

Conceptualizing and Contextualizing Media Innovation and Change

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Abstract

An innovation and change discourse has become central in journalism studies scholarship concerned with highlighting solutions to the many challenges confronting media in the digital era. Although with good intentions, these debates have been predominantly technocentric in their imagination of media’s future, inadvertently directing its development towards a preoccupation with mastering digital technologies. On the one hand, media have strategically appropriated and exploited such technocentric discourse to position themselves within the field as leaders with considerable prestige and status. On the other hand, however, journalists and media professionals have approached technological innovation with caution, demonstrating innovation to be a gradual process with incremental changes that need to align with or reimagine practices that support journalism’s core ambitions and public service ideals. Drawing on the scholarly work of colleagues included in this thematic issue, in this editorial we conceptualize media innovation as a fuzzy and contested concept and call for an expanded research agenda that redirects our attention more firmly towards: exploring organisational and institutional innovation; considering the role of ancillary organisations, collaborative projects, and the various newly emerging innovative actors within and outside of the journalistic field; adopting bottom-up approaches to examine societal innovation and its public value and scrutinize questions around who benefits from change; and finally, paying more attention to the transnational as well as culture-specific contexts in which media innovations happens.

Keywords

innovation discourse; journalistic change; media change; media innovation; technocentrism

1. Introduction: Innovation Beyond Technology

Media innovation entails change, but not every change is considered innovation. Innovation refers to introducing something “new and improved” to an industry, but what counts as “new” and—perhaps more urgently—as “improved” within the field of journalism or media more broadly, is very much up for debate (Steensen, 2009). Is a membership model to fund journalism something new or just different semantics for a traditional subscription-based business model? And what makes this new model better? Are new practices of engaging with audiences inherently innovative because they draw on new technologies, or rather are they the evolution of earlier traditions of media houses soliciting audience feedback?

As the studies in this issue show, such enquiries have been pronounced within journalism studies where debates have focused on two closely related questions: In the face of challenges to the news industry’s business model, should journalism hold on to its core practices and forms, and simply create an alternative revenue model and find new ways of distributing content? Or, rather, should journalism’s professional practice and the type of output (also) change?

These questions underscore the lack of a clear diagnosis as to which aspects of media need to change and in which domains media need to prioritize innovation. Over a decade ago, Storsul and Krumsvik (2013) offered a typology to structure this uncertainty, capturing different types of media innovation and influences affecting these, ranging from technology to (professional) culture and society. They differentiate between product innovation (e.g., new apps for media consumption), process innovation (e.g., how media outlets organize their work), position innovation (e.g., how media position their products within the market), paradigmatic innovation (e.g., changes to mindsets, business models, and core values), and social innovation (e.g., changes to meet societal needs).

While this typology offers an array of potential avenues for change, a techno-centric perspective has continued to dominate discussions of journalistic and media innovation. This has resulted in an overemphasis on product innovation within media industries and within academic discussions about innovation, leading to the implementation of innovation within a narrow socio-technical imaginary centred on “mastering” digital technologies (Harbers, 2023), and a skewed picture of what media innovation entails. The studies in this issue from Christopher Buschow and Maike Suhr (2024), Carolina Escudero (2024), and François Nel and Kamila Rymajdo (2024), however, expand our aperture from product innovation towards other facets of change. By focusing on the changing ways journalists structure and arrange their work on the institutional and organisational level (process innovation), or examining how journalistic innovations cater to social and societal needs (social innovation), we gain important insights into how media have been developing, even while our focus has been directed elsewhere. Buschow and Suhr (2024) take up this opportunity by conceptualizing the different levels of organizational innovation and formulating a research agenda to further develop organizational innovation as a research object. Escudero (2024) shows how so-called “self-managed media” prioritize societal values, thus engaging in social innovation in Argentina, while Nel and Rymajdo (2024) examine the drivers of change affecting the provision of trustworthy public-interest news in the UK.

While too much attention on technology can hinder our understanding of innovation, this is not to say that it plays an unimportant role. Rather, our call for a more expansive research agenda reinforces the need to

devote more attention to the way technologies and practices mutually influence one another. Rather than prioritizing technologies themselves, we echo Bruns' (2014) argument about the importance of considering technology in relation to practices as it simply takes time for media institutions to adapt their practices to exploit the affordances of new technologies. The interrelationship between technological introduction and practical change has been addressed elsewhere, including by Carlson (2015) who argues that to expect a quick and smooth implementation of new technology within the field of journalism, as one locus of media change, vastly underestimates the complexity of how journalism as a practice develops. Introducing and adopting new technologies means reimagining journalism's self-identity in a way that allows technology and practice to be aligned with each other.

Difan Guo, Haiyan Wang, and Jinghong Xu (2024) demonstrate this in their study of traditional news media in China adopting social media. They show social media presented traditional media with the challenge of negotiating the development of new participatory practices with their established societal roles and professional values. Drawing our attention to the interplay between institutional status and innovative change, they illustrate how, by innovating, Chinese media have been able to (re-)consolidate their status and power.

2. Negotiating the Understanding and Value(s) of Innovation

Acknowledging this variety in the aspects of media that have been subject to innovation beyond technology broadens our perspective on what type of changes and developments are captured with the term media innovation. Yet, what “new and improved” exactly refers to remains unsettled. Rather than trying to pinpoint how to define innovation—let alone prioritize what aspects of media need to change—we argue media innovation is an inherently fuzzy notion. By acknowledging this fuzziness, we can better appreciate and elucidate the many ways innovation has been understood and approached.

The lack of consensus as to what media innovation is and what exactly it entails cannot be separated from the specific media contexts used as frames of reference. Whether someone works for a newspaper in the US, a public broadcaster in the Netherlands, or a digital native journalistic startup in Croatia, each context affects how they understand journalism. Both more productively and urgently, we should consider these contexts within studies that assess media performance and envision their innovative future. This allows us to better weigh the societal influences shaping how innovation is defined and what types of change are labelled “innovative” and why.

Nevertheless, innovation has become something of a buzzword that is invoked casually, and repeatedly, when talking about the future of media and journalism in particular. This has been a throughline in the litany of challenges that media and journalism are facing in the digital era (Bélair-Gagnon & Steinke, 2021; Garcia-Aviles, 2021; Küng, 2013), where innovation is commonly presented as an antidote to whatever ailments media have been diagnosed with. Particularly with regard to journalism, innovation makes a rather utopian promise of bringing about a future in which journalism thrives again (Bossio & Nelson, 2021); a promise echoed in the influence of “ancillary organizations” outside journalism itself, including professional associations, innovation labs and hubs, incubator and accelerator programs, and funding agencies, which encourage and foster journalistic innovation by providing information, resources, training, and support for innovative journalistic actors and new initiatives (Lowrey et al., 2019). Embracing innovation is promised to

solve the lack of a sustainable business model, news media's inability to appeal to a digitally native generation of news consumers, or the declining authority of journalism in a "post-truth" society.

Despite the clamour for innovative approaches, research continues to show apprehension among the media. For different reasons, news media are changing very gradually and often reluctantly, and journalists are hesitant to embrace innovation as a way forward for the industry (Ferrucci & Perreault, 2021; Hendrickx & Picone, 2020). Some scholars see this resistance to innovation as a nostalgic knee-jerk response to change as a perceived threat (Kleis Nielsen, 2019; Singer, 2014). We argue that these responses (and hesitance) should not be regarded as a rejection of innovation per se, but rather a resistance to a specific understanding of innovation; a resistance that underscores the way the prevailing narrative of technological change undermines a more complex reality, where innovation needs to be considered alongside social practice. As Jane B. Singer (2024) argues compellingly in her commentary in this issue, those involved in implementing change need to wrestle not only with incorporating the new, but in "giving up" the old. To do so effectively, she argues, requires deploying those tools that support journalism's core ambitions.

This draws our attention back to understanding innovation as a contested concept, involved in a process of ongoing negotiation. This is clearly illustrated by Ragnhild Olsen and Kristy Hess (2024), who show local newsrooms pushing back against a techno-centric and market-driven understanding of innovation when this collides with their public service ideals. These newsrooms conceive of journalistic innovation in the gradual incremental changes achieved by "a combination of copying, modifying and translating already existing services to meet local audiences' (new) needs" (Olsen & Hess, 2024, p. 9). Similarly, Seth C. Lewis, Alfred Hermida, and Samantha Lorenzo (2024) outline a conceptual intervention and bottom-up approach to journalistic innovation through the "jobs to be done" hypothesis which posits that organisations innovate more readily in response to recognisable "jobs" or needs of their customers. Applied to journalism, the authors argue, the approach can help local journalism better identify and address the needs of underserved communities. Such pushback to the dominant techno-centric discourse on journalistic innovation shows that the meaning of innovation cannot be taken for granted as it is understood in divergent ways. This divergence of understanding becomes all the more apparent when considering the relative power audiences have amassed as a "discursive institution" that can engage within technologically driven feedback loops to respond to media changes (Banjac, 2022).

All this shows, as Godin (2015) has convincingly argued, that innovation is not a neutral, descriptive term, but a value-driven concept, whose meaning is performatively established and discursively naturalized. Consequently, how innovation is understood, constrains the directions in which media develop as it shapes the way their future is envisioned. In his article on the role of venture philanthropy in local news in the US, Brian Creech (2024) illustrates this in an insightful case. He analyses the influence of venture capital and philanthropic organizations on prevailing understandings of innovation, and how this affects the way local journalism is being reshaped according to a market logic. Creech argues that these organizations are "seeding entrepreneurial ideologies across the journalism field" (Creech, 2024, p. 2), highlighting the influence such "ancillary organizations" have had in their intermediary role as providing support and/or funding for journalistic innovation (Lowrey et al., 2019). The ample resources they distribute provide them with significant power, shaping what journalism will look like in the future.

Annika Richterich (2024) draws this thread further. In critiquing the focus on “technological solutionism” within a prominent design thinking discourse on innovation, she shows where this way of understanding innovation has become increasingly popular in recent years within textbooks and practical guides. Through an in-depth analysis of such design thinking literature, she reveals how “complex interrelations between innovation and social change are causally simplified,” driving a corporate and market-driven understanding of innovation that disregards “normative questions of innovation, (in-)equality, privilege, and social change” (Richterich, 2024, p. 1).

3. (Intermediary) Actors and Interlopers

Underlining these conversations about scarcity and the unequal distribution of resources available to support media innovation, including from venture capitalists and well-funded intermediaries, have been definitional struggles; not only over how innovation should be understood or where it should be focused, but also who has a vested stake in these definitional negotiations. The outcomes of these debates are not insignificant, nor merely questions of financial resources. Rather, those media deemed (potentially) “innovative” are granted a label that affords them significant prestige, and symbolic as well as societal resources that reinforce this status. For these reasons, we see innovation as a notion and a term that is being strategically exploited by actors in their attempt to gain or maintain a prominent position within the media field.

This struggle plays out not only between “traditional” journalistic actors but also in the way non-traditional actors at the periphery of the field have come to occupy an increasingly important role in expanding the discourse on and implementation of journalistic innovation by showing how prevailing norms and values can be adopted and adapted by new, interloping actors (Eldridge, 2018). Ana Milojevic and Leif Ove Larsen (2024) take such a starting point in their study of media-tech companies within the Norwegian media innovation cluster Media City Bergen where “implicit interlopers” who “contribute to journalism without challenging its authority” demonstrate influence in the way journalistic innovation has been pursued (Milojevic & Larsen, p. 4). Their findings point to the accidental nature of innovation, found within the “interplay between internal and external sources of innovation” (p. 14).

We see a similar throughline in the article from Allie Kosterich and Cindy Royal (2024), who focus on the role of product managers within journalistic organizations as a recently emerged job description for individuals who serve as “a locus of change” within these outlets. Focused on evaluating and introducing new journalistic products to cater to the changing needs of news audiences, product managers act as “institutional arbitrageurs” mediating and reconciling competing logics (journalistic, economic, and technological). Giordano Zambelli and Luciano Morganti (2024) point to similar ideas in their article on inter-firm collaboration aimed at fostering media innovation. They show that collaborative projects offer media practitioners and managers a “temporary framework” within which they can go on fulfilling their everyday demands for media production while engaging in knowledge exchange and exploration.

4. The Need for More Transnational and Comparative Research

While discourses on innovation convey an image of innovation as a universal antidote to the issues societally invested media are grappling with, the collection of scholarship in this issue points to the unruly and vastly complex reality of conceptualizing, envisioning, and implementing change. We can see here that innovation is

a constant negotiation of competing goals, interests, and values between different actors within and outside of journalism.

The supportive and obstructive factors in journalistic innovation that Klaus Meier et al. (2024) highlight in their comparative study of journalistic innovation in Austria, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, and the UK between 2010 and 2020 underscore this complexity. By considering these dynamics on a transnational scope and scale, they show that successfully implementing innovations relies on the interplay between external drivers, such as “technology, societal change, and change in the digital media universe,” and internal factors such as professional culture, and other “common obstacles” pertaining to everyday working culture (p. 1). Their study underlines the need for a stronger transnational perspective on innovation to better address the similarities and differences in drivers and impediments of journalistic innovation, but also, as the authors note almost in passing, because transnational research shows that “not all innovations are understood in journalism practice in the same way or applied homogeneously in each news market” (p. 14).

5. Conclusion

In closing, we return to our initial concern about the lack of a broadly shared and clear definition of what innovation entails. Innovation is a contested notion that is defined and envisioned differently depending on the underlying aims, values, and conceptions, as well as the institutional structure and organization of the field supporting it. In our continued attempts to define what journalistic innovation means and entails, what makes media change innovative, and how the future of journalism is envisioned, it is imperative that we remain mindful of the unique transnational and cultural contexts in which innovation is imagined and materializes. By scrutinizing these differences, we hope to better understand how they are shaping our study of innovation in media and journalism.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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