultaneously changing their way of operating. This too, aligns with the concept of authenticity. Specifically, we identify how faced with competition for people’s time and attention, particularly from social media, the interviewees were concerned with strengthening their connection with

local communities and preserving their obligation to serve the niche interests of the populations and environments that sustain them. Finding new ways of supporting their social and democratic function in local communities, by providing information, serving as an integrative force, as well as an arena for local public discourse (Skogerbø & Winsvold, 2011) while simultaneously identifying new revenue streams, was portrayed as an ongoing innovation challenge that entailed social as well as economic value creation.

8. Discussion and Conclusion

The interviews with local media managers in Australia and Norway provide important insights regarding localized innovation practices that challenge a techno-economic understanding of journalism innovation. While the local editors in our material recognized the importance of technology as well as business innovation in line with the dominating understanding of innovation in the research literature (García-Avilés, 2021), their accounts of change and renewal in their own organizations highlight a desire to pursue innovations that adhere to local needs, identity, and traditions. This kind of innovation extends beyond technological advances and market penetration in the Schumpeterian tradition (e.g., Storsul & Krumsvik, 2013). News producers find themselves balancing innovations that meet the expectations of the broader industry with those of audiences, generating an often conservative and incremental approach to change. Rather than “bright and shiny” new things (Posetti, 2018), small-step localized content innovations were perceived as essential service improvements that created new and improved value for local audiences and communities in line with normative ideals of local journalism’s social and community role.

Exposing the characteristics of such localized innovations demonstrates the importance of recognizing the sociocultural component of innovation, a perspective which, as noted by García-Avilés (2021) has been largely omitted in journalism innovation research. The localized innovations described by our informants were deeply embedded in local cultures and local journalism traditions. Moreover, they were rooted in a strong sense of local community needs as well as a sense of obligation to serve public sphere interests and create social value (Trappel, 2015). Rather than seeing existing (local) journalism traditions, cultures, and norms as obstacles to innovation, a recurring innovation problem identified in the research literature (e.g., Paulussen, 2016), our findings suggest that established ideas about what journalism should ideally do for local communities serve as essential anchoring points for localized innovation which provide purpose and directionality to new journalistic practices and services. Moreover, while our research confirmed that lack of resources often represents an obstacle to technological innovation in line with multiple previous studies (e.g., Boczkowski, 2005; García-Avilés, 2021; Villi et al., 2020) we also find that beyond the confines of technological and business innovation, local newspapers were creative content innovators who prided themselves with “doing new things” with the resources they had at hand.

It could be argued that a local news outlet’s ambivalence to technological innovation could limit the potential of some small news providers to explore new digital technologies and introduce new and dynamic innovations that benefit audiences and create new revenues. The idea that people don’t know what they need until they see and experience it is certainly a worthy argument—after all, innovation to solve news impoverishment has become a taken-for-granted assumption in industry, policymaking, and increasingly academic circles. However, a preoccupation with technologies risks undermining—and taking focus from—the importance of context and the core value of local journalism to serve the local community. Given so much technological change happens in metropolitan and bigger media environments, local media can

benefit from a slower, more sensitized approach to innovation. Based on our findings we argue that the challenge for local news organizations is to not change for change's sake but to be reflexive about what has come before, adopted by others and lends itself to experimentation in their own "patch" of the world. Shomoossi and Ketabi (2007) highlight that if taken away from its specific, intended audience, innovation can become less authentic. This is arguably particularly relevant if the same innovation is applied on a mass scale, for example, across multiple local outlets. Such technological advances may not be perceived as "authentic" either by local newspeople or the local audiences they serve.

While our findings exhibit considerable commonality in localized innovations among Australian and Norwegian local news organizations, one should not ignore the differences between the cases in our material. Notably, the Norwegian media outlets under study were corporate players owned by local news conglomerates that faced and responded to digital innovation challenges early on (Olsen & Furseth, 2023). For example, Amedia, one of the Norwegian newspaper groups represented in our research, has been recognized as a pioneer in the digital transformation of the news business due to the company's successful introduction of online paywalls (Olsen et al., 2021). The Norwegian newspapers surveyed could at least to some extent lean on centrally developed technology for monetization and content production as their mother company pushed to speed up the digitalization of local operations. The Australian cases, on the other hand, were mostly independently owned, local operations which were essentially reliant on local resources to come up with new ideas, technology and services. These small Australian outlets appeared more committed to their print legacy compared to their Norwegian counterparts which arguably operated in a more digitally oriented news market. Bearing in mind this divergence, our research has highlighted the value of a pooled case comparison approach to encourage scholars to learn from, share, and understand the different contexts in which local news is both studied and practised. A pooled case approach enables the centrality and integrity of participants' voices in their specific contexts to be maintained (Oldfather & West, 1995). It is not our intention for this to be a rigorous, empirical comparative study as this is an obvious limitation of such an approach. It's important to acknowledge, for example, that while both projects utilised qualitative methods, one used focus groups while the other adopted interviews. Nonetheless, it was the text of transcripts from both projects relating to questions on innovation that were pooled for the purposes of this thematic analysis.

Ultimately, we suggest an innovation discourse that emphasizes local values and needs, rather than technological advances, provides much-needed guidance for media policy formulation and execution. We posit that innovation subsidies should focus on innovations which are true to local news organizations' public responsibilities and helpful in the delicate balancing of "doing new things" without losing sight of local traditions, history, and culture.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to Professor Peder Inge Furseth of BI Norwegian Business School for his collaboration in collecting data from Norway and to research associate Angela Blakston for her support in collecting data from Australia. We would also like to thank the three anonymous reviewers and the team of academic editors for their valuable feedback on this manuscript.

Funding

This work was supported by The Research Council of Norway [grant number 316534] and the Australian Research Council [grant number LP180100813].

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

- Australian Government. (n.d.). Innovation fund a boost for regional and small publishers. <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/media-communications-arts/media-industry-programs/regional-and-local-newspaper-publishers-program>
- Belair-Gagnon, V., & Steinke, A. J. (2020). Capturing digital news innovation research in organizations, 1990–2018. *Journalism Studies*, 21(12), 1724–1743.
- Boczkowski, P. J. (2005). *Digitizing the news: Innovation in online newspapers*. MIT Press.
- Bossio, D., & Nelson, J. L. (2021). Reconsidering innovation: Situating and evaluating change in journalism. *Journalism Studies*, 22(11), 1377–1381, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1972328>
- Bowd, K. (2021). Re-focusing on the local: News start-ups, community engagement and social capital. *Australian Journalism Review*, 43(1), 63–79.
- Boyles, J. L. (2016). The isolation of innovation: Restructuring the digital newsroom through intrapreneurship. *Digital Journalism*, 4(2), 229–246.
- Broersma, M., & Singer, J. B. (2021). Caught between innovation and tradition: Young journalists as normative change agents in the journalistic field. *Journalism Practice*, 15(6), 821–838.
- Creech, B., & Nadler, A. M. (2018). Post-industrial fog: Reconsidering innovation in visions of journalism's future. *Journalism*, 19(2), 182–199. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884916689573>
- Ekdale, B., Singer, J. B., Tully, M., & Harmsen, S. (2015). Making change: Diffusion of technological, relational, and cultural innovation in the newsroom. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 92(4), 938–958.
- Finlay, L., & Gough, B. (2003). *Reflexivity: A practical guide for researchers in health and social sciences*. Wiley.
- García-Avilés, J. A. (2021). Journalism innovation research, a diverse and flourishing field (2000-2020). *Profesional de la Información*, 30(1), Article e300110. <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2021.ene.10>
- García-Avilés, J. A., Carvajal-Prieto, M., Arias, F., & De Lara-González, A. (2019). How journalists innovate in the newsroom. Proposing a model of the diffusion of innovations in media outlets. *The Journal of Media Innovations*, 5(1), 1–16.
- García-Avilés, J. A., Carvajal-Prieto, M., De Lara-González, A., & Arias-Robles, F. (2018). Developing an index of media innovation in a national market: The case of Spain. *Journalism Studies*, 19(1), 25–42.
- Gulyas, A., & Hess, K. (in press). The three cs of digital local journalism: Community, commitment and continuity. *Digital Journalism*.
- Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Heaton, J. (2004). *Reworking qualitative data*. SAGE.
- Heckman, M., & Wihby, J. (2019). The local-mobile paradox: Missed innovation opportunities at local newspapers. *Newspaper Research Journal*, 40(3), 317–328.
- Hess, K. (2016). Power to the virtuous? Civic culture in the changing digital terrain. *Journalism Studies*, 17(7), 925–934.
- Hess, K., & Waller, L. (2017). *Local journalism in a digital world*. Routledge.

- Jenkins, J., & Jerónimo, P. (2021). Changing the beat? Local online newsmaking in Finland, France, Germany, Portugal, and the UK. *Journalism Practice*, 15(9), 1222–1239.
- Koivula, M., Laaksonen, S. M., & Villi, M. (2022). Practical, not radical: Examining innovative learning culture in a public service media organization. *Journalism Studies*, 23(9), 1018–1036.
- Koivula, M., Villi, M., & Sivunen, A. (2020). Creativity and innovation in technology-mediated journalistic work: Mapping out enablers and constraints. *Digital Journalism*, 11(6), 906–923. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2020.1788962>
- Leberecht, T. (2013). *Back to the future: Why retro-innovation is the next big thing*. Fast Company.
- Lehtisaari, K., Villi, M., Grönlund, M., Lindén, C. G., Mierzejewska, B. I., Picard, R., & Roepnack, A. (2018). Comparing innovation and social media strategies in Scandinavian and US Newspapers. *Digital Journalism*, 6(8), 1029–1040.
- Lewis, S. C., & Usher, N. (2016). Trading zones, boundary objects, and the pursuit of news innovation: A case study of journalists and programmers. *Convergence*, 22(5), 543–560.
- Lowrey, W., Deavours, D., & Singleton, W. (2023). Agents of meta: Institutional actors in the journalism space and the innovation of local news. *Journalism*, 24(6), 1155–1173.
- Morlandstø, L. (2018). Innovation and value creation in local media. *The Journal of Media Innovations*, 5(1), 17–30.
- Oldfather, P., & West, J. (1995). Pooled case comparison: An innovation for cross-case study. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 1(4), 452–464.
- Olsen, R. K. (2022). Brukerbetaling i lokalaviser—En trussel for bruksmangfold og lokaldemokrati? In A. B. Gran & E. Røssaak (Eds.), *Mangfold i spill. Digitalisering av kultur og medier i Norge* (pp. 190–210). Universitetsforlaget.
- Olsen, R. K., & Furseth, P. I. (2023). Service innovation and value creation in local journalism during times of crisis. *Journalism Studies*, 24(4), 496–514.
- Olsen, R. K., Kalsnes, B., & Barland, J. (2021). Do small streams make a big river? Detailing the diversification of revenue streams in newspapers' transition to digital journalism businesses. *Digital Journalism*, 24(4), 496–514. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2023.2173510>
- Ots, M., & Picard, R. G. (2018). Press subsidies. In J. Nussbaum (Ed.), *Oxford research encyclopedia of communication*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.861>
- Paulussen, S. (2016). Innovation in the newsroom. In T. Witschge, C. W. Anderson, D. Domingo, & A. Hermida (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of digital journalism* (pp. 192–206). SAGE.
- Porcu, O. (2020). Exploring innovative learning culture in the newsroom. *Journalism*, 21(10), 1556–1572.
- Porcu, O., Hermans, L., & Broersma, M. (2022). Trust and fear in the newsroom: How emotions drive the exchange of innovative ideas. *Journalism Studies*, 23(9), 999–1017.
- Posetti, J. (2018). *Time to step away from the “bright, shiny things”? Towards a sustainable model of journalism innovation in an era of perpetual change* (Journalism Innovation Project 2018). Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism; University of Oxford.
- Schumpeter, J. A. (1934). *The theory of economic development: An inquiry into profits, capital, credit, interest, and the business cycle*. Harvard University Press.
- Shomoossi, N., & Ketabi, S. (2007). A critical look at the concept of authenticity. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 4(1), 149–155.
- Skogerbø, E., & Winsvold, M. (2011). Audiences on the move? Use and assessment of local print and online newspapers. *European Journal of Communication*, 26(3), 214–229.

- Steensen, S. (2009). What's stopping them? Towards a grounded theory of innovation in online journalism. *Journalism Studies*, 10(6), 821–836.
- Storsul, T., & Krumsvik, A. H. (2013). *Media innovations: A multidisciplinary study of change*. Nordicom.
- Thorne, S. (1994). *Secondary analysis in qualitative research Issues and implications: Critical issues in qualitative research methods*. SAGE.
- Trappel, J. (2015). What to study when studying media and communication innovation? Research design for the digital age. *The Journal of Media Innovations*, 2(1), 7–22.
- Usher, N. (2021). *News for the rich, white, and blue: How place and power distort American journalism*. Columbia University Press.
- van Leeuwen, T. (2001). What is authenticity? *Discourse Studies*, 3(4), 392–397.
- Villi, M., Grönlund, M., Linden, C. G., Lehtisaari, K., Mierzejewska, B., Picard, R. G., & Roepnack, A. (2020). “They’re a little bit squeezed in the middle”: Strategic challenges for innovation in US Metropolitan newspaper organisations. *Journal of Media Business Studies*, 17(1), 33–50.
- Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2019). The challenge of local news provision. *Journalism*, 20(1), 163–166. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918809281>
- Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2022). Origin stories of local journalism entrepreneurs. *Journalism*, 24(10), 2118–2135. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849221115223>
- Waschková Císařová, L. (2023). We were innovators, but we gave up: The muted digital transition of local newspapers. *Digital Journalism*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2023.2180405>
- Wilczek, B., Stanoevska-Slabeva, K., Kernbach, K., & Meckel, M. (2021). Un-locking strategic lock-ins of local media: An investigation of local media’s preferences towards public support for strategic innovation. *Digital Journalism*, 9(3), 276–299.

About the Authors



Ragnhild Kr. Olsen (PhD) holds the position of associate professor at the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Oslo Metropolitan University. Her research primarily centres around the realms of digitization and value creation within journalism, with a specific focus on local journalism. She has a keen interest in media innovation, the role of audience perspectives in shaping editorial priorities, and the effects of platformization on news media.



Kristy Hess is a professor in the School of Communication and Creative Arts at Deakin University, Australia. Her research focuses on the future of local journalism and the role of news media in geographic places beyond the metropole. She is currently leading two Australian Research Council Linkage projects examining news sustainability in a digital era.