

Jobs-to-Be-Done and Journalism Innovation: Making News More Responsive to Community Needs

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Abstract

Developing successful innovations in journalism, whether to improve the quality and reach of news or to strengthen business models, remains an elusive problem. The challenge is an existential concern for many news enterprises, particularly for smaller news outlets with limited resources. By and large, media innovation has been driven by never-ending pivots in the search for a killer solution, rather than by long-term strategic thinking. This article argues for a fresh approach to innovation built around the “jobs to be done” (JTBD) hypothesis developed by the late Clayton Christensen and typically used in business studies of innovation. However, attempts to bring the JTBD framework into the news industry have never taken hold, while scholars, too, have largely overlooked the framework in their study of journalism innovation. We argue that the JTBD approach can foster local journalism that is more responsive and relevant to the needs of local communities. It reorients journalism by focusing on identifying and addressing the underserved needs of communities, as understood by the communities themselves. It suggests that a bottom-up approach to appreciating the “jobs” that community members want done offers a model that supports both the editorial and business imperatives of local news organizations.

Keywords

audience; business; community needs; engagement; innovation; jobs to be done; journalism; management

1. Introduction

Developing innovations in journalism—whether to improve the quality and reach of news, strengthen the business model that underlies its creation and distribution, or both—remains an elusive problem for news media organizations around the world. The challenge of creating and nurturing such innovations is an

existential concern for many news enterprises. Their financial viability, particularly in the case of profit-driven imperatives but also pertinent to nonprofit settings as well, often hinges on how successful they are in discovering effective long-term strategies for engaging audiences (Nelson, 2021), generating revenue (Kuong, 2017), and adapting to fast-changing platforms and pathways for storytelling and news delivery (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022). Indeed, even the broader impact and import of journalism in contemporary media culture—a media culture marked by increasing information and entertainment choices for consumers and a diminishing agenda-setting influence for journalists—is, by some accounts, resting on whether journalists can effectively reimagine (and thus innovate) their professional practices and news products to reclaim relevance in society (Carlson et al., 2021).

Despite the pressing need for innovation in journalism, research thus far suggests a litany of failures (see discussion in Ferrucci & Perreault, 2021). Subsequent publications from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism have drawn attention to the lack of strategic innovation. In her roadmap for digital transformation, Kuong (2017, p. 23) devotes a chapter to addressing how “‘shiny new things’ are disrupting strategies, diverting attention, and adding to resource overstretch.” “The news industry has a focus problem,” Posetti (2018, p. 7) argues, showing how it “relentlessly [pursues] ‘bright, shiny things’ at the expense of core concepts such as content, business development and audiences.” This technology-centric obsession with chasing the latest trends and tools, she finds, has led to “innovation fatigue” for many journalists, and the ineffectiveness of continuous “pivots” to the latest fad is evident in how organizations across many countries have struggled to find sustainable models for supporting news provision (Posetti, 2018; see also Min & Fink, 2021). Consider, for example, how Hermida and Young (2021, p. 44) found that Canadian news media offer “no exception to the never-ending pivot in the search for the killer innovation that will save the news industry.”

Perhaps, as some have suggested, the definition of the problem is misaligned. Maybe an “overriding and celebratory focus on innovation” and its attendant emphasis on capitalism and entrepreneurship, for example, has marginalized normative considerations about journalism’s civic virtues and fundamental importance to democracy (Creech & Nadler, 2018). Or perhaps the challenge lies in the difficulty of defining and conceptualizing what “innovation” is intended to mean in the context of journalism (Lewis, 2012; Lowrey, 2012). This is particularly true given that innovation—which can refer broadly to ideas that are applied to develop new products or services—is often associated with ambiguous notions of “change” (Peters & Carlson, 2018), thereby encompassing, unhelpfully, all forms of technological evolution. As a result, innovation may appear to offer little analytical purchase as a concept.

We argue, however, that a fresh approach to innovation—what it means, how it works, and why it matters—is warranted in the study of news, media, and society. On the one hand, this is a practical concern, because the imperative for news media organizations to discover sustainable innovations for their very survival remains a vital and vexing challenge. On the other hand, this is a theoretical undertaking, because journalism scholarship to date has struggled to fully conceptualize the nature of this problem facing the news industry and what might help resolve it.

This article thus offers a conceptual intervention, one built around the “jobs-to-be-done” (JTBD) thesis developed by the late management theorist Clayton M. Christensen (see Christensen et al., 2016, for an overview) and typically used in business studies of innovation (e.g., Hankammer et al., 2019). JTBD predicts that organizations more readily innovate if they recognize that customers have “jobs” they want done in

their lives; that customers have particular needs they wish to satisfy and thus look to “hire” products and services to help them address those jobs; and that customers also “fire” those firms not fulfilling their needs-driven jobs. JTBD is therefore a radically ground-up perspective on innovation, beginning with a deep understanding of customers’ needs, rather than a more typical top-down conceptualization by the service provider about what it means to offer a compelling product. In this view, successful innovation means “identifying jobs that are poorly performed in customers’ lives and then designing products, experiences, and processes *around those jobs*” (Christensen et al., 2016, p. 52, emphasis added).

While the JTBD theory has mostly been applied to business strategy, it was once believed to hold great promise for legacy news organizations—specifically, to help them innovate in the mid-2000s during a critical period of digitalization and transformation for legacy media. Indeed, Christensen contributed to a 2006 report called *Newspaper Next*, heralded at the time as a “blueprint for transformation” for legacy media (American Press Institute, 2006). Neither that report nor later attempts to bring the JTBD framework into the news industry ever took hold, however. Additionally, scholars of journalism, too, have largely overlooked the framework in their study of innovations and transformations in journalism during the past two decades (for an overview, see Belair-Gagnon & Steinke, 2020; Cornia et al., 2017; Posetti, 2018).

In this article, we seek to offer three key contributions to the literature. First, we recover the “lost history” of JTBD in journalism, as a way of opening up paths of inquiry for the study and practice of news innovation. Second, we investigate why innovation has remained such a frustrating challenge in journalism, exploring how the contemporary “audience turn” illustrates the tensions between journalism’s professional culture and its business models that may be hindering innovative progress. Third, we bring these ideas together by developing a normative conceptualization of the JTBD hypothesis, one that respects the unique professional commitments of journalism while also acknowledging the underserved needs of communities. In this final part, we examine how a bottom-up approach to understanding the “jobs” of community members brings a novel dimension to the audience turn, offering journalists and scholars alike a way to reimagine news innovation.

Four important points of clarification are worth making at the outset. First, we are following others (Krumsvik et al., 2019; Storsul & Krumsvik, 2013; Westlund et al., 2021) in referring to innovation broadly as the development and implementation of new processes, products, or services—in this case, for improving the value proposition offered by journalism to a particular community or market (cf. Olsen & Furseth, 2023). However, the JTBD model that we describe is not equivalent to innovation, nor does it prescribe a particular type of product, service, or technology. Rather, JTBD is a shift in strategic thinking that can help news organizations discover transformative innovations by seeking to uncover unmet needs (or “jobs”) in their communities of interest. This leads to a second point. JTBD is about organizational adaptation to market-driven needs, with applicability for nonprofit news outlets and public service media as much as for-profit providers. All classes of media organizations have an obligation to learn about, engage with, and successfully grow their audiences. There is nothing inherently commercial about pursuing unmet needs in the marketplace. Third, regarding the conceptual scope of this article, while the JTBD framework largely emerged from the US and appears to have particular relevance to local news media there, it is not limited either to the American market or to local journalism. It is, as noted, a framework that originated in business studies and was intended for application across many domains and industries. Fourth, while others have called out the self-centeredness that has stymied journalists’ ability to innovate for at least 40 years

(Boczkowski & Lewis, 2018; Zelizer et al., 2021), few have offered the kind of tangible model for innovative renewal that we aspire to accomplish in this piece.

2. JTBD as a Forgotten Framework for Journalism Innovation

To understand the history of the JTBD approach, it is necessary to go back to the late 1990s and early 2000s. This period marked the early forays into online news websites by established news outlets, from *The Washington Post* in the US to *The Telegraph* in the UK (for an overview, see Stuart, 2006; for additional discussion, see Boczkowski, 2005). The development of online news coincided with the emergence of the theory of disruptive innovation in the field of business, developed by Clayton M. Christensen (1997; see also Christensen et al., 1998). Disruptive innovation theory suggests that newcomers establish a foothold by meeting the needs of an underserved or overlooked audience, usually offering a lower-end and lower-cost alternative, and then improving their offerings until they eat away at the market of existing incumbents.

The late 1990s and early 2000s were marked not just by the move to online by leading news publishers, but also by the rise of new entrants such as the Drudge Report as well as new online formats such as blogging (Stuart, 2006). In other words, disruptive media players were innovating in the way to report and deliver the news. To get a sense of the mindset of newsroom leaders at the time, Buoziš et al. (2021) offer a valuable historical perspective on industry attitudes during this period of change and transformation. They analyzed panel discussions of the American Society of Newspaper Editors hosted on C-SPAN between 1986 and 2000 as a means “for exploring how industry discourses sustain and produce institutional dynamics and prescribe possible responses to extant conditions and crises” (Buoziš et al., 2021, p. 70).

The period that Buoziš et al. examine is relevant as it spans the time before the internet to the early days of online journalism, against the context of innovation and disruption. Their analysis found debates about business models and profitability were a central theme, with tensions over the established boundaries between the editorial and business sides of newspapers. Particularly notable is the way that emerging threats to business models were equated with threats to the public value of news, with a strong seam of nostalgia for an era when journalists didn’t have to worry about money and instead could focus on the civic mission of journalism. As Buoziš et al. (2021, p. 82) describe it: “Persistent nostalgia for journalism’s past often frames business challenges as the primary threat to journalism’s public mission.” While thought leaders in the world of business were advancing novel ideas of how to address change, US newspaper editors were harkening back to a mythic golden age.

It is against this background that Christensen developed his concept of JTBD as one response to the challenges and opportunities of disruptive innovation. In a 2005 article for *Harvard Business Review*, Christensen et al. (2005, p. 76) argued that “when people find themselves needing to get a job done, they essentially hire products to do that job for them.” They cite the example of why drivers would buy milkshakes as they began their commute to work: The job of the milkshake was to break up the monotony of the drive with a product that could be held in one hand, wasn’t too messy, and would stave off hunger for a while.

Christensen’s ideas were at the core of a major initiative by a leading industry body to help the newspaper industry weather the digital transformation of media. In 2005, the American Press Institute started work on

its Newspaper Next project with a budget of USD\$2 million (Gray, 2016). The year-long project drew on Christensen's ideas of disruptive innovation, which was to be expected as the consulting firm founded by him, Innosight, was hired to work on the endeavor and was led by one of his former students. Christensen was quoted prominently at the start of the final publication:

A powerful wave of disruption is sweeping the newspaper industry, but it doesn't have to be a disaster. There are at least as many growth opportunities as threats, and companies that learn to think and act like disruptors can not only survive but prosper. (American Press Institute, 2006, p. 2)

When it was published in 2006, Newspaper Next presented itself as the solution to the woes of the US newspaper industry. It placed the JTBD concept at the core of its "blueprint for transformation" (American Press Institute, 2006). Indeed, the publication mentions JTBD 98 times in its 96 pages. The report laid out a detailed game plan for adopting the JTBD method, offering a step-by-step method and framework, as well as examples of its use by American newspapers. Peter Bhatia, then-editor of *The Oregonian* in Portland, is quoted as saying, "Newspaper Next has helped me to see that we do have a future...and that it is more in our control than the popular wisdom would have us believe" (quoted in American Press Institute, 2006, p. 1).

Following the publication of Newspaper Next, its managing editor, Steve Gray, spent the year presenting the blueprint at more than 50 daylong workshops in the US and abroad, attended by more than 5,000 people (Gray, 2016). In 2008, the American Press Institute published a follow-up report detailing 24 case studies of publications that had followed the blueprint, leading Gray to conclude that "by all signs, Newspaper Next itself was successful" (2008, p. 1). Coincidentally, 2008 was also the year when daily newspaper circulation in the US fell below 50 million for the first time since 1945 (Lowrey, 2011).

Despite the initial buzz around Newspaper Next in the US (Buttry, 2011), the JTBD model was hamstrung by the day-to-day realities of trying to innovate at a time of declining print revenues and audiences. The same year of the American Press Institute's follow-up report came the 2008 financial crash and recession, described as a "near extinction-level event" by Ellis (2011, para. 4) in his assessment of the impact of Newspaper Next. Former American Press Institute president Andrew Davis reflected that "there was enthusiasm, the embrace [of Newspaper Next], initial experimentation—then rapid and dramatic retrenchment" (quoted in Ellis, 2011, para. 5). The new hope of Newspaper Next, with its blueprint for making the leap to a better future, fell by the wayside as newspapers focused on maximizing the core print business (Buttry, 2011; Ellis, 2011). Not even a 2012 *Nieman Reports* cover story (Christensen et al., 2012) making the case for the JTBD framework seemed to have had much impact.

As much as Newspaper Next aimed to equip news organizations with a framework for renewal, the primary driving force of such businesses became the imperative of survival. Critics of the project suggested that "existing news publishers have to worry about saving jobs. They are still prisoners to a business model not of their choosing" (Little, 2017). For others, Newspaper Next did not go far enough, with Jeff Jarvis arguing that "the project seems to be trying to move a big, old barge five degrees when we need to blow up the barge and pick up the pieces and build new boats" (2006, para. 8).

The news industry in the US then was caught in a catch-22 situation that persists to this day, faced with the challenges of changing audiences and technologies at the same time as it was dealing with declines in

established revenue models. In the 2000s, digitalization was changing news production, distribution, and consumption in ways that would be accelerated by social media and mobile technology. There was a clear need for sustained and long-term investment in experimentation, based on “a blending of journalistic, technological, and commercial competencies” (Küng, 2015, p. xi), with any potential financial returns in the distant future. Yet strategic, long-term investments in resources, time, and people were and continue to be challenging for many news publishers (see, for example, McKisson & Pallack, 2021). Instead, innovation in journalism has tended to be characterized by persistent pivots, often in response to the hype about new technologies, in the pursuit of short-term returns (Hermida & Young, 2021). Numerous scholars have noted the lack of a long-term strategic approach to innovation based on audience needs (Belair-Gagnon & Steinke, 2020; Kueng, 2017).

The lost history of JTBD in industry is also reflected in the academic literature. There is no mention of Christensen or his work in Belair-Gagnon and Steinke’s (2020) overview of almost 30 years of research in journalism studies on innovation in news. They found that gatekeeping theory, convergence, journalistic roles, professionalization, and the diffusion of innovation were the main theories and concepts used in the literature. The work by Belair-Gagnon and Steinke (2020) suggests there is a blind spot in journalism studies regarding Christensen’s work. The lack of a JTBD lens in the literature may be because journalism studies journals focus on journalism as a field, whereas innovation theory may play a greater role in related fields such as media management and media economics.

3. The Audience Turn in Journalism

A potentially promising direction for innovation that connects with the JTBD framework has been the *audience turn* in journalism practice and studies (Costera Meijer, 2020). Journalists have traditionally been dismissive of audience interests (Gans, 1979), only to have become increasingly aware of, but not necessarily responsive to, audience preferences via traffic metrics as well as forms of community engagement (Nelson, 2021). The origins of this turn can be traced back to the rise of participatory journalism, which serves as an example of the tensions between journalism’s professional culture and the JTBD approach. Studies on the concept of participatory journalism, in which citizens are framed as producers as well as consumers of news, have illustrated how newsrooms have sought to maintain editorial control over key stages of the journalistic process (Peters & Witschge, 2015; Singer et al., 2011; Thomas, 2022). The critical difference with a JTBD framework is that participatory journalism is not concerned with the *purpose* of the journalism produced by a newsroom. Instead, it serves as a means of involving audiences in existing ways of being and doing, within strictly defined parameters that do not question the purpose of journalism and how adequately it addresses audience needs.

With the audience turn, rather than viewing news consumers as “problematic to journalism’s role in democracy,” practitioners are “reckoning with audiences as fundamental to keeping journalism alive as [a] constructive force in democracy” (Costera Meijer, 2020, p. 2330). Despite some resistance, the notion of being more responsive to the audience is no longer automatically criticized as leading to populism and sensationalism (Costera Meijer, 2020). The audience turn has encouraged news organizations to adopt metrics to better integrate the consumer perspective through a market logic approach that seeks to balance the normative goals of civically minded journalism with the commercial goals of financial sustainability. The significance of the audience role in everyday editorial decisions and practices surrounding news

production and distribution is debatable, given concerns over the perceived impact of tracking clicks, shares, and likes on quality journalism (Christin, 2020; Petre, 2021).

Among the number of terms used to refer to the audience turn is engaged journalism, acknowledging that there is a significant degree of ambiguity over what is engagement and how it is practiced (Robinson, 2023; Wenzel & Nelson, 2020). Engaged journalism has gained some traction “as a promising strategy to increase trust in journalism, create new revenue streams, and foster community-building” (Schmidt et al., 2022, p. 23). The relationship between engaged journalism and the JTBD framework can be understood in terms of editorial and commercial innovation. These approaches to audience-centered innovation, which in many cases are overlapping and not mutually exclusive, take on some aspects of Christensen’s ideas. But, as will be discussed, they fall short of the underlying premise of the JTBD framework.

In terms of editorial innovation, one of the key aims of engaged journalism is to improve the relationship between journalists and audiences, often by seeking to offer communities greater agency in the stories told about them (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Lawrence et al., 2018). Robinson (2023) has described a paradigm shift in the way journalists approach their audiences, as a growing number of reporters are trained to take on new roles and skill sets in listening to communities and learning alongside them, even as they also maintain longstanding roles as storytellers and watchdogs. Practitioners and scholars have coalesced around the normative concept that journalists can best serve the public by transcending their traditional role as detached decision-makers who determine what is newsworthy (Schmidt et al., 2022, p. 23). Rather, they advocate for journalists to actively collaborate with their audiences, seeking their ideas, experiences, questions, and opinions throughout the news production process.

When it comes to commercial innovation, engaged journalism has a more transactional element to it. Here lies the promise of better revenues by making its products and services more relatable to its existing and potential audiences. This ongoing shift toward a more collaborative approach with citizens (Robinson, 2023) has inspired practitioners to reimagine new strategies to stimulate business while simultaneously encouraging audience participation. The greater focus on audiences and their interests in the news industry has been, in part, driven by a business imperative, particularly as many news organizations have become more reliant on reader revenue than traditional advertising over the past decade (Benson, 2019; Newman et al., 2023). In response to the shift toward subscription and membership models in the news industry, editors have adjusted engagement strategies to build loyalty and increase subscriptions (Neilson & Gibson, 2022). However, digital-based revenues, for the most part, remain quite low in comparison to previous times (Chyi & Ng, 2020), and there is a significant imbalance across the industry in generating reader revenue (Newman et al., 2023).

As an innovation framework, the audience turn, be it as engaged journalism or other forms of participation, shares some commonalities with the JTBD approach. Both seek to build better relations with audiences and better understand their needs. But there are some significant differences. A study of audience-centered innovation in media companies in 30 European countries concluded that “in most cases they do not allow participation of users in the content- and business-related decision making” (Nenadić & Ostling, 2018, p. 19). In other words, audience-centered approaches tend to consider how to involve publics in existing (rather than new) journalistic ways of thinking and being.

A JTBD approach asks a more fundamental question about what kinds of journalism are needed to help publics live better lives, based on audiences' needs and priorities, rather than those of a newsroom. Brown and Groves (2021, p. 5) argue that this involves breaking away from a gatekeeper mindset, highlighting that "instead of a product-first mentality, news organizations must start by thinking of their audiences at the initial development stage of any new product or service." While audience approaches encompass both editorial and commercial innovation, they are still primarily oriented around the informational needs of citizens as defined by journalists. By comparison, a JTBD approach is oriented toward the specific needs of citizens to resolve distinct problems that may represent a wider set of tasks. The audience turn, therefore, falls short of the audience-first approach at the core of the JTBD thesis.

4. Resistance and Opportunity

In this fourth section, we argue that a normative conceptualization of the JTBD hypothesis that respects the unique professional commitments of journalism while also acknowledging the underserved needs of communities provides a way to advance discourses around media, innovation, and audiences. To do this, we identify what we term *zones of resistance* and *zones of opportunity*. By this, we mean the factors that hinder the JTBD approach and those that encourage its spread and growth.

4.1. Zones of Resistance

There are three main zones of resistance to a JTBD orientation, namely resources, mindset, and culture. While they will be discussed individually, it is clear that they overlap and often buttress and reinforce each other. Resources, in the shape of money, expertise, and time, are essential for any innovation project to develop, launch, and grow (Kueng, 2020a). The history of the Newspaper Next initiative offers valuable lessons on how resources—or, rather, the lack of them—can serve to choke and eventually kill off innovation. News publishers were hamstrung by the need to generate new revenues quickly, even though projects required time to grow and flourish (Gray, 2008). At the same time, they were limited by a lack of business expertise, leading to a dependence on existing print sales staff to sell digital products and services (Gray, 2008, p. 2). The lessons from the Newspaper Next foray into JTBD highlight the need for a commitment to innovation, which leads to mindset.

Mindset, or the established set of attitudes held by people, is the second potential zone of resistance. The significance of people's mindsets has been theorized in the context of the network society, with Castells (2007) arguing that audiences have appropriated digital media technologies to create what he calls new forms of mass self-communication. The question is how far professional mindsets have changed to take account of Castells' "new form of societal communication," which he describes as "self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception" (2007, p. 248).

Mindset has been addressed in relation to journalism innovation (Gynnild, 2014), entrepreneurial journalism (Caplan et al., 2020), and the practice of mobile journalism (Salzmann et al., 2023). A mindset of resistance harkens back to the notion of journalism's vital role in democratic societies, forming part of the discourse on how to rebuild journalism in the US (Downie & Schudson, 2009). The information provided by journalists is framed "as vital to the healthy functioning of communities as clean air, safe streets, good schools and public health" (The Knight Commission, 2009, p. XIII), even if the public does not see it as essential as journalists do

(Newman et al., 2021). After almost 30 years of online journalism, “a mass media mindset persists” that shapes how journalists, editors, and executives approach innovation (Kueng, 2020b, p. 12).

The past three decades of journalism innovation have been marked by a mindset of isomorphism, short-termism, and pivots to the latest shiny thing (Hermida & Young, 2021; Lowrey, 2011), leading to calls for a “reconceptualised journalist” (Royle, 2023, p. 126), or one who can blend skillset and mindset in reimagining journalism and its future even while being able to execute it in the present. The need for a different mindset in newsrooms is consistent in studies by Kueng (2017, 2020a), described by a news executive as “getting people to ask the right questions instead of just telling them how to push a button” (Kueng, 2017, p. 33). Asking the right questions is at the core of the JTBD approach, and is premised on a mindset open to change, uncertainty, and risk.

To be able to ask the right questions requires a newsroom culture that encourages and rewards such actions. Culture emerges as the single most significant zone of resistance to the adoption of new ideas and practices. The culture of an organization delineates a set of shared assumptions about how to address challenges and opportunities. Arguably, the core challenge for innovation in newsrooms is that the cultural values developed during a particular time in journalism are still being used in a new era (Kueng, 2020a). In their blueprint for digital transformation, Brown and Groves (2021) highlight how culture has stood in the way between intent and execution, despite a prevailing mantra of “digital first.”

The JTBD hypothesis is at odds with widely held cultural values of editorial independence and autonomy. Part of that resistance may be due to the business school origins of JTBD as well as its associations with entrepreneurship and free-market capitalism. It may simply be too utilitarian an approach, one that treats news as a *product* that is responsive to the needs and demands of *consumers*, rather than speaking to the public service ethos of journalism (Mari, 2015; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1991). Joseph Pulitzer (1904) himself opposed teaching anything about the business of newspapers; he argued that schools of journalism should be “anti-commercial,” as he saw “journalism not only as a profession, but as the noblest of all professions” (p. 655). More than 100 years later, attitudes toward the divide between editorial and business have started to narrow, though arguably not far enough as proponents of the JTBD hypothesis have suggested they should (Christensen et al., 2012).

4.2. Zones of Opportunity

Conversely, there are three main zones of opportunity for a JTBD orientation, namely a ground-up embrace of community needs, a product orientation in news work, and a renewed sense of purpose for journalism—each of these representing significant potential for innovation and improvement moving forward. As above, these will be discussed individually but should be understood as overlapping and mutually reinforcing dimensions.

The first zone of opportunity—a radical, bottom-up reorientation around community needs by news providers—builds most clearly on the work of engaged journalism, which Robinson (2022, para. 3) describes as a wholesale “industry transformation away from traditional top-down, official-dominant, binary he-said-she-said reporting of the news.” This transformation, she argues, is at least 15 years in the making, and has accelerated in recent years because foundations, think tanks, and other journalism-adjacent organizations “have embarked on a massive, cohesive reporter retraining throughout the United States [and

elsewhere] toward rethinking what journalism is and who it is for” (para. 4). This training is beginning to bear fruit in strategies that range from news outlets being more transparent about reporting processes and ethical decision-making (a rather easy effort) to inviting community members to directly collaborate on content production (a considerably harder step; Robinson, 2022). It’s unclear if these engagement initiatives will succeed in fostering greater trust in journalism, nor if they will be attempted half-heartedly or in full by the news organizations that try them, but what they suggest is that journalists still have much to learn about grounding their work in community needs from the get-go.

Indeed, from a JTBD perspective, news organizations have an opportunity to do something that, to this point, has never come naturally for them: to *start* their work from a community-centric standpoint, beginning with a deep understanding of audience needs and then letting their work flow from there, rather than *finishing*, as they so often do, with community considerations as an add-on to pre-designed, pre-templated forms of journalism. A first step toward developing this JTBD orientation to community needs would be to build up journalistic capacities in “listening literacies,” which Robinson et al. (2021) have characterized as trust-building strategies relevant for journalists and members of the public alike. Even more, though, news organizations need to learn to listen in ways that can inform the design and development of new information products and services that directly respond to unmet needs in the community.

This product orientation, built around deep listening and design-thinking sensibilities (Dimitrakopoulou & Lewis, 2023), is the second zone of opportunity. It refers to the need for journalism, as several have argued recently (Kiesow, 2023; Royal et al., 2020), to take inspiration from product management sensibilities and techniques drawn from the software development field: to recognize that journalism and its outputs can be reimagined if understood as products that must be designed for and made responsive to user experience. Product management includes a number of elements that can feel more like business than journalism—e.g., “product strategy, prioritization of activities, execution of deliverables, testing, benchmarks, and analytics with a focus on the integration of user, business, and technology”—and so the turn toward product management in newsrooms can “turn many journalists off” (Royal et al., 2020, pp. 599–600; see also Kiesow, 2023). Nevertheless, for JTBD to be accomplished in journalism, it requires situating a product orientation at the core, making journalism “a space where reporting teams innovate and solve problems through new technologies, workflows, and ethical challenges—where ‘product’ is no longer nefarious but the future” (Royal et al., 2020, p. 601). In that future, communities and their problems are made paramount, and then products and services are designed to address those needs, with a radical openness for discovery.

Such openness is vital to the third and final zone of opportunity: a chance to reconsider what journalism is *for* in the first place, as a means of reinvigorating its role and purpose in society. Journalism, of course, serves vital functions in supporting democracy and public life: “By distilling complex ideas, holding the powerful to account, and revealing hidden realities, journalists play a crucial role in helping audiences make sense of the world,” as Powers and Vera-Zambrano (2023) argue. And yet, in the next breath they acknowledge:

Experiences in the profession, though, are often far more disappointing. Many [journalists] find themselves doing tasks that bear little relation to what attracted them initially or are frustrated by institutions privileging what sells over what informs. The imbalance between the profession’s economic woes and its social importance threatens to erode individuals’ beliefs that journalism remains a worthwhile pursuit. (Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2023)

Journalism, in this sense, is a profession seemingly adrift—necessary for society, yes, but hardly appreciated as it once was, and on an increasingly shaky footing socially and economically. What journalists need, at least in part, is a renewed sense of purpose: a fresh understanding of their work’s intrinsic meaning and impact. A JTBD orientation can help in this regard. Journalists, by taking a jobs-first approach, can see that the traditional top-down view of journalism’s importance to society is valuable but blinkered because it fails to account for a broader, bottom-up view of what news and information could do and become for people. This revitalized view of journalism would enable news organizations to see their work in a new light: as the means not only of holding power to account or providing information about politics, but also in facilitating the informational resources that help people enjoy a fuller, richer life—the “good life” that is the ultimate normative goal (cf. Vorderer, 2016).

5. Conclusion

Almost 20 years after Christensen et al. (2005) advanced the concept of the JTBD, it is time for a reimagining that can help to guide innovation and growth in the news industry. Our aim here is not to foist a solution on scholars and practitioners that will solve all the woes of journalism. Instead, it is to generate a discussion on how the jobs approach can help to foster journalism—particularly at the local level—that is more responsive and relevant to the needs of local communities. The enthusiasm among some about JTBD in the early 2010s was tempered by the realities of falling print revenues and fragmenting audiences. More broadly, we suggest that it may have been too much of a corporate and utilitarian approach, one seemingly at odds with journalism’s presumed noble mission. In such a view, JTBD forces journalism values and practices to contort to suit the needs of the market, and thereby overlooks the important social and civic roles and responsibilities of journalism, ones that transcend market imperatives alone.

However, we argue that this assumption about JTBD and its failed implementation by news organizations is too narrow an interpretation, and it limits the thinking around the framework’s potential for journalism’s reinvention. The core of JTBD is an understanding of the needs of people, through carefully identifying their problems and challenges, and exploring how these can be alleviated. For journalism, this means identifying and meeting the needs of communities—as defined by communities themselves, rather than journalists—and then responding to these needs to help people live better lives. Here we draw from Brown and Groves, who argue that “organizations must identify their audience’s communication ‘JTBD’—whether advertising or editorial or a new adjacent-possible hybrid—and satisfy those needs when, where, and how the audience wants them satisfied” (2021, p. 98). JTBD, in this light, need not be seen as a purely capitalist pursuit, or dismissed as merely a marketing ploy. Rather, it’s about recognizing that journalism does not exist without an audience, and that for journalism to maintain and grow its audience in the future, it will need a firmer grasp on what “job” could and should be fulfilled for those audiences.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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