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EDITORIAL

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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 technologic). 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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ARTICLE

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Venture Philanthropy, Local News, and the Murky Promise of Innovation

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Abstract

As local news has grown as a research and policy concern, venture philanthropy organizations, like the Google News Initiative, Meta Journalism Project, and American Journalism Project, have forwarded a capacious vision of innovation as offering a broad set of revenue-based solutions to local news' crises. This article analyzes materials produced by these organizations as a form of metajournalistic discourse to understand how venture philanthropists' focus on local news and innovation buttresses their authority to intervene in journalistic cultures and articulate visions for the future. Venture philanthropy organizations have claimed a broad and granular authority to define the directions of local journalism's future, recursively justifying their role as stewards of tech industry largesse by declaring which problems, practices, and innovations are worthy of investment and attention.

Keywords

American Journalism Project; Facebook journalism; Google News Initiative; local news; Meta Journalism Project; metajournalistic discourse; venture philanthropy

1. Introduction

In the middle of the summer of 2023, as news industry leaders, university instructors, and media commentators debated the cultural and economic consequences of artificial intelligence, the American Journalism Project, the venture philanthropy organization focused on building financially sustainable news organizations by encouraging business, technological, and cultural innovation, announced that it would be working in partnership with OpenAI, the company behind generative AI products like ChatGPT, to deliver

funding that would encourage innovative, and hopefully profitable, uses of AI tools in local newsrooms (Fischer, 2023).

Though OpenAI's total gift of $10 million was much smaller than other recent high-profile donations from Meta and Google (Creech & Parks, 2022), it typifies a moment where an ascendant American technology company stands poised to disrupt the news industry, but also attempts to alleviate this disruption with philanthropy that brings its technologies closer into newsroom culture. The words of American Journalism Project CEO Sarabeth Berman distill the context in which such gifts exist:

> In these early days of generative AI, we have the opportunity to ensure that local news organizations, and their communities, are involved in shaping its implications. With this partnership, we aim to promote ways for AI to enhance—rather than imperil—journalism. (Ropek, 2023, para. 3)

Berman's words nod to trends of technological change and financial decimation of local news, but also draw attention to the way that venture philanthropists have been positioning themselves as brokering solutions that bring tech industry-driven innovation to local news organizations.

Berman not only cedes that a future driven by AI is perhaps inevitable, she also implicitly centers the American Journalism Project as a responsible steward of journalism in that future. The declining state of local news has been an urgent issue of policy and research concern for many years, and given this context, Berman and the American Journalism Project are an example of a larger ecology of venture philanthropy organizations, often supported by tech industry largesse, that have coalesced around the crises of local news. From the Google News Initiative and Meta Journalism Project (previously Facebook Journalism Project) to more overtly journalism-focused foundations like the Knight Foundation, American Journalism Project, and the Lenfest Institute for Journalism, venture philanthropy organizations wield a rapidly growing influence over journalism and its professional cultures.

As these organizations construct crises in local news as an opportunity for publicly-centered innovation, they often forward projects to revitalize local journalism as a market good, revealing themselves, in part, as actors seeding entrepreneurial ideologies across the journalism field (Creech & Parks, 2022). This article interrogates the discursive aspects of venture philanthropists' influence, specifically how recent focus on local news has abetted an expansive and flexible notion of innovation that has created a broad space for venture philanthropy organizations within the journalism field. Aside from making grants, these organizations also produce significant discourse about journalism, laden with assumptions about what the future of news should be. By leveraging financial and discursive capital around the crisis in local news, these organizations promote their own role as arbiters of change in the industry.

2. Literature and Theory

2.1. Venture Philanthropists in the Journalism Field

As the Berman quote in Section 1 demonstrates, venture philanthropy organizations exercise their influence partially via discourse, much like other institutions seeking to influence the field of journalism (Carlson & Lewis, 2015; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017; Ryfe, 2016). Debates about changes in journalism are often driven by

access to resources, prestige, and influence, areas that are particularly amenable to venture philanthropy's influence (Carlson, 2016). As technology companies have become imbricated in journalism's culture via philanthropy, venture philanthropy projects are often accompanied by discursive framings that conflate challenges to journalism's market value and public value (Creech & Nadler, 2018; Creech & Parks, 2022; Russell & Vos, 2022).

Though there is a robust history of public media relying on philanthropy, philanthropic funders have played an increasing role in shifting norms and practices in journalism over the past decade (Konieczna, 2018), but their role as discursive actors and change agents has remained murky (Konieczna, 2022). To understand the cultural and ideological impact of venture philanthropy, it is important to understand how venture philanthropy operates as a specific kind of giving, often with large sums of money overtly deployed to incentivize news organizations to better respond to market imperatives, usually under the guise of economic sustainability (Creech & Parks, 2022). As in other areas of civic and public life, venture philanthropy in journalism is often pursued with an overt ideological mission to bend public goods to market logics (Moody, 2008). Critics of venture philanthropy see it as a way of asserting the social power of the financial elite to orient civil society toward their own visions (J. Scott, 2009; Williamson, 2018). In the case of journalism, the growth of venture philanthropy also marks the expansion of the tech industry's influence over journalism and public life, largely through acts of beneficence and largesse (Russell & Vos, 2022).

As news organizations have faced myriad crises, the collection of institutions seeking to influence the field of journalism and chart its future has also grown, with philanthropic funding acting as one means of influence available to external actors (Lewis, 2012; Reese, 2020). As others have noted, this influence often circulates through funding networks, where a cohesive vision may emanate from one organization, but begin to cohere into common sense as they are taken up by related organizations (Lowrey, Deavours, & Singleton, 2023). This dynamic is especially visible among the philanthropy-funded projects aimed at supporting local journalism, where funders and regional-scale organizations play an important role in articulating industry-wide shifts to local actors (Lowrey, Macklin, & Usery, 2023). Accounting for the role these organizations play as change agents and financial actors is important, especially when ideals obscure newsroom realities (Ferrucci & Nelson, 2019; M. Scott et al., 2019).

Venture philanthropists exist in the tension between innovation as an ideal and the realities that make the uptake of certain innovations impractical or unrealistic. As critics of innovation note, a focus on technological and market-centric innovations overlooks both cultural change and journalism's role within society at large (Bossio & Nelson, 2021). As the following analysis shows, though, venture philanthropy organizations often deploy an expansive notion of innovation to bolster their authority to describe and dictate how others might respond to change, often echoing an entrepreneurial ideology that has proliferated in the field (Cohen, 2015; Luengo, 2014). Furthermore, philanthropic funding usually reflects prevailing ideological trends and changing understandings about the role of private enterprise and American society (Arnove & Pinede, 2007), and journalism is no exception (Browne, 2010).

2.2. Venture Philanthropy in Innovation Discourse

Much of the discourse around venture philanthropy leverages an ongoing focus on—and ambivalence about—innovation in journalism. Whereas innovation and change at one point connoted economic

possibility through technological development, the language around innovation has become more measured over time but has also continued to firmly diagnose a need for change in journalism's professional cultures (Quandt, 2023). Innovation often acts as a framework for evaluating interventions in organizational structure and professional practice, justifying the presence of a range of new actors in the field (García-Avilés, 2021). As a concept and discursive category, innovation is rhetorically potent in part because of its ambiguity, placing normative value around the need for the journalism industry to intuit economic change as a driving value (Belair-Gagnon & Steinke, 2020).

In practice, innovation is often not as determinative as proponents and critics might suggest. As Singer and Broersma (2020) show, even as news workers and journalism students accept change, the urge to innovate is often synthesized within the bounds of established practice. Innovation discourse is laced through with expectations for how change might be achieved, but because of the documented difficulties in changing journalistic cultures, that change is often tightly focused on the uptake of new technologies, partly because the practical integration of new technologies into news' routines is easier to achieve than cultural change within journalism (Broersma & Singer, 2021). However, the costs of innovation are clear to those who work in the field, as journalists intuit that the kinds of innovations celebrated in the field "would need a new workforce" to take root, "which would come at the expense of the historical knowledge and long-earned professional culture that is fundamental to the industry today" (Ferrucci & Perreault, 2021, p. 1443).

Such is the context venture philanthropy has emerged within, offering interventions into journalism's professional culture in response to a somewhat different set of crises. As Carlson and Lewis (2019, p. 648) note, much of the discourse around change in journalism creates explicit space for new actors in the field, at times shielding them from critique or deeper inquiry. A superficial focus on change may push researchers and commentators alike to "unknowingly mirror the cycles of optimism and future-orientation" found among innovation's most ardent advocates. Still, change, especially in response to crisis, possesses a normative urgency upstart actors like venture philanthropists might use to justify their growing place in the field.

2.3. Crises in Local News

In recent years, academic and foundation-funded researchers have dedicated ample resources to producing knowledge about the state of local news and its potential futures, concluding that large swaths of the US are now news deserts left underserved by contraction in the news industry (Abernathy, 2023). The notion that many communities lack robust local coverage is a powerful one, animating much research into the consequences of local news' decline and setting an agenda for a better understanding of the practices and funding that might fill the void (Finneman et al., 2022; Mathews, 2022). As this research clarifies the problems facing local news, it offers a substantive point of intervention for organizations outside of journalism to engage with (Forman, 2021; Hendrickson, 2019).

At the same time, the local news crisis also provides a locus for normative discourses about journalism and its role in community life to circulate, discourses that often do not fully acknowledge an implicit idealism in much of the writing and thinking about local news (Usher, 2023). As Pickard (2019) argues, various crises of local news are symptomatic of a broader market failure, and while focused interventions are welcome and useful in a variety of contexts, they do not have the capacity to address significant, systemic problems. And yet, such is the nature of the crisis in the field of journalism—it crystallizes attention by framing a complex

array of interrelated problems as embodied in a particular flashpoint that lends ideological credence to actors proposing solutions (Zelizer, 2015).

This is not to say that the well-substantiated problems facing local news are not as severe as others have documented. However, the urgency, reality, and complexity of these crises invite various actors to define how news leaders and outside organizations alike should respond. The act of defining problems in the field is ultimately an embodiment of discursive power, especially as ideas about the local news crisis and its potential solutions mobilize human, technical, and financial resources (Carlson, 2016). Looking at how venture philanthropy organizations define and respond to crises in local news offers a means for understanding how they wield their nascent influence in the field.

3. Methodology

To understand the values and ideology that circulate via venture philanthropic framings of crises in local news, this project traced the metajournalistic discourse (Carlson, 2016) evident in texts produced by venture philanthropy organizations themselves. Projects overtly connected to Silicon Valley companies, like the Google News Initiative and the Meta Journalism Project, often act alongside intermediaries like the Knight Foundation and American Journalism Project to produce discursive material that coheres into a field of knowledge about local news and serves as analog for institutions' power to shape ideas around a field (Schmidt, 2008). This article uses the tools of critical discourse analysis to understand how venture philanthropists justify their space in the journalism field by identifying where and how they might direct outside capital to intervene in journalism's myriad crises. This material evidences a strain of metajournalistic discourse that emanates from actors outside the field and offers a lens into their strategic uses of discourse (Buozis, 2023), revealing the logics and values that grant external institutions legitimacy (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017).

This specific analysis is based on a corpus of 112 documents gathered from the Meta Journalism Project and Google News Initiative, as well as recipients of their local journalism-focused funding, mainly the American Journalism Project, the Knight Foundation, and The Lenfest Institute for Journalism. Each of these organizations was selected as a site of analysis because they have explicitly identified themselves as either venture philanthropy organizations or sympathetic to the goals of venture philanthropy. Organization websites and communication materials were searched using the keywords "local news," "philanthropy," "local journalism," "local journalist," and "local publisher." The collection focused on materials produced between 2018 and 2022 but also incorporated relevant materials from outside this time frame. Organization websites were also searched for reference to other communication and marketing outlets operated by these organizations, such as blogs hosted on Medium.com, which were also searched. Recent archives of press releases and marketing materials were then examined in order to find local journalism and philanthropy-focused texts that may have escaped the search terms. Texts were saved as time and date-stamped PDF files once they were encountered in order to mitigate changing and updated websites.

The materials gathered included research reports, press releases and marketing materials, case studies, recaps of events, and workshops hosted by venture philanthropy organizations, as well as practical advice codified in how-to and instructional guides. Shorter materials of less than 400 words were discarded. These materials were then supplemented with interviews with key staff and executives from these organizations published in

venues like the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, *The New York Times*, and *The Columbia Journalism Review*. Materials were read in-depth and multiple times, in accordance with Stuart Hall's (1975) long preliminary soak, which, as Steiner (2016) has noted, may connote a listless engagement, but requires the researcher to systematically come to know a corpus "in order to decipher the patterns of ideological thinking" evident in the materials (Hall, 2016, p. 131).

4. Analysis

4.1. Venture Philanthropy as the Solution to a Local News Crisis

Venture philanthropists' ability to define local news as a problem that capital can intervene in is foundational to a discursive strategy intended to claim space for these actors in the journalistic field. For instance, after the American Journalism Project's founding in 2019, cofounder and Texas Tribune CEO John Thornton starkly articulated why local news organizations would not find the financial success of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* had found by pursuing a national audience: "The market has failed at the local-level….And market failure just is a fancy way of saying that the market won't produce as much as we need as a society" (Waller & Folkenflick, 2020, para. 3).

Market failure offers an interesting framing in this case because it defines a role for venture philanthropy to play as solicitors and distributors of capital that otherwise would not be interested in local news. Thornton makes such an impetus explicit when analogizing venture philanthropy and venture capital:

> If you think about a venture capital firm that every two or three years goes out and raises a new fund to invest in promising new startups, it's not unlike what we're attempting to do here. We have raised $46 million in commitments from foundations and a couple very generous and wealthy individuals. And the idea is that will take that $46 million and invest it in 20 or so…mission-driven organizations. (as quoted in Waller & Folkenflick, 2020, para 5)

This framing, setting up a demand for a market-friendly actor who is also cognizant of local news' mission and culture, carries through much of the discourse, forwarding venture philanthropy organizations as unique in their ability to match financial resources with deserving organizations because they can translate market value to journalism's public value. Venture philanthropy's increasing prominence in the field is justified not only by access to capital but also by the ability to direct that capital with a judgment informed by journalism's public mission and awareness of its crises.

Garnering significant attention in 2019 for securing large gifts from the Meta Journalism Project and the Knight Foundation (Daniels, 2019), the American Journalism Project claims this scale of investment allows it to credibly engage in the work of "reimagining [journalism's] future by building a model to finance and sustain the local news our democracy requires" (American Journalism Project, 2022, p. 1). Though the language is vague on its surface, its logic is evident in the syntax, explicitly connecting "finance" to "the local news our democracy requires," foregrounding an awareness of the economic conditions that underpin journalism's public mission. Such logic is most apparent when the organization focuses directly on revenue strategy, espousing a mix of national donor outreach, subscriptions, and local philanthropy as necessary to meet the ideals of growth and sustainability. The American Journalism Project (2022, p. 7) *Impact Report* articulates economic growth as a

criterion of success: "American Journalism Project grantees grow by an average of 67 percent in the first year of their grant, and are on the path to double their revenue by the third year." In this framing, revenue growth acts as prima facie evidence of venture philanthropy's success, specifically an ability to build revenue where market failure had been otherwise assumed, though, as Usher (2021) has observed, much of this funding tends to come from and support already affluent communities. Still, the framing is telling because concepts like growth and sustainability are invoked as self-evidently good as if the ability to generate revenue is a necessary condition for resolving local journalism's crisis.

Much of the ambiguous foregrounding of financial success as both a goal in its own right and a marker of mission service partially extends from the role organizations play as knowledge producers, foregrounding their own market research in order to bolster their credibility as stewards of philanthropic capital. Again, consider the following passage from the American Journalism Project's (2022, p. 11) *Impact Report*:

> We have studied the local information ecosystem with our partners in four regions to understand the health and trajectory of existing information sources and the extent to which they are collectively serving residents' needs. We examine local information gaps and news needs from the ground up, pairing quantitative analysis of the existing landscape with a community listening program. We hire and train community ambassadors to conduct interviews and host focus groups, and leverage multilingual surveys and SMS outreach to reach a broad range of communities—especially those historically underrepresented in the news media.

This methodology bridges sophisticated data analysis and knowledge gleaned from interviewing underserved communities, a methodology that situates the American Journalism Project as a knowledge source, granting the "we" in the previous passage the weight of epistemic authority.

It is a claim to authority that is often implicit in other projects. Take, for instance, the words from the Knight Foundation's Jennifer Preston, speaking about the potential impact a $4.8 million gift from Meta stewarded by the Knight Foundation might have: "Bringing together major news organizations and experts in technology, journalism and other areas, [the gift] recognizes the importance of a concerted, strategic effort to address the challenges that local news organizations are facing in the digital age" (Knight Foundation, n.d., para. 4). Acting as a convener, in this case, lends Preston the credibility to speculate on what the impact of the money might be: "This next phase will help to create a model for the digital transformation of news organizations that can be shared across the country, helping local journalists better connect with their audiences and develop new innovations in storytelling" (Knight Foundation, 2017, para. 4).

Venture philanthropy leaders also produce knowledge and arguments about the state of the broader field that justify their place in it. Writing in the pages of the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* in the wake of an October 2022 announcement that Gannett would implement new cost-cutting measures impacting staff salaries and retirement benefits, Berman (2022, para. 2) presents non-profit and philanthropy-funded journalism as a viable alternative for journalism's future:

> The signs of peril for local news have become so frequent that they are barely, well, newsworthy. But the demise of local news is by no means inevitable….Powered by foundations and individual donors, promising examples of nonprofit news organizations across the country are showing how to turn the tide on what was widely viewed as a dying business.

Detailing the success of projects connected to venture philanthropy funds, Berman (2022) offers an argument for how future donors might rely on organizations like the American Journalism Project as an alternative to hedge funds and private ownership, and in so doing, argues for venture philanthropy as a model for journalism's future that continues to intuit the whims of the market, but also offers a means for guarding against its excesses.

By justifying venture philanthropy as a way of navigating market forces, these examples also demonstrate a common discursive tactic that defines local journalism's main obstacles in terms of resources while highlighting venture philanthropy organizations' unique expertise in marshaling those resources, usually under the ambiguous concept of financial sustainability. The ambiguity here is key because it presents sustainability as a normative goal that invites a range of strategies across the discourse: encouraging digital innovation, better understanding and meeting community information needs, or cultivating relationships with local donors that traditionally have not invested in the news. Venture philanthropy presents itself as a path to sustainability by foregrounding the knowledge certain organization leaders claim to have gained through experience. Consider the words of American Journalism Project cofounder and Chalkbeat CEO Elizabeth Green (2019, para. 7):

> I know from my own experience building Chalkbeat—now one of the fastest-growing local news organizations in the country, with a team of more than 50—that what is most needed is not one-year grants to support individual reporting projects…what is most needed is investment in organizations' capacity to sustain themselves, and to grow.

Sustainability, then, is not only a financial goal, but a cultural value that connotes an orientation toward the market as implicit in the kinds of decisions successful organizations make. As venture philanthropists frame local news as worthy of donor attention, they point to their own success as stewards of philanthropic resources to argue that they possess the market savvy to achieve sustainability and thus justify their ability to help other organizations compromise with the realities of the market in order to meet their public mission. This echoes a longstanding tension in American journalism—the reliance on the market to deliver journalism's public value—with venture philanthropists overtly invoking their success in generating revenue as justifying their role in helping other organizations resolve this tension (Baker, 1994).

4.2. Gathering and Sharing Practical Knowledge

Venture philanthropists' credibility as savvy market actors is partly sustained by the role they play in disseminating practical knowledge to the field. Largely, this knowledge centers on integrating new technical capabilities into the practices and operations of local news organizations. As Simon (2022) argues, journalism organizations have become increasingly beholden to platform companies as digital tools have become more deeply imbricated in journalistic practice, and tech industry-affiliated venture philanthropy builds upon this dependency (Usher, 2020). A significant number of materials in the corpus offer training and mastery over technologies designed or owned by Google and Meta, and several documents promise techniques that help improve news products in ways that entice new readers and offer insights into better navigating digital ad networks and potential subscribers using Google and Meta -owned properties (Galfi, 2020; Meta Journalism Project, 2020a, 2020b). Much of the material reflects findings from grant recipients, whose experience is framed as emblematic of the kinds of innovative change local news organizations

should pursue. Consider a case study from South Carolina's *Post and Courier*, a 2020 and 2021 Google News Initiative grantee that used Google Analytics to better understand the market potential of paid newsletters focused on sports and dining. *Post and Courier* newsletter Editor Sam Hunter recounted his experience in a tone accessible to other regional and local editors:

> We've been able to create robust revenue growth without a huge amount of lift. It was helpful to have data tracking from the start and to test different things. As a newspaper, the question was, "Would we have the audience for paid newsletter subscriptions?" And it certainly appears like we do. (Google News Initiative, n.d., para. 8)

The tools here are consumer-grade, but their uptake is typical of the kind of innovation around business thinking encouraged among grantees. For example, when New Orleans' Jambalaya News Initiative launched a Spanish-language news service, they relied on the Google Voice phone service to distribute Spanish-language news alerts via SMS to an audience reliant on cell phones. A video highlighting the project focuses on many of the low-tech strategies the staff used to build an audience: tabling in community spaces and sharing word of the service in face-to-face interactions (Google News Initiative, 2021). It's an example of shifting practices around the capacities of easy-to-use tools, in the process making Google's presence in the news product imperceptible. By offering practical advice for integrating technical innovations into editorial and business operations, venture philanthropy organizations act as mediators of emerging knowledge in the field. Best practice guides, YouTube video tutorials, case studies, and archived presentations from donor-funded conferences all act as ongoing resources that demonstrate the simplicity of adopting strategies developed by grantees and the diversity of approaches that exist in nearly every aspect of a news organization.

While it is tempting to see tech companies as further entrenching themselves in the news industry through practical knowledge that tells news organizations how to best utilize their tools, the provision of practical knowledge has a much broader consequence. For instance, The Lenfest Institute offers a collection of resources focused on non-profit newsroom management, membership development, and digital subscription strategy alongside guides on technology and innovation (The Lenfest Institute for Journalism, n.d.-a). The quality and currency of these materials notwithstanding, they demonstrate the role venture philanthropy organizations play in aggregating and gatekeeping emergent practical and business knowledge, granting structure to what might become the field's common sense. Unlike the Google News Initiative or Meta Journalism Project, this is not a case of an organization offering advice on how to use technologies owned by the main benefactor. Instead, the provision of practical knowledge, usually offered as insightful business advice, buttresses the prominence of organizations like Lenfest as sources others should turn to for expertise. Expertise, presented in this way, operates as a discursive value that deepens organizations' authority precisely because it demonstrates the value of the knowledge these organizations possess in an almost self-evident way, echoing much of what Silicon Valley leaders have said about journalism more generally (Russell, 2019).

Venture philanthropy organizations organize workshops, produce best practice guides, highlight specific initiatives at grantee organizations, and circulate insights through a variety of industry-facing venues, from the Online News Association to *The Columbia Journalism Review*, to various future of journalism conferences (Friedlich, 2023; Knight Foundation, 2023; Renner, 2017). Taken together, these materials represent the

agenda-setting power of venture philanthropy organizations, specifically their ability to draw attention to which trends and tools provide the most potential value to news organizations, as well as which grantees would benefit from future donations and philanthropic investments. Though at times mundane and somewhat insular, the provision of this knowledge as innovative and practical, often sourced from a broad community of philanthropist-affiliated news practitioners and distributed within that community cement venture philanthropy organizations' role as both knowledge and resource distributors within the ecology of non-profit news organizations, making clear the venture philanthropists' assertion that their core value comes from their ability to know how donor money might be most effectively spent.

4.3. Between Public Value and Market Value

Perhaps what is most striking in the corpus is the way publicly-oriented visions of journalism's future are often explicitly connected to the pursuit of revenue. This dynamic is most obvious in a statement Thornton and Green (n.d., para. 2) made upon the American Journalism Project's launch in 2019:

> We founded [American Journalism Project] based on three interlocking beliefs: Democracy and journalism are interdependent. Local journalism is a public good that market forces won't adequately supply. This market failure is a problem that we the people—not our government, and not our commerce—must solve.

This invocation of market failure articulates a specific space within the journalistic field for venture philanthropy to occupy, and allows these organizations to move with discursive ambiguity between more overtly market-oriented framings and the language of public mission. This discursive ambiguity is key to venture philanthropy's role in bringing non-profit journalism in line with a broader entrepreneurial ideology in the field (Cohen, 2015). Often, by invoking a nascent, underserved need that can be potentially filled by local journalism's most innovative organizations and individuals, venture philanthropists evidence their own value by showing where philanthropic dollars might have the most impact:

> Local news coverage on topics of civic interest is a public good: vital to informed decision-making in a democracy, but no longer supported by the private market. Plenty of journalists are ready to take on this challenge by developing creative new business models in the public interest. What's been missing is the philanthropic capital to truly support them. (American Journalism Project, 2019, para. 6)

Articulations that bridge profitability and public mission have long been a part of American journalism (Baldasty, 1992; Benson, 2018), but when applied to the philanthropic sphere, it expands the scope of what might fall under the rubric of innovation, linking business innovation and technological change to public mission.

The productive ambiguity here is most explicit when discussing the ideal personnel and organizational cultures that venture philanthropy firms would seek to support. Take, for instance, Green's (2019, para. 6) description of personnel needs within local journalism:

> We need expert teams whose sole focus is raising diverse revenue for news. We need product and technology talent to keep our work as high-impact as possible. We need strategic leadership and

> operational capacity to turn newsrooms with modest footprints into scaled institutions. And we need the real dollars required to build truly diverse teams of journalists, serving diverse readers, with diverse leadership, founding teams, and governing bodies.

Though aimed at non-profit newsrooms seeking to make themselves most attractive to funders, the passage reads in many ways like a clarion call for refining business and organizational operations toward market efficiency. Furthermore, the overt invocation of diversity and equity is a welcome development, and not always typical in discussions about the future of journalism, but in linking diversity to both business development and technological development, the passage subsumes a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion to developing and capitalizing upon audience demand. Implicit in this appeal is the need to make an organization attractive to a wide range of philanthropic dollars by preserving certain markers of successful business culture as indicative of the kinds of organizations donors should want to invest in.

Within this discourse, notions of market value are capacious enough to subsume other public values. This logic became explicit in the wake of 2020's George Floyd protests and broader scrutiny of racial inequity across American journalism. Though funders supported and promoted diversity and equity efforts prior to Floyd's murder, the corpus shows a marked increase in materials highlighting organizations that found ways to make issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion appealing as an audience and product development strategy. Take, for instance, a Meta Journalism Project press release highlighting the ways the organization Anti-Racism Daily used Instagram to garner 100,000 subscribers throughout 2020. Editor-in-chief Nicole Cardoza highlighted Instagram's functionality in building her readership, noting that "Instagram is where we start the conversation," but also useful in driving audiences to a newsletter focused on ways "to enact real change," demonstrating that "Instagram is where the back-and-forth happens" (Meta Journalism Project, 2020c, para. 8). Because Instagram's functionality can "enable people to respond, share their own stories, offer additional resources, share how the work plays out in their own community," it is a tool folded into Anti-Racist Daily's editorial work, highlighting the utility of a Meta-owned property in meeting the organization's mission (Meta Journalism Project, 2020c, para. 6).

Much of this work demonstrates a facility in synthesizing a legitimate critique of journalism into an audience strategy driven by both mission and market opportunity. Materials produced by venture philanthropy organizations offered an important platform for publications focused on underserved audiences to critique longstanding journalistic practices, as is the case of Memphis-based MLK50 publisher Wendi Thomas, speaking on a panel supported by the Meta Journalism Project:

> I think some of the pushback that people in legacy newsrooms may get is "we're not choosing sides, we want be objective," which…means hetero cis white male perspective. But when you have five people at a Grizzlies game…and you have one person in all of the community covering K-12 education, you are saying what matters. (Meta Journalism Project, 2021, para. 3)

And yet, this perspective is granted a platform precisely because broad-scale reckonings around race and journalism evidenced an unmet audience demand.

Foregrounding equity and diversity, as well as progressive change in journalistic cultures is a laudable and urgent goal, but in defining it as a mission and business goal, venture philanthropy organizations further

bolster their authority to guide the direction of journalism's financial future by intervening in its culture in a way that is responsive to critics. Consider the following from The Lenfest Institute for Journalism (n.d.-b): "As publishers think about reaching younger and more diverse audiences, their internal cultures, editorial output, and fundraising messaging need to truly reflect their communities" (para. 3). The link between revenue and mission is explicit: "In order to successfully create diverse and equitable fundraising strategies, news organizations must first build diverse and equitable teams and cultures" (para. 4). What is reflected in these examples, and worth considering in the conclusion, are venture philanthropy organizations' broad authority to frame changes in journalism and direct how resources flow in response to those changes. As attention among funders has shifted, critics like Meredith Clark in the following quote from *Nieman Lab*, have reconsidered the flurry of philanthropic attention diversity, equity, and inclusion work has received in recent years, drawing attention to a common dynamic around philanthropic funding in the field:

> Really well-meaning people with access to social structures and access to capital are jumping in and wanting to get involved, but they're not addressing some of the root causes that got us here in the first place….Instead, they're building out infrastructures that allow the money to move from one place to another—but as it goes through that movement, it gets siphoned off. (Tameez, 2023, para. 7)

The critique reveals an aspect of venture philanthropy rhetoric that often goes unacknowledged, namely, that many of the normative assertions about what practices, organizations, and values might bring non-profit journalism toward a financially viable future obscure attention to how these projects are actually working, and whether or not venture philanthropists are acting as fair arbiters of resources.

Still, the ambiguous blending of financial concerns and public mission remains a powerful discursive framing precisely because it establishes business innovation as a flexible criterion for evaluating journalism's future. Consider the following statement on how to best support local news from The Lenfest Institute for Journalism CEO Jim Friedlich (n.d., paras. 4–7):

> We need to marshal both commercial and philanthropic forces if we are to have any prayer of rebuilding local news at scale. Non-profit news media is, at least at the moment, far too small to adequately solve the problems of local news. It is a promising toddler, maybe this year a gangly teenager. It needs to grow meaningfully in both revenue and business sophistication….Conversely, in order to survive and to thrive, for-profit news media must do a much better job reinventing itself—its products, its customer value, and its community values. In a way, non-profit news needs to become much more commercial, and for-profit news much more audience-centric and mission-based.

This passage typifies a logic at the core of venture philanthropy, that blending commercial and non-profit cultures is the path to meeting journalism's future. Still, how to blend these cultures remains varied and elusive, but the hope that it can be done contributes to a discourse where advice for "healing polarized communities" persists alongside "creating generative relationships with major donors" (The Lenfest Institute for Journalism, 2023; Zamora, n.d.). These framings bolster venture philanthropy's authority to set the terms for understanding just which future for journalism is worth directing resources to at any given moment in time.

5. Conclusion

As illustrated in Section 1, much of the focus of venture philanthropy starts from the assumption that inevitable technological change will disrupt local journalism in financially ruinous ways unless organizations innovate and adapt. It is important, though, to note that organizational innovation focused on financial sustainability is not the only possible response to market failure. On the one hand, arguments for increased public and government support of local journalism abound, relying on market failure as an impetus for public policy to intervene (Pickard, 2020). Venture philanthropists offer a discursively powerful alternative to public funding by arguing that a broad range of non-commercial revenue sources exist and that news organizations can develop a revenue strategy that makes them more appealing to market-minded funders. Given that an increasingly large share of philanthropic capital flows through venture philanthropy organizations, much of the discourse works to bolster the credibility with which they manage and build a funding infrastructure around journalism.

Venture philanthropy organizations' focus on innovation is subtle and capacious, capturing an orientation between market and mission that can account for changing conditions and critiques of journalism, subsuming response to those critiques as one of the privileges their control over capital affords. Over time, as venture philanthropy's funding infrastructures around journalism become more implicit, its ideological commitments and interventions in journalistic cultures have become increasingly nuanced and flexible. While these organizations rarely argue for complete public funding even as they invoke market failure, they do forward a reinvention of journalistic culture as necessary for generating revenue because it comports with donors' expectations of what a sustainable news organization should be in an increasingly precarious news economy. Thus, venture philanthropy organizations recursively justify their own presence in the field as stewards of tech industry largesse, declaring which problems, innovative practices, and changing values are worthy of the capital and attention these organizations muster.

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ARTICLE

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"It's New to Us'": Exploring Authentic Innovation in Local News Settings

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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.

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Conflict of Interests

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ARTICLE

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Organizations as Innovations: Examining Changes in Journalism Through the Lens of Newly-Emerging Organizations

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Abstract

This article argues that the growing variety of new journalistic organizations and their diversification beyond the traditional newsroom may offer a deeper and broader understanding of change and innovation within journalism. Newly emerging organizations play a multifaceted role in journalism: They are both drivers and results of change; they serve as indicators of the ways in which the structures of journalism and its production processes are evolving; they reveal industry trends early on and enable longitudinal research. Despite the emergence of non-traditional organizations in journalism, existing studies on these new entities remain fragmented and have yet to coalesce into a sustained research program. Against this background, this conceptual article aims to contribute to the ongoing theoretical progress in journalism studies in three ways. First, it identifies key factors of why organizational innovations happen. Second, it systemizes recent studies exemplifying the plurality of new organizations in journalism according to different levels from organization studies, including the field level, the level of organizational populations, and the level of the single organization. Finally, the article proposes a research agenda for establishing "organizations as innovations" as a novel conceptual lens for understanding change and innovation in journalism studies.

Keywords

digital journalism; journalistic organizations; media start-ups; new organizations; new organizing; organizational innovation

1. Introduction: Organizations as Innovations in Journalism

In journalism studies, a perspective on organizations is well established, with such research primarily centered on the influence of organizational factors on the nature of journalistic content (Hanusch & Maares, 2021; Westlund & Ekström, 2019). This research strand, however, has mainly looked into the traditional organizational entity of journalism, i.e., the newsroom and its routines, processes, and standards of newsmaking (Bantz et al., 1980; Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978). Ever since the 19th century's era of mass media, when the newsroom was born and "imprinted" (Stinchcombe, 1965, p. 153), this monolithic form of organizing has become taken for granted as the natural way to produce news. As a consequence, a newsroom centricity prevails in research (Deuze & Witschge, 2018; Ferrucci & Kuhn, 2022). Ethnographic studies from the 1960s onwards provided pivotal findings for progress in news production research, yet failed to extend the organizational perspective beyond the newsroom. Moreover, they focused almost exclusively on uniform daily newspapers and television stations, which have never been representative of the field as a whole (Boczkowski, 2010).

Although digitization has shaken up this line of inquiry, which has developed new approaches to transformation since the turn of the century (Cottle, 2007; Gade, 2022), its main focus remains on innovation *inside* the conventional newsroom, such as the implementation of technological, work-related, and managerial changes, as well as on barriers to organizational development (e.g., García-Avilés et al., 2014, 2019; Paulussen, 2016). What this research does not account for is today's broad and increasingly differentiated spectrum of new forms of organizing news production beyond the newsroom. Ferrucci and Kuhn (2022) dedicate an entire essay to the argument that, against the backdrop of technological and industry disruptions and rising labor precarity, the single organization's power over news production practices has never been greater than it is today. They recommend "envisioning the journalism industry as a collection of organizations" (Ferrucci & Kuhn, 2022, p. 13). While their essay makes a pointed argument for the new relevance of organizations in the hierarchy of influences on journalism, it gives less consideration to organizational innovations and new ways of organizing the news production process.

This prevailing research gap is evident in current literature reviews (Belair-Gagnon & Steinke, 2020; García-Avilés, 2021b), which reveal a primary focus on technological developments, formats, genres, and platforms, as well as on business models perceived as key dimensions of innovation and change. However, a recent empirical study in five European countries by Meier et al. (2022) found that with collaborative investigative networks and new organizational teams, two organization-related phenomena were among the most important innovations in journalism in the decade since 2010. Still, new organizations and novelty in organizing journalism remain an under-explored dimension of current research, despite there being much to learn about the changing institution of journalism by investigating its pioneering organizations (Hepp & Loosen, 2021).

By new organizations, we refer to recently emerging ventures, started independent of established media, related in one way or another to the field of journalism and the news production process (Deuze & Witschge, 2020; Usher & Kammer, 2019). However, "new" does not necessarily mean that an organization has no historical antecedents. Organization scholars emphasize that new forms are often recombinations of characteristics of established organizational templates. An operationalized definition of when an organization is different enough to be considered truly "new" in a manner relative to existing conditions is

hard to establish in light of the current state of research, as these forms have not been well explored and are rather poorly understood (Buschow & Suhr, 2022b). Furthermore, we use the term "new organizing" because the creation and maintenance of organizations is understood as an active and dynamic process of organizational becoming under prevailing environmental conditions, rather than something which naturally occurs in journalism (Weick, 1979). Moreover, "organizing" can capture different analytical levels—both the formation of entirely new types of organizations as well as the design of organizational structures, processes, and practices within such collective entities.

Recent studies conducted on non-traditional organizations and new forms of organizing in journalism are fragmented and have not yet coalesced into a sustained research program, meaning the research agenda may overlook key developments. As this article shows, novel organizations and new organizing are key to understanding changes and innovations within the field. For example, project-based, temporary journalism cooperations (such as in the Panama Papers) shed light on a broader trend towards a projectification of journalistic work, open collaborative structures for participative news production with non-journalistic actors show a changing division of labor in the field, and social media-based journalism organizations illustrate how platformization transforms journalism (Buschow & Suhr, 2022b). While recent research has typically taken the changing institution of journalism as a starting point to examine the downstream implications for organizations (e.g., Ferrucci & Eldridge, 2022; Reese, 2022), these examples underscore the significance of also studying organizational innovations more deeply as a means to gain insights into broader trends that the institution is undergoing. The main contribution of our article is to propose a conceptual approach to explore the changing institution of journalism, its structures and practices through the lens of its novel organizations, which are both manifestations and catalysts of these transformation processes.

To do so, journalism research must expand its organizational perspective beyond the traditional templates of organizing. Such an endeavor can draw on the vast array of insights offered by organization studies (e.g., Aldrich et al., 2020; Davis & Sinha, 2021; Powell & Brandtner, 2016; Sandhu, 2018; Scott, 2014). Against this background, our article aims for three contributions. First, we explore the drivers and conditions of new organizing in journalism. We intend to show why the established organizational template of the newsroom is losing viability, while a growing variety and diversification of organizations related to the field of journalism can be observed (Section 2). Second, in order to broaden the organizational perspective, we shall bring together recent studies on the plurality of new organizations in journalism and arrange them according to three levels on which organizational innovations can occur: the *field level*, the *level of organizational populations* (certain clusters of similar organizations), and the internal level of the *single organization* (Section 3). Third, we will propose a research agenda for establishing organization and new organizing as a fruitful lens through which change and innovation in journalism can be better understood (Section 4).

2. Drivers and Conditions of New Organizing in Journalism

In a classic, more functional way, Gade (2022, p. 2) defines news organizations as:

> Specialized entities that are functionally assembled to efficiently achieve the work of their industry, the creation of news. Organizations define the nature of work, divide that work into specific tasks, design jobs around these tasks, coordinate the tasks, and create processes that ensure work quality.

In recent years, a number of developments within and beyond the industry have increased the pressure on traditional news organizations and thereby fostered the development of novel organizations and new forms of organizing. Among these developments are shifting labor markets, the increasing virtualization of media work, economic upheavals, the growing relevance of new types of media products that demand different modes of production, and societal changes that journalism responds to by reorganizing. In many ways, organizations are both the result and key agents of this ongoing change, social arenas, and power containers where broader transformations are negotiated and may even originate in the first place.

2.1. Shifting Labor Markets and the Virtualization of Media Work

In business in general, there is a current discourse on flatter, less hierarchical, and more flexible organizational models which stand in stark contrast to the traditional hierarchical and bureaucratic enterprises of the industrial age (e.g., Reitzig, 2022). Agile organizational models are expected to be better equipped to navigate the volatile and rapidly evolving landscape of the digital age, while also aligning with the growing demands for "new work" among employees. This is particularly relevant in the context of shifting labor markets in the Western world, which are marked by a competitive "war for talent." These debates on "new work" and "new organizing" also affect journalism, which is already under considerable economic pressure since digital media basically destroyed its traditional business model (Nielsen, 2019).

Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic called for creative methods of cooperation, virtualized much journalistic work, and dramatically reduced the importance of physical office space (García-Avilés, 2021a). A basic requirement for the virtualization of media work is digitization, which has proven to be an enabler for the dematerialization of newsrooms (Wall, 2022) and the rise of alternative forms of collaboration and new organizational models—something which could even be observed before the global pandemic hit (Bunce et al., 2018; Reyna, 2023). In organization studies, digital tools and technologies are seen as "raw materials available to those who organize firms" (Davis & Sinha, 2021, p. 2), with which they then lay the foundations of new organizing and different forms of media work. For example, digital environments enable more collaborative, participatory forms of organizing journalism, with methods originating from IT and programming, such as Scrum (Usher, 2016), and hybrid networks of open-source investigations (Reese & Chen, 2022).

2.2. Economic Upheavals

In the last couple of years, it has become clear that the operational cost structure of the traditional newsroom as the main site of news production in the industrial era is apparently no longer viable under conditions of digital journalism, where revenue has fallen sharply when compared to former media businesses. Legacy media has primarily resorted to cost-cutting and downsizing, layoffs, outsourcing, and the closure of entire newsrooms. Novel ways of cost saving can be observed among legacy media, but few fundamental renewals of organizational designs. Deuze and Witschge (2020) underscored this point by noting that an examination of a newsroom located within a legacy media organization today would reveal, first of all, a significant number of "empty chairs" (p. 92).

Nevertheless, it is precisely journalism's difficult economic situation that is a key driver of organizations' genesis and a wide spectrum of new types of organizations and organizational designs. What could be

considered the creative destruction of legacy industry structures is thought to free up resources for newcomers, with the global start-up movement in journalism increasing the sheer number of organizations (Deuze & Witschge, 2020; Usher & Kammer, 2019). Although many start-ups tend to reproduce existing organizational forms, they are "imprinted" (Stinchcombe, 1965, p. 153) by the historical and cultural context from which they emerge. Additionally, many of these new organizations, whether for-profit or not-for-profit, have the explicit aim of tackling current challenges within the journalism industry and preserving (what they consider) quality journalism (Konieczna, 2018). Therefore, the increasing variation and diversification of these start-ups can be seen as a quasi-natural response to a changing structural context, as entrepreneurs search for new ways to deal with this context (although many of these ventures will inevitably fail along the way; Buschow, 2020). Some start-ups are even intentionally created in response to the limitations and disadvantages of the traditional newsroom model. For example, Young and Callison (2021) investigate a data journalism start-up that had been founded to tackle prevailing issues of gender discrimination and colonialism in North American journalism.

Even after the entrepreneurial turn and the emergence of a creator economy, both of which are often connected to the fragmentation and individualization of media work, organizing remains a critical aspect, giving rise to novel types of journalism organizations, such as online outsourcing journalism labor markets (Hoag & Grzeslo, 2019) or the newsletter platform Substack, sometimes referred to as a new operating system for individual journalists (Hobbs, 2021).

2.3. New Media Products

The emergence of new digital presentation modes (e.g., listicles, news quizzes), journalism genres (e.g., slow journalism, solutions journalism), and distribution channels (e.g., media platforms and streaming services) has contributed significantly to the changing landscape of journalism organizations. Although new organizations may not always result in the development of new forms of journalism (Deuze & Witschge, 2020), it is apparent that different media products require specific ways of media work. For example, podcast studios and newsletter collectives are distinct from the conventional newsrooms of broadcast stations and daily newspapers simply due to the frequency with which they publish their content, the technological requirements and the more interactive role of their audiences, among others. The traditional assembly-line mode of organizing is no longer applicable to news production, as each new media product calls for specific forms of media work (Gade, 2022).

2.4. Societal Developments

Societal shifts demand new ways of organizing journalism to cope with changing environmental contingencies and societal complexity. If journalism serves the function of societal self-observation, a transformed (e.g., globalized, digitalized) society requires new organizing for journalism (along with new working structures) that enables such self-observation. Cross-border collaborative investigations (such as in the Panama Papers and Paradise Papers) are a prime example of this need, as these project-based, temporary collaborations are established to respond to interconnected global challenges, topics such as the climate crisis, international finance flows, and tax havens (Buschow & Suhr, 2022a; Konow-Lund, 2019). Dealing with such complexity requires a departure from the conventional editorial structures and beats of newspaper journalism. In his groundbreaking study from the 1960s, the German journalism researcher

Manfred Rühl, from a Luhmannian system theory perspective, looked at the environmental conditions which a newspaper's editorial office required to emerge and persist (Rühl, 1979). Today, this question must be turned around: What organizational innovations in journalism are currently being created in response to the contemporary environmental context?

3. Conceptualizing the Landscape of Organizational Innovations: Fields, Populations, and Single Organizations

As organizations shape their environment while also being shaped by it, newly emerging organizations might serve as seismographs for forecasting developments in journalism, and investigating them is key to understanding more general changes and innovation in the industry. In order to widen the perspective on organizing in journalism and to develop an advanced understanding of the organizational landscape, we will propose theoretical concepts derived from organization studies. Based on this conceptualization, exemplary non-traditional new media organizations are introduced to illustrate the potential of novel organizations as a lens for innovation.

Informed by sociology-based organization studies, this article distinguishes between three analytical levels of organizing: the *field level*, the *level of organizational populations*, and the level of the *single organization*, ordered by the scope of the phenomena observed (see Figure 1). Following organization studies, these levels are nested within each other. At the field level, we can observe the diverse spectrum of actors involved (in one way or another) in newsmaking, some of which are part of a certain population. A population is a cluster of organizations that are alike in key respects (Aldrich et al., 2020). Others are exceptional, unconventional cases for which a population has not (yet) emerged. Single organizations, whether part of a population or not, can be investigated regarding their specific organizational designs and elements of organizing (e.g., in terms of formal hierarchies, specific beats, work roles, meeting structures), as shown in the units of analysis on the lowest level of Figure 1. Although organization studies have developed a multitude of conceptual approaches, we chose to stick to this rather classic heuristic differentiation as it is both familiar and useful for our purpose (Scott, 2014).

3.1. Field Level

At the field level, the "collection of diverse, interdependent organizations that participate in a common meaning system" (Scott, 2014, p. 106), one stream of current journalism research primarily focuses on the boundaries of the field and on new entrants whose journalistic status is frequently disputed (Eldridge, 2019). These newcomers, such as bloggers or content creators, are regularly termed strangers, peripheral actors, interlopers, or intralopers (e.g., Holton & Belair-Gagnon, 2018). They bring in alternative values, norms, and beliefs, challenging traditional notions of journalism. Typically, a Bourdieuian perspective is applied here that focuses on the competition between incumbents and challengers, i.e., power struggles over doxa and dominant visions of the field. Another common approach is to investigate the boundaries and demarcations of traditional journalism vis-à-vis newcomers (Carlson & Lewis, 2015).

Today, the actors "formerly known as the outsiders," are, as Ferrucci (2022, p. 181) stresses, firmly established in the field. This requires widening the research focus and examining these novel actors and adjacent institutions in depth, thereby de-centering traditional institutional understandings in journalism

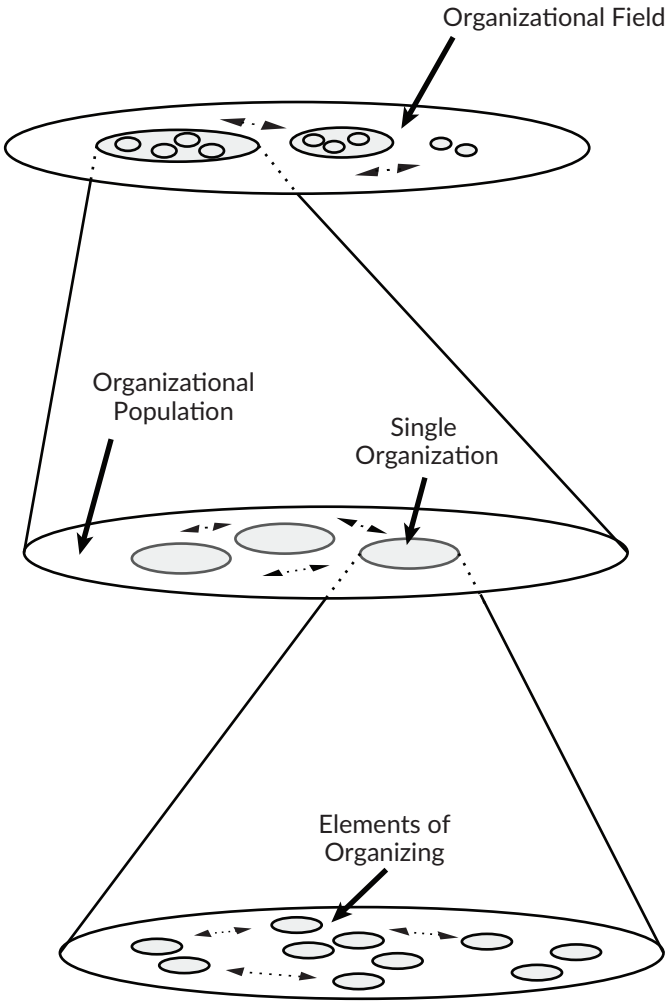

Figure 1. Three analytical levels of organizing. Source: Authors' work based on Sandhu (2018).

research (Eldridge, 2022). However, so far, such novel organizations are rarely studied regarding how they produce news or how they perform new functional roles in the industry. Instead of focusing on how actors from outside the industry influence traditional journalism, the study of newly emerging organizational innovations at the field level paves the way to more in-depth inquiries into how news work is distributed across the field and how activities and functions are (re-)distributed among organizations and novel sites of news production.

This is exemplified by the genesis of new types of "meta-organizations" (Lowrey et al., 2023), focused on supporting and sustaining journalism with novel functional roles and responsibilities in the industry and a variety of organizational goals. These meta-organizations are typically formed in reaction to societal and economic developments that affect journalism (e.g., limited resources for quality journalism), as illustrated in Section 2. Among them are entities that are neither legacy media players (such as publishers or broadcasters) nor news agencies, but organizations operating somewhere in between and beyond, regularly taking on tasks that have traditionally been integrated into a single media company. These are typically non-antagonistic actors trying to be an aid to journalism by reacting to the changing structural context. In this, they differ from the likes of bloggers, influencers, and organizations such as Wikileaks, which were

often regarded more as a threat in field-centered journalism research (Eldridge, 2019). Among these remarkable organizational innovations are cases such as the for-profit journalism tech consultancy start-up Hearken (Crispim da Fontoura, 2021), the non-profit media start-up Science Media Center Germany (SMC) as a supporting organization for the work of science journalists (Buschow et al., 2022), and the discontinued Civil, a blockchain-technology-based journalism platform (Le & Loebbecke, 2020).

Their investigation offers fruitful avenues for revealing more general change and innovation in journalism, as they amplify the trend toward a shifting division of labor in the field. This shift is characterized by decoupling and repackaging certain activities of journalistic production, traditionally bundled in legacy media companies, into novel organizational units. One organization driving such change in the field is SMC, a non-profit meta-organization that exerts "field repair" and "field advancement" activities (Buschow et al., 2022). In doing so, SMC aims to compensate for deficits in science journalism (such as work intensification, cost cutting, and downsizing in legacy media) by taking over certain elements of the journalistic practice of research/investigation in order to provide qualitative "raw material" for journalistic content production in legacy media newsrooms and news start-ups. Moreover, SMC develops and provides tools and support infrastructure for news work. The fact that their new industry roles, organizational characteristics, and practices of media work have not yet been examined shows the lack of research on such organizations—see understudied cases such as The Tiny News Collective, a platform providing tools, resources, and knowledge to US news entrepreneurs starting new journalism projects in underserved news deserts, or Lawyers for Reporters, providing pro-bono legal support to news ventures.

In summary, and with regard to theoretical advancements, investigating the organizational field level through a lens of "organizations as innovations" allows us to see the wide spectrum of novel organizational species that populate journalism today and their interdependencies. By examining these different species, as well as the new roles and functions at play, we can gain insights into the redistribution of tasks and functions amongst actors in the field. This dynamic process is characterized by the emergence of new organizations that assume novel roles in the industry, while existing ones undergo specialization or even cease to perform certain functions, ultimately leading to a reconstitution of value creation in the journalism field.

3.2. Populations Level

A pressing question of research on new organizing is whether a non-traditional organization can serve as a template or a prototypical role model for the genesis of a whole new population. In organization ecology research, a population refers to a specific group of organizations that share certain similarities, although there may be some degree of variability among members (Aldrich et al., 2020). The emergence of similar organizations marks the proliferation and stabilization of certain trends and, over time, reveals some remarkable broader changes in journalism. For example, SMC can already be seen as a blueprint for followers, as it is part of a larger global movement of science media centers in, among other countries, Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand (Buschow et al., 2022). Even if these organizations differ in nuances, they mark a gradual institutionalization of an innovative infrastructure support system that reshapes work in (science) journalism. Other examples of organizational populations that have recently emerged in journalism include stand-alone fact-checking organizations (Brookes & Waller, 2023; Graves & Konieczna, 2015), innovation-orientated media labs (Mills & Wagemans, 2021), and hybrid non-profit university centers (Olsen, 2020). These organizations differ significantly from the classic templates of organizing journalism, as they

specialize in certain tasks (fact-checking news), take on new ones (transforming news by innovation), or combine functions that were previously separated (bringing together employment and education).

Although these organizations have been studied, they are still under-researched as populations, hindering an advanced understanding of their larger impact on journalism. This can be seen in the rise of the novel organizational population of cross-border collaborative investigations, such as the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists and the European Investigative Collaborations (Buschow & Suhr, 2022a; Konow-Lund, 2019). In this novel organizational form, journalists temporarily cooperate on a transnational investigation (as in the Panama Papers or Paradise Papers), enabled by shared digital technologies, infrastructures, and resources (e.g., investigative material, leaked data sets). While extensive research has been conducted on the working structures and collaborative practices of these particular organizations, their characterization as an organizational population has not yet received adequate attention.

By investigating this organizational population through a lens of "organizations as innovations," a more general organizational trend towards the "projectification" (Buschow & Suhr, 2022b) of journalism can be gleaned. These projects can be perceived as a reaction to a complex environment, interwoven global challenges of news reporting (e.g., international finance flows and tax havens) which are partly caused by the increasing digital interconnectedness of societies, and new societal developments that demand more networked ways of reporting and practices of resource pooling. Due to specialization and temporality, projects fundamentally challenge the traditional newsroom structure by dissolving its permanent structures of societal (self-)observation, developing more towards "what are sometimes called pop up newsrooms" (Wall, 2022, p. 139).

Whether a single organizational variation develops into a prototype and gives rise to a novel population is, of course, unclear and depends, among other things, on the extent to which this organization succeeds in acquiring resources and the extent to which it fits its environment and gains legitimacy (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Journalism studies need to closely and longitudinally follow non-traditional organizational forms soon after market entry, while also focusing on the decline of populations since traditional mass media entities (such as commercial newspapers) are under immense economic pressure and might have come to the end of their organizational lifecycles (Nielsen, 2019). Given the increasing influx of foundations and non-profit organizations in journalism (Ferrucci & Nelson, 2019), it is worth exploring whether there is a shift from a predominantly for-profit industry structure to a prevalence of non-profit organizational populations.

In summary, on the level of organizational populations, the rise of new populations (such as infrastructure support organizations and cross-border collaborative investigations) and the breakdown of existing ones (such as newspapers and traditional newsrooms) draws attention to a growing mix of organizational forms in journalism. As the example of cross-border collaborative investigations shows, organizational populations underline the manifestation of certain trends and the redistribution of resources (capital, labor, knowledge, customers), as well as power shifts among populations. Since the emergence of novel organizational populations interacts with environmental conditions, these clusters of organizations serve as expressions and indicators of such conditions, demonstrating how journalism responds to them organizationally.

3.3. Level of the Single Organization

At the level of the single organization, investigations can focus on the media work of recently emerging organizations with new roles and functions in the field (e.g., Buschow et al., 2022; Crispim da Fontoura, 2021) or novel organizations that deliver journalistic content similarly to the traditional newsroom but employ alternative procedures and structures of news production (e.g., Stringer, 2018; Wall, 2022). In either case, adopting a perspective of "organizations as innovations" allows for an exploration of the organizational elements involved in news work and the design of structures, coordination processes, and work practices within such collective entities.

For example, in platform environments such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, novel organizational designs are emerging that are specifically geared towards producing journalistic content for these global media platforms. Additionally, novel organizations built around principles of participation and peer production are experimenting with work practices and less formal processes that offer to include both professional and non-professional actors beyond the newsroom (O'Riordan et al., 2020). By understanding contemporary organizational designs, it becomes possible to uncover new facets of journalistic work, including aspects related to organizational hierarchies, work roles, coordination and decision-making processes, levels of autonomy, and workforce structures (e.g., occupational security, financial security, socialization, and on-the-job training). While some of these categories have already been pinpointed by traditional newsroom ethnographies, new organizational designs offer the potential to identify additional, omitted, or innovated elements of organizing that influence contemporary journalistic production.

When encountering a novel organizational design, it is essential to ascertain whether it can be regarded as an archetypical organizational configuration, a template for organizing that is different from the classic newsroom model. This perspective enables an examination of how remarkable practices of media work spread and are adopted beyond the boundaries of a single organization.

In summary, studying the individual organization level through an "organizations as innovations" perspective provides a fresh view of the evolving nature of media work, the transformation of organizational designs and elements of organizing, and their impact on journalistic production today. By gaining an understanding of these organizational elements, practices, and transformations, we can glean valuable insights into broader changes in the industry.

4. Conclusion: Towards a Research Agenda on Innovative Forms of Organizing Journalism

Historically, organizations research in journalism studies primarily focused on examining work routines, recurring practices, and standardized processes within the traditional newsroom. Given the emergence of a multitude and variety of new organizational forms of news work and fundamentally new types of organizations in the journalistic field, this article proposes a shift from stasis and routine to innovation and change. As demonstrated by the conceptual lens of "organizations as innovations," observations made by research on different organizational levels contribute valuable insights to develop a better understanding of more general transformations of journalism, especially since novel organizations might be capable of anticipating future developments in the field. In doing so, our article adds another category of novelty to

innovation research in journalism, broadens our understanding of media organization, and enriches theory building in the field of journalism organizations.

At each of the three organizational levels and in their interplay, there is potential for shedding light on the key dynamics currently unfolding in journalism and thus enriching wider conceptual discussions, as Table 1 highlights. Understanding organizational innovation in the journalistic field reveals significant changes in the division of labor and the transformation of value creation configurations among organizations, providing a complementary perspective to Bourdieuian-inspired field research. As seen from recent meta-organizations, certain parts of the journalistic workflow are decoupled and repackaged into specialized organizational units, sometimes working on a non-profit basis. The emergence of science media centers exemplifies this reconfiguration of journalistic labor at the field level and offers a compelling avenue for further research into such infrastructure support systems. Further research at the field level should ask how the division of labor is changing among actors, and which new types of actors are developing in response to societal changes.

Table 1. Research agenda following from a lens of "organizations as innovations."

Analytical level	Research questions
Organizational field	How is the division of labor changing? How is news work (re-)distributed among different organizations and units in the field?
	Which new types of actors with which (specialized) tasks and functions are developing in response to institutional and societal changes?
	How can meta-organizations support journalistic labor and compensate for shortcomings in the industry?
	What roles and responsibilities do meta-organizations (as infrastructure support systems) take on and what are their influences on journalistic practice and norms?
Organizational populations	Which novel organizational populations are developing in the field?
	What are the preconditions for a new organizational template to grow into a population?
	How do new populations react to societal developments and the shortcomings of traditional media organizations?
	To what extent are there shifts in industry structures in journalism that are evident in the rise and decline of populations, such as a shift from for-profit to not-for-profit populations?
Single organization	How do novel organizations perform elements of news production differently from traditional newsrooms?
	Which new roles are performed by novel organizations?
	What makes an archetypical organizational design that can potentially be adapted by other organizations?

At the organizational population level, researching new organizing highlights the diverse mix of organizational forms and the redistribution of resources and organizational power in journalism. Organizational forms and structures that better fit the societal challenges of the 21st century will eventually give rise to new populations, as exemplified by cross-border collaborative investigations, while older forms (such as traditional mass media organizations) will tend to be deinstitutionalized. Further research on novel organizational populations should consider the preconditions necessary for a new organizational template to develop into a population and how

new populations react to societal change and the shortcomings of traditional media organizations. Studies should also longitudinally monitor the mix of populations in the sector (e.g., market entries and exits), as such analyses can provide insights into the more general shift towards a non-profit industry structure.

The single organization level reveals the dynamic nature of media work, changes in organizational designs and elements of organizing, and their influence on contemporary journalistic production. By comprehending these organizational aspects, practices, and transformations, we can acquire valuable knowledge about wider changes within the industry. However, traditional news ethnographies that rely solely on single case studies may not be the most suitable approach for investigating the vast and diverse landscape of novel organizations in journalism. Instead, adopting an approach such as Usher's (2016) "hybrid ethnography," which involves broadening the sample size while reducing depth, could offer a more effective means of researching and categorizing a greater number of (innovative) elements of organizing.

As can be seen from this research agenda, there is a steady need to study the ongoing transformation of the organizational landscape of journalism, utilizing the conceptual lens of "organizations as innovations" proposed in this contribution. Moreover, this lens has the potential to enrich existing research streams in various ways. For example, research on media ecologies (Anderson, 2016), hybrid networks of professional and non-professional media actors (Reese & Chen, 2022), and innovative news epistemologies (Zamith & Westlund, 2022) could benefit from a differentiated approach focusing on the three levels: field, populations, and single organizations.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.1. Institutional Logics

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

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

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

2.1.1. Institutional Complexity

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

2.2. Institutional Arbitrage

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.3. Research Context: Product Managers in News

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

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

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

2.3.1. Product Managers in News

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. Method

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

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

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

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

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

3.1. Analysis

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

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

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

4. Findings

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

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

4.1. Resource Valuation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.2. Purpose

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.3. Practice

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.4. Legitimacy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.1. Limitations and Future Research

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

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

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

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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Breaking Away From Hectic Daily Media Production: Unleashing Explorative Innovation Through Inter-Firm Collaborations

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Abstract

Beyond the widespread disruption narrative around media innovation, journalism scholarship has put forward valuable remedies to counteract a techno-deterministic perspective by embracing socio-constructivist and socio-technical approaches. Nevertheless, thus far, scholarly attention has primarily been directed towards the newsroom despite the journalism field having undergone significant structural transformations. In this article, we adopt an organisational perspective to journalism innovation and apply it to the emerging locus of inter-firm collaborations in journalism. In fact, while the newsroom has traditionally been considered the dominant location for implementing innovations, an increasing amount of media work currently occurs in decentralised settings. Our study draws upon 20 qualitative interviews with media practitioners and media managers who have been involved as project leaders in inter-firm collaborative projects. These projects have received institutional funding specifically aimed at fostering media innovation. We strive to understand how practitioners conceive of innovation in their overall activity, what obstacles they encounter in their usual routines, and how collaborative practices support them in their innovation trajectory. Our findings indicate that innovation is predominantly perceived as a demanding and complex ongoing practice characterised by adaptation to an evolving environment and hindered by a lack of resources and time. We also find that collaborations offer media practitioners a temporary framework for balancing their efforts to keep up with the demand for daily media production and their aspiration to carry out explorative activities. Lastly, our research reveals that these collaborations provide occasions for knowledge exchange and self-reflection that are frequently absent in non-collaborative settings.

Keywords

dissonance; explorative innovation; inter-firm collaboration; journalism innovation; news media organisations

1. Introduction

Expectations and prophecies around the uptake of new technologies and their transformative impact on the field of journalism have long characterised the media innovation discourse, outside and inside academia, and continue to do so (Posetti, 2018; Steensen & Westlund, 2020). Regularly, a new, supposedly disruptive technology or an innovative product attracts the attention of industry leaders and academics for its potential to save or kill the journalism industry. Examples were the pivot to video in 2015, podcasts, the metaverse, blockchain technology in the early 2020s, and AI, including the latest developments of large language models in late 2022. When such products and technologies are discussed as applicable to journalism, the technological component is usually regarded as the only deterministic agent that can transform media consumption patterns and influence organisational re-arrangements of news production and distribution. However, the social context in which these technologies are adopted receives little scrutiny, both in the public discourse, at the industry level, and even in academia. Each new artefact is expected to introduce significant change due to its inherent novelty, compelling the journalism sector to merely respond adaptively to the repercussions of unforeseeable circumstances (Creech & Nadler, 2018). However, journalism scholarship has illustrated, from the early 2000s, the multifaceted nature of innovation processes. By practising a socio-constructivist approach to innovation, the focus has shifted away "from the effects of innovation to the process of innovation," with a new emphasis on how technologies are internalised in the social setting of the newsrooms (Paterson & Domingo, 2008, p. 16). This approach has shed light on the critical role of the media practitioners and the organisational cultures of the companies in which they operate. A wealth of research conducted under this socio-constructivist perspective from the early 2000s has contributed to building a wide scholarly understanding of the social dynamics of innovation in the newsroom (Paulussen, 2016).

However, the contemporary media landscape has profoundly changed in the last two decades. If traditional newsrooms are far from becoming extinct, they have become an increasingly less dominant form of "employment and organisation in journalism" (Deuze & Witschge, 2018, p. 169) than they were in the 20th century. Digitisation, notably, has contributed to amplifying the competition at the level of news offer. Furthermore, the financial stability of traditional news organisations has been challenged by declining print circulation, insufficient digital revenue growth, and the rise of digital platforms and news startups. With the exception of a few cases, these transformations have led traditional news organisations to make hard decisions regarding staff layoffs (Nielsen, 2018) and R&D investments (Küng, 2015). The increasing precarity of the profession has contributed to fueling the phenomenon of freelancing and entrepreneurialism, with journalists creating their own companies and independent small-scale brands (Deuze & Witschge, 2018), often depending on grant-based support to conduct their operations. In other cases, new journalistic companies have been born as a reaction to societal phenomena, such as fact-checking agencies in the context of online disinformation. More interestingly, the increasing complexity of technological development has contributed to making it too expensive for many news media to support the in-house development of tailored technologies, making the practice of sub-contracting to external specialised companies more common (Küng, 2015).

In this evolving and precarious environment, the traditional locus of the newsroom is broadened and remodelled, becoming much more fragmented, diverse, and layered. In line with this shift, the locus of innovation, the actual location where creative ideas are discussed, negotiated, tested, and implemented, is

no longer only the institutionalised setting of the newsroom (Hepp & Loosen, 2021). Contemporary news organisations increasingly seek external collaborations to engage in activities that demand specialised skills and knowledge not fully available within their internal structures (Cook et al., 2021). Partnerships with external providers, such as tech startups, consultancies, content agencies, and other non-traditional journalistic actors, have become more attractive due to the increasing technological complexity and rapidly evolving media consumption habits. In this article, we claim that this emerging decentralised innovation practice represents an under-researched yet increasingly significant setting for journalism innovation in the contemporary journalistic landscape.

In Europe, both at the EU level and at the national level, several public institutions are currently supporting collaborative practices in journalism, mostly with a focus on investigations, but lately, with growing attention also to innovation and business transformation. The EU's Journalism Partnerships Programme exemplifies this practice, as well as other national and regional ones, such as the Flemish government's Digital Transformation Programme (Relanceprojecten voor de Mediasector) launched in 2023 in the framework of the EU Recovery Fund. However, despite the increasing availability of such funding opportunities, dedicated research exploring the impact and effectiveness of these initiatives is scarce. Given the growing interest of policymakers in Europe towards collaborative innovation, we decided to conduct research on the experience of Stars4Media, the first EU programme supporting cross-border collaborative innovation projects. In this article, we focus specifically on the second edition of the programme (2021/2022), which saw the implementation of 30 collaborative projects involving 76 media companies across 22 European countries. We strive to understand how the team of practitioners involved in these projects conceive of innovation in their overall work, what obstacles they usually encounter in their organisations and how the collaborative projects they carried out helped them overcome these obstacles and bolstered their innovation trajectory. We examine the "lived experience of journalists" (Heft, 2021, p. 147) who were directly involved as project leaders in the implementation of these collaborative projects. The main research question that will be answered in this study is: How do inter-firm collaborative projects stimulate innovation in journalism?

This research question will be broken down into three sub-research questions: How do journalists perceive and emphasise the significance of innovation within their routine work? What are the primary obstacles they encounter during processes of innovation? And how, in the experience of journalists involved in the innovation programme Stars4Media, are collaborative projects useful to overcome the obstacles typically experienced during innovation processes?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Explorative Innovation in Journalism as an Organisational Endeavour

From the early 2000s, journalism scholars started to posit that research on journalism innovation should extend beyond simply examining how technology transforms the industry. The focus gradually shifted towards investigating how the diverse actors participating in the processes of change within the social setting of the newsroom shape their individual interests, engage in negotiations to achieve their objectives, and either impede or facilitate the progress of innovation (Paulussen, 2016). In line with this perspective, García-Avilés et al. (2018) define innovation in journalism as the collective practice of leveraging creative skills to generate value for an organisation and for the users/customers of its products/services. However,

the meaning of value—a central construct in this definition—is far from being self-evident when referring to innovation. When is value being generated? On the one hand, generating value can entail a set of marginal changes and refinements in products and processes, in this case referred to as exploitative innovation. On the other hand, it can involve the radical rethinking of internal workflows or the creation of novel editorial products and services, in this second case referred to as explorative innovation. This latter case is considered much less common than the first one because explorative activities require a managerial commitment to mobilise the needed resources for creating an environment that is conducive to exploration and innovation (Porcu, 2017). Journalists, furthermore, usually dedicate their creative energies almost entirely to the execution of day-to-day activities (Koivula et al., 2020). A wealth of empirical research in the field of organisational studies has demonstrated that news media companies usually struggle to make space for exploratory activities, as they find it hard to balance daily media production and explorative innovation, an ability that has been labelled as ambidexterity (Koivula et al., 2022; Porcu, 2017). However, it is precisely through the enactment of explorative innovation practices that the potential for substantial value creation and financial rewards emerges. In the present study, our conceptualisation of journalism innovation aligns with its explorative form, as we seek to investigate news media organisations engaging in activities that deviate from their regular operational routines rather than simply making incremental enhancements to them.

2.2. Dynamics of Internal Collaboration in Journalism: Dissonance as an Essential Ingredient for Innovation

Organisational research in the newsroom has advanced the idea that explorative innovation benefits from being carried out collaboratively (Gade & Perry, 2003, as cited in Paulussen, 2016; Küng, 2017; Valero-Pastor et al., 2021). From an organisational/processual perspective, literature on integration has examined the dynamics of intra-firm collaboration between the different social groups that compose a news media company. In the literature on convergence, the rationale is that an integrated firm, where different assets of specialised knowledge are coordinated, is conducive to innovation and more suitable for operating in an uncertain environment (Gade & Raviola, 2009). The theoretical building block which supports the correlation between a mix of specialised assets of knowledge and innovation is the concept of dissonance, as presented and discussed in Stark's book *The Sense of Dissonance* (2009). Dissonance refers to the organisational attitude of a firm that "regularly and recursively produces perplexing situations" (Stark, 2009, p. 5) in which friction is intentionally generated through the encounter of multiple evaluative principles. This means that a company's management encourages situations in which professionals with different profiles and disciplinary backgrounds are brought together to develop a solution or solve a problem. Within this type of setup, organisational taken-for-granted are set aside, and novel insights are generated. The concept of dissonance, although originating from fields outside of journalism studies, has gained considerable traction within the realm of journalism research, particularly among scholars focusing on the dynamics of intra-firm collaboration (Lewis & Usher, 2016; Nielsen, 2012; Wagemans & Witschge, 2019; Westlund & Lewis, 2014). This may be attributed to the fact that journalistic organisations have historically evolved as hierarchical organisations and internally divided structures, where organisational walls reflected internal sets of competing values co-existing in one entity. The inflexibility of such sub-divided structures has materialised in the relatively unsuccessful experiments of news organisations that set up so-called intrapreneurial units to unleash hidden innovative potential. In these experiments, small and flat startup-like units embedded in the larger structure of the company were established to stimulate organisational creativity through

collaborative teams. As attested by the study of Boyles (2016), however, the prevailing top-down management culture heavily hindered the success of these initiatives, thereby showing how organisational hierarchy can negatively influence a company's trajectory of innovation.

Regarding internal divisions, two main lines of organisational divide have been scrutinised by journalism scholarship. A wall between the editorial and commercial departments has been a necessary tactical choice to protect editorial integrity from market interests (Schudson, 2012). A wall between the editorial and the tech departments has also constituted a characteristic trait of newsrooms, in this case, because of the historical tendency to consider technologists as lesser media professionals. Despite the different professional cultures and occupational ideologies of technologists and journalists, research has demonstrated that their coordination into an intentional community can yield fruitful outcomes in terms of generating creative solutions which would otherwise not have been conceived of, as several single case studies have shown (Baack, 2017; Lewis & Usher, 2016; Nielsen, 2012). The process of digitisation, in fact, has illustrated that technologists should not be considered just as practitioners in charge of the maintenance of the infrastructure but as key actors in the development of new products and services (Westlund & Lewis, 2014). Intra-firm collaborations have emerged as socio-technical practices, in which human actors (both the media professionals and the audiences) have contributed to shaping the process of digitisation by making the role of technological actants increasingly central. This implies that in such settings, a given technology's impact on the newsroom unfolds dialogically due to a complex web of internal negotiations. Also, the case of the collaborations between journalists and business people has received extensive academic scrutiny. Drew and Thomas (2018) identified structural and individual factors that can shape the outcomes of cross-functional teams. Cornia et al. (2020) found that the once dominating norm of separation is now being deconstructed in the discourse of senior executives in favour of the emergence of a new norm-building process in which collaboration and adaptability already play a central role. This shift seems to be confirmed by the results of a longitudinal study on perceptions of intra-organisational innovation of Norwegian newspaper executives (Westlund et al., 2021).

2.3. Inter-Firm Collaboration: An Avenue to Media Innovation?

It might be tempting to assume that media executives, in line with the increasing trend of internal collaboration discussed in the previous sections, would equally support experiments with external collaborations. However, when it comes to inter-firm collaborations, there are at least two substantial reasons to conclude the opposite. This is especially valid for collaborations between news media companies of the same size, country, and editorial profile. These companies often compete for the same resources; hence, engaging in collaborative innovation projects with their competitors seems to imply a paradox (Gade & Raviola, 2009; Graves & Konieczna, 2015). Secondly, a cultural reason contributes to complicating the hypothetical scenario of inter-firm collaboration: The socialisation of journalists working for legacy media has coincided with a process of active delimitation of the field along the line of traditional/non-traditional journalistic actors, which Bourdieu would have attributed to the necessity to "maintain a dominant vision of what journalism is" (Eldridge, 2018, p. 556). This identity-building process tends to translate into an act of boundary preservation, which may hinder collaboration processes, particularly with non-journalistic or non-traditional companies. Slot's (2021) study on collaborative innovation practices of Dutch news media seems to confirm this, especially regarding traditional organisations. Her research shows that on a superficial level of analysis, Dutch news media deem collaborative innovation important for their transformation phase,

particularly for the knowledge-sharing aspect and the importance of making strategic connections. However, from a more critical perspective, their take on collaborative innovation signals "more a discursive practice than a practical ambition" (Slot, 2021, p. 427), which can be explained by the high level of competition and self-awareness that characterises the Dutch journalistic field. Given these considerations, it is challenging to argue that inter-firm collaborations, whether among journalistic actors exclusively or between journalistic and non-journalistic actors, can universally represent a feasible option for fostering explorative innovation.

Empirical academic research can, however, study specific scenarios of collaborative practices to indicate in which contexts and for which journalistic actors collaborative innovation can represent a viable and enriching solution. In fact, despite the obstacles presented in the previous paragraph, there is a growing academic consensus that the practice of inter-firm collaboration is gaining traction in the field (Cook, 2021; Heft, 2021; Konieczna, 2020). More recently, literature has illustrated that the practice of collaboration is taking off beyond the scope of large investigations such as the Panama Papers (Heft, 2021) towards smaller-scale initiatives at a local level, as in the case of some South American initiatives (Chacón & Saldaña, 2021; Schmitz Weiss et al., 2018) or for politically pressured news media (Cook, 2021). At a theoretical level, Graves and Konieczna (2015) explored the idea of collaboration as a practice of field repair in which the democratic mission of journalism is revamped by news-sharing despite journalism remaining a competitive occupation. Heft and Baack (2021, p. 15), building on the idea of "pioneer journalism" (Hepp & Loosen, 2021), have advanced the concept of intermediaries of changes to point to how small-scale collaborations "can contribute to a gradual integration of transnational practices" into daily media production. At the level of empirical research, Heft (2021) discussed the phenomenon of grant-based collaboration from below by examining the motives, the advantages/challenges, and the ways in which these collaborations take place, and concludes that they contribute to the normalisation of the practice in the field. Lastly, the research stream of "open innovation" (Klaß, 2020), which studies settings where companies tactically use the external environment to unleash their innovativeness, has illustrated how news organisations widely experiment with inter-firm collaborations. Specifically, news organisations increasingly seek cross-industry alliances in the form of hackathons, living labs, one-to-one partnerships, or open-source projects (Lewis & Usher, 2013) to jointly develop innovations that require the coordination of highly specialised sets of knowledge.

3. Design and Methodology

Grounded on this theoretical framework, we decided to examine the phenomenon of small-scale collaborative innovation projects between journalistic and non-journalistic actors. Specifically, we seek to understand which unique instruments are provided to media companies for achieving explorative innovation in collaborative settings, as opposed to non-collaborative ones. We opted for a qualitative methodology to answer our main research question, as we intend to examine the dynamics of innovation from the perspective of the tangible lived experiences of the participating journalists within the collaborations.

This study builds on a body of 20 qualitative semi-structured interviews with a selection of project leaders of the 30 collaborative projects of the second edition of the Stars4Media programme. In the framework of the programme, the project leaders coordinated each of the 30 collaborative projects supported within the second edition of Stars4Media. These project leaders had a deep understanding of both the project implementation and the collaborative dynamics between the partners. In the medium-sized companies involved in the interviews, these people also usually had a managerial position, while in bigger organisations

(established legacy media) they usually had a middle management position. In these latter cases, we asked a manager at a higher level to join the interview to respond specifically to questions related to the history and practice of innovation in the company. In some cases, project leaders who coordinated a project that entailed a technological innovation invited a colleague from the technological department to the interview to assist with the more technical aspects of the project implementation.

The selection process of the interviewees was grounded on the theoretical sampling principle (Mayring, 2014), as we decided to interview only the project leaders of the projects led by a news organisation. This selection narrowed down the number of interviewees from a total of 30 project leaders to 20. The companies represented by the 20 interviewees encompassed six big companies (>200 employees), three medium (50–200 employees), three small (10–50 employees), and eight micro (<10 employees). The news organisations represented by the interviewees typically carried out their projects in partnership with tech startups, consultancies, design studios, and other non-journalistic actors, often entailing a strong degree of cross-disciplinarity in the composition of the partnerships.

The interviews took place after the implementation of the collaborative projects, between March and April 2022, partly in person and partly remotely. They were recorded and lasted an average of 64 minutes. They were subsequently transcribed and coded with the support of MAXQDA, following the systematic and focused analysis method (Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2020) as part of the thematic analysis (Mayring, 2014; Puppis, 2019). Both deductive and inductive coding were practised. We developed deductively from theory a first set of broad categories that were already incorporated in the interview guide, and we started to code the interviews based on these categories. After this, we identified the main categories relevant to our research question and we engaged in further work of open coding to inductively create new sub-categories for answering our sub-research questions. Lastly, the different sub-categories pertaining to the main thematic areas that we identified were compared to each other to answer our main research question.

4. Case Study: The Stars4Media Programme

The Stars4Media programme was launched in 2019, following the European Parliament's proposal that media innovation in the EU should be supported by enabling cross-border collaborations between European media organisations. The basic idea behind the programme is to provide grants for collaborative consortia of usually two or three media organisations to work together on an innovative project for a limited amount of time. In the second edition of Stars4Media, which ran between January 2021 and June 2022, 30 collaborative innovation projects were selected, awarded with a grant and enabled to implement their proposal across four months. Collaborations happened mostly remotely due to the ongoing travel limitations related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The companies' representatives we talked to were also the initiators of the projects: they developed the main aspects of the proposal, selected the partners themselves, and then applied to Stars4Media to receive the funding. Stars4Media's second edition received 101 applications, and 30 projects were selected by an independent jury. The project proposals could be submitted to only one of the three available topic tracks or macro-areas: editorial innovation, technological innovation, and business innovation. Typically, these projects primarily focused on the initial phases of ideation and initial testing. The projects that received funding included, but were not limited to, initiatives around the development of tailored AI and augmented reality/virtual reality technologies for the tech macro-area, solution/constructive journalism and novel channels of audience engagement for the editorial macro-area, and the testing of novel

revenue models for the business macro-area. Despite the presence of a lead company in all consortia, all the partners of each consortium were supposed to work in a collaborative logic and not in a contractor-client relationship, hence contributing equally to the result, with frequent online interactions and regular check-ups enabled by remote video conference tools.

5. Results

5.1. Innovation as an Organisational Practice of Constant Adaptation

In the first phase of the interview, the respondents were asked to reflect on their relationship and history with innovation, referring to their company and not the collaborations. We asked why they considered innovation important in their overall practice and what they wanted to achieve with it. Their responses provided information that was essential for understanding, in the second phase of the interview, how collaborative practices supported their innovation trajectory. This is because different ways of conceiving and practising innovation entail different ways of exploiting collaborations. The responses illustrate that innovation is considered important for diverse reasons, depending on each company's profile, mission, and specific situation. Legacy media tend to articulate the importance of innovation using variations of the semantic domain of necessity, which they link to the urgency of achieving financial sustainability by either strengthening practices of audience engagement or by upgrading the relevancy and public perception of the company. However, smaller media or non-profit organisations tend to deem innovation important for enhancing qualitative reporting, for bolstering the societal mission of the company and for empowering readers. This variety of interpretations suggests that the role of innovation depends on each unique social context in which a company operates.

Furthermore, next to presenting their relationship to innovation in a variety of different terms, many respondents have also suggested that innovation for them is also a complex process of gradual adaptation to a constantly evolving environment, in a logic of continuous trial and error. This is confirmed by the way in which the effort of adaptation is rhetorically formulated. Several respondents framed innovation as an organisational conundrum rather than an opportunity to solve their issues easily. Frustration, puzzlement, and perplexity are described as being involved in the process. Several respondents think of innovation as a mandatory but complex arrangement for which they are not entirely prepared.

"We certainly need to explore new ways of expression for the content that we have, which is a huge human resource problem by the way, it is not only a technological problem" (Interviewee 5). As this quote suggests, technology alone appears insufficient to compensate for the organisational challenges that news media companies face during transformation processes. This resonates with the invitation of Steensen (2013, p. 54) to think of innovation through a practice perspective: "The change in the structure of an organisation is not necessarily evoked because of influence from outside the organisations….But can be evoked through agency from within the organisation." The dialectic between the different human agents of the company and the human resources mentioned in the excerpt shape—and are recursively shaped by—the structure in which they operate. Innovation, hence, is not predominantly about which solutions technology can offer but what organisational adaptation is required for humans operating within structures and acting as gatekeepers of technologies in specific social contexts.

5.2. Navigating Obstacles to Innovation: Moving Explorative Innovation to the Top of the Roadmap

In the second phase of the interviews, we moved to the main obstacles they typically encountered when carrying out innovation projects. This section of the interviews also explicitly does not refer to their collaborative work in the projects carried out as part of the Stars4Media programme. Understanding the usual obstacles in their typical routines is a necessary preliminary step to identify the facilitating aspects they encountered in the collaborative projects, which were addressed in a different section of the interviews. Insufficient financial resources, the lack of skills, and the lack of money were among the most regularly discussed obstacles, both by digital native organisations and by legacy news media. The lack of money is not surprising as it is in line with available evidence: Financial constraints were indicated as the main obstacle to innovation in a recent survey on the future of the news media industry (Newman, 2022). Budget cuts and uncertainty about the results of experiments with new products/services contribute to feeding an already ingrained risk-averse attitude at the executive level. In fact, innovation is described as an activity that entails extra costs related to the training of the personnel or the onboarding of new professional roles. Several respondents have not simply pointed out how limited resources make the cost of technology inaccessible but how the company's overall skill gap cannot be reduced with extra training or by taking on new staff. The combination of lack of skills and lack of specific profiles causes, according to many of them, their company to fail in bringing a mix of different evaluative principles to the symbolic table around which creative ideas are discussed. The concept of dissonance is useful in this case to illustrate the internal difficulty with the conceptualisation and implementation of creative ideas, as these two quotes confirm:

> If you cannot renew your staff, then it is really complicated to have new ideas from the inside. You need to get them from the outside. (Interviewee 18)

> I think that there is a gap between what we have as a vision on the one end…and the skills that we need to get there. And we can always get there until a certain level, but sometimes you need specific skills, technical skills, skills from data analysts, marketers, and strategists, which we do not have in-house. (Interviewee 3)

More interestingly, similarly to how money exacerbates the skill shortage, it also affects time. Time occupies a substantial space in the interviewees' reflections, who describe themselves as constantly overloaded in their efforts to transform their companies. Daily media production absorbs almost all the companies' energy; therefore, any extra project that potentially deviates from the roadmap is either discarded or pursued with limited engagement. This organisational struggle is often described as symptomatic of chronically overstressed operational capacity, in which both the practitioners and the executives with decision-making responsibilities are constrained by their already full schedule of short-term targets:

> Journalists are busy 100% of their time making news; they have no time to innovate with us [innovation lab of a public broadcaster] because they are focusing on news production. And they have targets too. But it is not their problem. It is a management discussion: making sure that there is time allocated to new initiatives. (Interviewee 4)

> Managers are as overworked as everybody else. They do not get to dedicate the space to say, "Oh, I found this grant; who in my team could do it now?" They are more on visible daily stuff, especially in our 24/7 news operations. Work never stops. (Interviewee 10)

The way the respondents articulate their answers suggests that for news organisations, the difficulty with their innovation trajectory is primarily and inextricably of an organisational nature. Technology is part of the equation insofar as it is implicated in the change process. However, technology alone cannot be a complete solution, nor can it compensate for the organisational obstacles that an organisation faces.

5.3. Collaborative Innovation: Stimulating Explorative Attitude by Providing a Framework and an Occasion for Dissonance

In the last part of the interviews, the collaborative projects of the Stars4Media programme were discussed in more detail to connect how the interviewees experienced innovation to how the collaborative projects concretely supported them in their innovation trajectory. When discussing the concrete advantages of the collaborations, curiously, many respondents dwelled on the financial aspect of the grant, which is not itself an inherent element of the collaboration. They pointed out how even the limited financial support they received influenced the decision of their company to re-assess their priorities. The simple creation of a temporary budget allowed them to make space in the agenda for a project that they perceived as potentially valuable but practically too risky without external funding:

> I would not have taken time to work on that because it was valuable; it was important, but it was not mandatory. I am in the position of choosing what is mandatory, and I cannot save time to think about the extras, but the extras can be a game changer in one year. (Interviewee 1)

> This [Stars4Media programme] is something that we could definitely have done, but it would have been a side project that I would have done on a Friday afternoon between five and eight in the evening, or something like that. Where we would still be super enthusiastic about it, but semi-committed. (Interviewee 3)

The budget provided by the Stars4Media project is usually a limited contribution that hardly covers the entire investment sustained by the companies involved, as declared by the participants in the programme. However, it is sufficient to act as a trigger to stimulate their explorative attitude and to reshuffle their strategic priorities: "It is not a lot of funding. But you still have external expectations that you have to live up to. And I think that is quite important for making innovation happen. Because otherwise, the daily work will be prioritised" (Interviewee 12).

The prospect of a partially financed project provides single entrepreneurial individuals acting within the company with extra legitimacy to take the initiative and create space in the roadmap and time in the agenda for an explorative project. Clearly, this evidence does not imply that the collaborative dimension itself makes companies suddenly more prone to innovation or even long-term organisational transformation. In fact, temporary budgets for innovation projects could be (and have already been) allocated without a collaborative dimension. The funding agency of Stars4Media—the European Commission—obviously has a normative view on the role of collaboration, especially cross-border collaboration, because its mission is to support the cross-national integration of the European media sector. From how the interviewees emphasised the grant as an advantage, it can be assumed that the collaborative dimension might predominantly be a formal aspect that companies have to comply with to fund a project that they might have in the pipeline but which cannot be financed internally. What seems to confirm this assumption is the

fact that almost all interviews have reflected on how, without the support of Stars4Media, they would have hardly engaged in the project. The interviewees' emphasis on the financial aspect may indicate that these collaborations are strategically used to try out projects and ideas that could potentially work but whose likelihood of success is perhaps judged as low. The experimental nature of these projects seems to confirm this assumption: The companies involved have the rare opportunity to create a temporary, less competitive setting for experimentation that allows them to evaluate whether the effort will pay off, having minimised the risk. Further research might investigate if such experimental projects can potentially become a standard way to support the initial phase of innovation processes or rather mainly serve as a low-risk "playground" setting, exerting minimal impact on the standard innovation culture of news organisations.

The interviewees, however, also reflected on other advantages that were inherently connected to the collaborative dimension itself. Many project leaders emphasised how the project deadlines agreed with the partners created positive peer pressure, which influenced their capacity to make the most out of the project. In their experience, the collaborative dimension creates a logic of mutual expectations and positive peer pressure among the partners and this, in turn, forces each company to commit more strongly to the project. The external budget makes the involvement possible, and the collaborative dimension makes the results more likely to be achieved. Collaborative innovation practices function as temporary frameworks that act as environmental stressors. The companies are involved in a wider environment which allows them to temporarily overcome the difficulty of working on innovation alone. The programme's framework contributes to making the existing organisational structure of a company more fluid and flexible by creating a new unit of professionals who engage in the project beyond the usual organisational boundaries.

In several cases, there is a further facilitating aspect of the collaborations that have contributed to medium to long-term change in the companies. Many respondents have hinted at the benefit of having a larger diversity of profiles involved in the project, which is usually unavailable internally. Furthermore, this mix of competences and different evaluative principles (the cross-disciplinary aspect) has, according to them, created a platform for reflecting on their usual internal workflows and choices. In the experience of many respondents, the collaboration allowed them to overcome the narrowness of evaluative principles that they encountered in a non-collaborative logic. In a word, they experienced a work setting more conducive to dissonance. This scenario also corresponds to the typical collaborative settings experienced by companies that experiment with "open innovation." This aspect happened particularly as part of collaborations that saw journalistic companies working with technological companies. In many of these partnerships, the technological company usually would provide the journalistic company with a solution for a specific problem: an automated process for video analysis and archiving, the creation of a virtual reality-based editorial product, the possibility to module the duration of an audio track thanks to an automated summarising tool, or the application of AI to photojournalism techniques. The journalists involved in these partnerships usually reported that they had not directly learned from the technological partner how to develop the technology further, but they had started to internalise it. However, they did understand how to exploit and integrate it into their work. Furthermore, through the engagement of the editorial staff with external technological companies, many projects contributed to overcoming certain cultural attitudes and resistance towards experimenting with technology. The following excerpt from an interview with a regional newspaper exemplifies this dynamic. The process of starting up the collaboration between the partners also required that the regional newspaper provide a set of professionals from different units to be dedicated to the project, as explained by a media professional from the technology department who joined the interview.

This, in turn, supports the internal dialogue between different departments:

> The project leader was a great help in onboarding all those people from different units. They started, really, I would say, reluctantly; they were not keen on experimenting this way because it is not a habit of the company; you could see it in how they were behaving. And at the end of the first meeting, that started to shift and change. And we could see people really excited about the possibilities, and this way of working and how there were different approaches to imagining a project….And those people who did all the conception phase now are knowledgeable a lot on this technology. When I talk to them, they start using the right words, they start to get interested, read about it elsewhere and say, "I saw this and this, and this connects to this." So you start to have this link between all those different people and all of these different units. (Interviewee 7)

6. Conclusions

This article has investigated how inter-firm collaborative projects stimulate innovation in news media companies. The analysis of the interviews has revealed that innovation is understood as a collective practice of adaptation to a changing environment. Innovation can be de-dramatised and regarded as a social practice carried out collectively by a group of individuals with their "attitudes and strategies, negotiations and knowledge exchanges" (Schmitz Weiss & Domingo, 2010, p. 1169). The interviews reveal that innovation practices in news media companies are hindered by a shortage of financial resources, which impacts the available skills, specialised profiles, and time for carrying out innovative projects. This study expands existing literature on journalism innovation by providing a set of practical implications that journalists may consider for strengthening their company's innovation trajectory through collaborations. First, creating external relationships is usually viewed as a tangible benefit as it comes with additional internal legitimacy capital and the possibility of creating long-lasting synergies that extend beyond a single project. Even a limited financial grant, such as in the case of the Stars4Media programme, is sufficient for news media companies to re-assess their priorities and embark on experimental projects. Most importantly, the collaborative dimension itself stimulates positive peer pressure and mutual expectation that is usually unavailable in their companies. Secondly, the opportunity to step away from media production routines offers the opportunity to interact closely with media professionals who bring specialised knowledge that is not usually available internally. If fully exploited, this dimension can result in a long-lasting improvement of media production processes and creative workflows. Several interviewees reflected on how the collaborative setting leads to self-reflection and re-evaluation of organisational routines, which strongly supports their learning trajectory. Lastly, some pointed out how collaboration contributes to generating change at the level of a company's innovation culture by challenging organisational inertia. Journalists, beyond the idea of an unjustified faith in collaborations as a silver bullet solution, can reflect on whether their ongoing or future collaborations can yield such immaterial benefits, which are deemed key building blocks for long-term newsroom innovation.

This study offers a novel qualitative perspective on the emerging phenomenon of collaborative innovation and offers several implications for future research. First, if such collaborations help media companies focus on explorative innovation, it would be crucial to further investigate the effects on long-term organisational change and measurable improvement in the medium to long term, with a longitudinal perspective. Beyond the temporary advantage, companies need to gain financially to continue investing in collaborations. Lastly, since

the end goal of these grants is to improve the overall resilience of the news media industry, the question of the systemic impact of these programmes could also be explored.

Limitations are present in this study, particularly when it comes to the fact that the phenomenon of collaborative innovation is investigated through the perspective of media professionals who actively decided to engage in collaborations. However, no view is provided from the perspectives of those who decided not to, including what their motives were. The findings, hence, cannot be generalised to news organisations that show limited interest in collaborations. However, we maintain that these results offer an original perspective on a phenomenon that continues to gain momentum and hence deserves academic scrutiny beyond the advertorial discourse around innovation in the field of journalism.

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Conflict of Interests

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Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Can't Fix This? Innovation, Social Change, and Solutionism in Design Thinking

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Abstract

Design thinking is commonly presented as a solution-oriented approach to innovation. It aims to solve so-called "wicked problems," with various textbooks and toolkits promising to equip their readers with the skills needed to do so. By rendering design thinking as a magic bullet for problem-solving towards innovation and social change, some of its proponents fall back on a solutionist position. This is despite a growing body of research highlighting critical approaches to design thinking. Drawing on, and adding to, such literature, this article examines how innovation and social change are concretely conceptualised in design thinking guides. Using a cultural media studies approach, the article first contrasts design thinking literature with critical design research, emphasizing the notion of (technological) solutionism. It then zooms in on a purposively selected case: a design thinking textbook aimed at tertiary students. Based on an interpretative analysis of this example, it discusses what understandings of innovation and social change are encouraged in the envisioned design thinking. In linking the reviewed literature and observations from the case study, the analysis highlights two main arguments: First, complex interrelations between innovation and social change are causally simplified in outlining design thinking, thereby fostering techno-fix approaches and mindsets: Readers are encouraged to not merely select but in fact construct solvable "problems," in turn avoiding confrontations with substantive issues that cannot be fixed through the envisioned design thinking. Second, innovation is conflated with corporate activities and normative questions of innovation, (in-)equality, privilege, and social change are neglected, in turn suggesting a misleading symbiosis between economic and societal interests.

Keywords

design thinking; inequality; innovation; social change; solutionism; techno-fix; technological solutionism

1. Introduction

Design thinking is widely hailed as a panacea for innovation (Brenner & Uebernickel, 2016; Brown & Wyatt, 2010; van Reine, 2017). Proponents of design thinking commonly describe it as a steerable process and an attainable set of skills alike: an effective, solution-oriented approach to innovation by design (Wylant, 2008), which aims to achieve social change (Brown, 2009). As a skill set, it is nowadays trained in corporate, governmental, and various academic settings alike (Razzouk & Shute, 2012), meaning to equip employees or students with the skills needed to solve the "wicked problems" societies are increasingly facing (Buchanan, 1992; Rittel & Webber, 1974). Within design thinking literature, there is consequentially also a vast body of textbooks, toolkits, and process guides promising to instruct their readers in "harnessing the power of design thinking" (Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011, p. 34). This article examines how innovation and social change are framed in such design thinking guides, focusing on their use in higher education.

On the one hand, its proponents are known for their enthusiasm and "belief" in design thinking (Greenwood et al., 2019). On the other hand, researchers in critical design studies, innovation studies, as well as science and technology studies (STS) have long cautioned that innovation and social change occur neither linearly, nor are they easily predictable. Notably, those emphasising the social construction of technology have warned against mindsets of (technological) solutionism (Dobbins, 2009; Morozov, 2013). Techno-fix approaches (Selinger & Whyte, 2012) foster technology developments that are not well attuned to societal needs and users' interests. There is moreover a growing body of critical literature on the limits and implications of design thinking specifically, inter alia from researchers concerned with critical design and critical making (Jakobsone, 2017; Kimbell, 2011, 2012; Murray, 2020; Newton & Pak, 2015; Service Design Network, 2019). And yet, design thinking proponents, and their guides and toolkits, appear to largely ignore such critical perspectives.

To scrutinise how such a broadly observed mismatch between design thinking guides and the complex interrelations between innovation and social change concretely manifests itself, my article starts from two questions: How are innovation and social change communicated, also relationally, in textbooks and guidelines on design thinking? And stemming from this, what are the implications for the understanding of, and approaches to, innovation encouraged in such contexts? To address these issues, this article adopts a cultural media studies approach. First, I will contrast design thinking literature with concerns of (technological) solutionism and critical design research. Second, I will analyse the design thinking textbook *Design Thinking for Student Projects* (Morgan & Jaspersen, 2022), which is mainly aimed at tertiary students.

While design thinking has been more frequently discussed as a topic for innovation studies and as an approach in science and technology education (Panke, 2019), this article aims to contribute to the debate from a critical media studies and communications perspective. By analysing a textbook, I hope to facilitate a broader debate on the didactic media used to communicate design thinking principles and to instruct students. The article examines how innovation is didactically communicated, in design thinking in particular, though also potentially beyond. With design thinking being increasingly used in media, journalism, and humanities as well as social science disciplines more broadly (Burdick & Willis, 2011; Parker, 2014), the educational implications of this growth should be reflected upon too. I scrutinise how complex relations between design, innovation, and social change are framed as inter alia dependent on organisational, corporate contexts, and market success. Based on this analysis, I discuss what implications this may have for the approaches and mindsets encouraged through design thinking, especially considering its use in tertiary education across a broad variety of disciplines.

While acknowledging practical reasons for reducing complexities in such textbooks, the article problematizes a conflation of innovation with corporate economic activities. The analysis highlights two main arguments: First, complex interrelations between innovation and social change are causally simplified, in turn encouraging techno-fix approaches and mindsets among students. Second, normative questions of innovation and social change are neglected: also by blending out civic grassroots innovation, while at the same time suggesting a misleading symbiosis of economic and societal interests. Before proceeding, it should be stressed that this article does not mean to disregard the manifold important, critical works on innovation, design, and design thinking alike: Instead, it starts from the observation that much of this work is largely neglected in more practical, educational media on design thinking, in turn also underemphasising the critical thinking potentially invested in design. With this, I hope to contribute to a broader conversation about the implications of neglecting innovation risks and tensions in didactic media on design thinking—for teaching practices and for students' learning.

2. Design Thinking, Innovation, and Social Change

Design thinking and related approaches can be traced back to the 1950s–1970s. Arnold's (1959/2016) *Creative Engineering* and Archer's (1965) essay series *Systematic Method for Designers* explored how "thinking like a designer" could also support other practitioners in tackling societal issues. Rittel and Webber (1974) are widely credited for bringing the notion of "wicked problems" to the forefront, prominently returning in Buchanan's 1992 article "Wicked Problems in Design Thinking" (see also Peters, 2017). The term meant to highlight that societies are facing issues which are increasingly difficult to solve, as they are determined by multiple, interdependent factors. Such problems are intricately entangled, with related needs and interests contradicting each other and thus hampering possible solutions. In addition, not all factors may be equally well-known or understood.

Cross (1982) argued that "designerly ways of knowing" were not only beneficial to designers but should be encouraged in other disciplines and educational contexts too; the author emphasised their relevance beyond primarily design-oriented fields such as engineering or architecture. Rowe's 1987 book *Design Thinking* further promoted the term and its use(fulness) in fields other than those commonly associated with design. Hence, in its original understanding, design thinking referred to cognitive strategies and practical approaches adapted from the design field (Rowe, 1987). In studying such approaches, design researchers were aiming to shed light on processes of creativity and problem-solving, and to develop foundations for instructing others in systematically developing relevant skills (Cross, 2011/2023a). However, in the mid-2000s and notably the 2010s, writings on design thinking shifted further (or split) towards the application and practical uses of design thinking—notably as a method for inspiring innovation and guiding solution-oriented approaches to problems (Cross, 2023b; Brown, 2008). Here, design thinking was mainly considered as a process aimed at solving problems by favouring practical solutions over understanding the roots of such problems, and as a skill-set to be acquired. The latter also facilitated its uptake in higher education institutions, as design thinking became seen as an expertise to be taught too.

Design thinking as an approach for non-designers was thus not only taken up in corporate settings but found a place in higher education curricula as well. Design thinking classes are nowadays routinely offered at universities worldwide (McLaughlin et al., 2022; Wrigley & Straker, 2017). This trend indeed goes far beyond what one might consider "the usual suspects" in terms of disciplines, with design thinking not only being

taught in economics departments but also in, for example, the (digital) humanities (Burdick & Willis, 2011). Miller (2017) even suggested that design thinking may be "the new liberal arts" (p. 167). This is also related to design thinking literature emphasising its proximity to human-centred design (Baker & Moukhliss, 2020), notably encouraging methods such as empathy, interviews, and observations. Design thinking literature heavily links respective processes and skills to innovation (Brenner & Uebernickel, 2016). Such innovation is often treated as a catalyst for social change (van Reine, 2017), allegedly enabling educators to teach "innovation as a learning process" (Beckman & Barry, 2007).

Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that a broad range of textbooks, toolkits, and process guides for design thinking have emerged over the last 10-odd years (Liedtka, 2011; Peters et al., 2021). Process guides like the Stanford *Introduction to Design Thinking* and other "how to" sources have been highly influential in instructing teaching on design thinking (Panke, 2019). Yet, surprisingly little attention has been paid to how such guidelines concretely frame the envisioned practices, and how they thereby arguably co-shape participants' views on matters of design, innovation, and social change. While this article will only make a modest start at addressing this gap by focusing on one example, I hope to stimulate further research on this issue. In addition, I aim to emphasise and add to critical discourses in design research by highlighting insights and concerns that appear still neglected in textbooks and guides on design thinking.

3. Technological Solutionism and Innovation by Design

While it is safe to say that innovation is an ambiguous and diversely defined concept, not only depending on what discipline one asks, it is predominantly defined in relation to novelty/new-ness, creativity, and change: For example, as "inventiveness put to use" (Yock et al., 2011) and as "successful implementation of creative ideas" (Amabile, 1996, p. 1). "Success," here and elsewhere, tends to be put on a level with market acceptance and economic profit (Morozov, 2013), inter alia ignoring variants of civic and grassroots innovation. This is despite civic innovation having been described as a key domain for "grassroots innovation movements" which "arise in reaction to perceived social injustices and environmental problems often arising in conventional innovation models" (Smith et al., 2014, p. 115). The argument also highlights that the kind of innovation examples selected and presented in inter alia didactic sources promote certain motivations and values driving such innovation.

And yet, not only are science and technology corporations and institutes and perhaps public-private partnerships considered the linchpin for innovation, but technological innovation is in turn also still frequently depicted as a main driver of social change: a line of argumentation that has been described as "technological determinism" (see also Wyatt, 2007). Definitions of innovation guided by technological determinism are still very much around—despite various authors tirelessly stressing the multiple, complex factors shaping how society and technology co-evolve (Dafoe, 2015). At the same time, innovation scholars have long stressed the need to move beyond technocentric perspectives and consider civic innovation as a relevant practice too (Meissner & Kotsemir, 2016; Smith et al., 2024). Analysing, among other things, how the understanding of innovation changed over time, Meissner and Kotsemir (2016) show that its conceptualisation as a process and as a culture, especially, rather than as a mere tangible outcome, has been influential in innovation studies. In turn, strictly sequential understandings of innovation processes were abandoned, in favour of more complex open innovation paradigms, increasingly considering users' agency in the acceptance and domestication of new products, services, and technologies. In design and design

thinking, this point is notably reflected in an emphasis on users' perspectives, participatory approaches, and the relevance of empathy and testing (Köppen & Meinel, 2014).

Providing an overview of earlier work on generations of innovation process models, Meissner and Kotsemir (2016) also show that a view of innovation as a technological breakthrough dominated up to the mid-20th century. A technology's acceptance was largely seen as a demand issue and resulted in a "push" approach to technological product development. Later innovation models considered complexities such as organisations' broader innovation culture as well as interactions and interdependencies between e.g., universities, corporations, and governmental organisations, also resulting in "quadruple/quintuple helix frameworks of innovation" (Carayannis et al., 2018). Another question, also underlying this article, is hence: If innovation scholars have largely moved beyond techno-solutionism for decades, why and how does such techno-centric thinking still factor into didactic practices when it comes to design thinking? This might be considered puzzling as also STS and related disciplines have stressed that the establishment and popularisation of emerging technologies is not simply a matter of their functional superiority. In arguing for the social construction of technology authors notably opposed technological determinism, that is the—either tacit or explicit—assumption that technology is the main driver of social change (Pinch & Bijker, 1984). Instead, as critical historians and media archaeologists have pointed out too, technology's acceptance or disappearance is contingent on social factors that are difficult, in some cases impossible, to control. Despite, or exactly because of such contingencies and power relations affecting innovation cycles, technological solutionism and techno-fixes have been extremely persistent and are still thriving today (Dobbins, 2009; Morozov, 2013).

Solutionism is inextricably linked to technological determinism. In defining technology as a main driver of social change, tackling societal issues and achieving the desired change can consequentially only be approached through technological innovation. This is not to say that there are no technological solutions to certain issues: For example, vaccines are considered a techno-fix in the best sense of the word, as they de facto provide a technological solution to a problem. At the same time, once a vaccine is developed, much work is still to be done to ensure the sufficient vaccination of a population (Gordijn & Have, 2022). Having said that, ideologies of solutionism and techno-fix approaches have facilitated an emphasis on steering social change through technological innovation and product development more broadly. I introduce (technological) solutionism as a key concept here, as I will argue further below that by falling back on solutionism, design thinking guides encourage approaches and mindsets considering technology and saleable commodities as the lynchpin of social change. Dobbins (2009) also warns of a "solution-driven design" that "risks applying the 'magic bullet' model to solve problems, reaching for the answer before the questions have been fully asked" (p. 182). Building on Dobbins, Morozov (2013) criticises that—rather than genuinely considering wicked problems—the "problem-solving" dominant in design (thinking) merely masquerades market-driven innovation as activities addressing a societally relevant issue. While Morozov's work notably targets design as a field saturated with solutionism, he acknowledges merely a few of the more critical strands in design research. However, the concerns examined above have been taken up in critical design studies and critical making research too, as I discuss in Section 4.

4. Critical Design and Maker Culture

As indicated in Section 3, there are certainly various critical voices to be found in design research and design thinking literature alike. Yet, these do seem to largely disappear when one looks at toolkits, guidelines, and how-to textbooks. Among others, authors encouraging a more critical engagement with design thinking are Kimbell (2012, 2011), Jakobsone (2017), Ozkaramanli and Desmet (2016), Rodgers et al. (2017), and Loewe (2019). Insightful critical work on design thinking can also be found in literature at the intersection of critical making and design (DiSalvo, 2014; Ratto, 2011; Service Design Network, 2019). Such authors remind us that design is as such more complex than often implied in design thinking. This also relates back to authors such as Dorst (2011), emphasising that designers tend to invest substantial critical thinking into their work, notably highlighting the need to acknowledge historical, geographic, and situational complexities of design practices. Similarly, Manzini (2015) discusses the implications of spreading design approaches among disciplines that are not traditionally considered as design(ers). The author notably considers innovation as "social innovation," also exploring designers' role in supporting participatory design practices and co-design.

Most authors concerned with a lack of criticality in design thinking argue for (re-) introducing speculation, provocation, and situatedness as well as an acknowledgement of normativities and uncertainties in design thinking. In "Rethinking Design Thinking," Kimbell (2011) discusses three main issues: the dualism of thinking and doing assumed in design thinking; widespread ignorance towards diversity in design practices and context; and an emphasis on the designer's agency in design. Later arguing for a practice theory approach in design (thinking), the author moreover calls for "moving away from a disembodied, ahistorical design thinking to a situated, contingent set of practices carried by professional designers and those who engage with designs, which recognizes the materiality of designed things and how they come to matter" (Kimbell, 2012, p. 131). Similarly, Jakobsone (2017) and DiSalvo (2014) stress the normativity and politics of design, emphasising designers' responsibility to engage with future impacts and the desirability of their creations. In terms of normativity, design thinking has notably faced criticism for its neocolonial tones (Janzer & Weinstein, 2014; Murray, 2020) and a neglect and/or simplification of gender and diversity issues (Christensen et al., 2021). For example, Tunstall (2013) observed that the "values of design thinking draw from a progressive narrative of global salvation that ignores non-Western ways of thinking rooted in craft practices that predate yet live alongside modern manufacturing techniques" (p. 236; see also Arora, 2019, and Arora et al., 2023). Ozkaramanli and Desmet (2016) argue that designers may notably intervene in such normative debates by focusing on provocation and critical reflection through design(ing). They highlight the notion of "personal dilemmas," also referring back to Kimbell's (2012) emphasis on situatedness and the relevance of standpoint theory for design. Building on Ozkaramanli and Desmet's (2016) work, Loewe (2019) also highlights the relevance of critical debates and "provocation by design."

By drawing on insights from critical design research, STS, practice theory, feminist theory, and postcolonial critique, these authors also revisit concerns of technological determinism and solutionism outlined in the previous section. At the same time, they do not entirely "give up on" design thinking as a potentially valuable approach. Ratto (Service Design Network, 2019), too, acknowledges design thinking as a tool to potentially spark creativity, yet suggests that more critical (making) approaches should be incorporated as "an antidote to design thinking." Among the works emphasising the importance of critical thinking in design thinking, two arguments related to tech-determinism and solutionism appear notably striking—and have been succinctly summarised by Matthews et al. (2023, p. 12): "In our experience, design thinking, in the applied sense of a

set of tools to address wicked problems, tends to underspecify what design actually does and exaggerate what it will accomplish." Design thinking thus should stay clear from promoting design as a "just do it" mode, which underemphasises and under-stimulates the intellectual work that goes into design (see also Kimbell, 2011, p. 289). A main issue hence lies in some design thinking proponents overstating what it enables participants to do, with critics calling for practitioners and educators to refrain from overinflated, simplistic promises of social impact through design. Such concerns are clearly articulated in a growing body of critical literature on design thinking. However, they do appear to be still marginalised in design thinking literature more generally and in practice-oriented design thinking guidelines specifically. To shed light on how such tensions concretely play out, my analysis will scrutinise how innovation and social change are conceptualised in one design thinking textbook. Section 5 will therefore first address why the textbook has been selected, and how it has been analysed.

5. Approach

This article takes a cultural media studies approach and interpretatively analyses one example of design thinking guides: a textbook aimed at tertiary students. Sterne (1999) emphasises that the analysis of texts and artefacts is a key component of cultural (media) studies. This will also be the case in this article: I will analyse parts of the book *Design Thinking for Student Projects*, by Morgan and Jaspersen (2022), focusing on the chapters "Innovation" (pp. 24–60) and "Design Thinking" (pp. 62–88). While the close reading of individual texts or compiled corpora is methodologically central to cultural media studies, Sterne further highlights that these texts and media are mostly "a means to an end." Their analysis should be ultimately about attention to power and a commitment to politics. In this sense, analysing such cases can and should contribute to "a richer understanding of the political character of cultural and social life" (Sterne, 1999, p. 262). This article likewise aims to analyse a design thinking text(book) and medium, presenting a case-based analysis.

A single case study approach comes with advantages and limitations. Alasuutari (1996) suggests that:

> Instead of assuming that any corner of social reality leads to the traces of some universals to be pointed out in the final analysis, in cultural studies a case study is understood to reveal a local and historically specific cultural or "bounded" system. (p. 371)

While such an approach may invite criticism as enabling merely "exceptionalist" insights, case study approaches are in turn known to facilitate "a high level of explanatory richness" (Brydges & Sjöholm, 2019, p. 124). Despite a single case study not allowing for generalisable conclusions, this approach can still bring out societal implications of design thinking as it is promoted and practised in higher education. Yin (2009) and Stake (2000) both emphasise that the main aim of a case study is not to assert generalisability, but to function as (potentially preliminary and always interconnected) step/s in building theory and directing future research. Hellström (2008) likewise argues that a main value of case studies lies in possibilities for transferability, by triggering and contributing to knowledge building in conversation with others (Hellström, 2008). In this sense, my article draws on previous criticism of design thinking, while likewise aiming to shed further light on how such issues are concretely expressed in (didactic) design thinking media—in this case: a textbook. This rather humble contribution to the field can thus yet contribute to the debate on criticality in design thinking more broadly, especially with regard to its role in higher education. To acknowledge my own

positionality in this field, I have participated in and hosted design sprints and similar events (see Richterich, 2019), also in the context of higher education, and have researched civic innovation practices (Richterich, 2020). As a university educator based at a European humanities and social sciences faculty, I have taught design thinking and (co-)hosted design sprints, mostly open only to students, though occasionally also for a more general public. My experience, and sometimes unease, within these settings has also inspired this article.

Among the textbooks and guidelines on design thinking, I decided to focus on *Design Thinking for Student Projects* (Morgan & Jaspersen, 2022) for three main reasons. First, I followed a purposive selection approach, aiming to select an "information-rich" case that can speak to "issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (Patton, 1990, p. 169). I pursued what Patton (1990) describes as "theory-based/operational construct sampling" (p. 177). This means that I selected the textbook as the main case, because of its "potential manifestation or representation of important theoretical constructs" (Patton, 1990, p. 177), that is: design thinking in relation to innovation and social change. Second, I have focused on a publication aimed at students in higher education, as the implications of this seemed particularly notable. While one will not be surprised to see innovation conflated with market success in corporate contexts, it seems worthwhile to discuss what this would mean for tertiary students' understanding and approaches (even when these may be placed in inter alia economics departments). Third, while I could have selected several examples, I instead decided to close-read one case of design thinking guidelines in order to present a detailed discussion rather than an overview. This has been done since the above literature review broadly indicates that innovation and social change are key concepts in design thinking literature. Starting from this insight, I aim to shed light on *how* they are being made sense of, and linked to each other, in detail. The two chapters then have been picked as they were most fitting in terms of speaking to the notion of innovation and change, while likewise making a close-reading doable within the scope of this article. Close-reading as the detailed, interpretative reflection on texts originates mostly from literary studies; however, it has been taken up in media studies too, e.g., to analyse games, weblogs, or metadata (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011; Cohan, 2017; Eriksson, 2016).

6. Analysis and Discussion

6.1. The Textbook

Design Thinking for Student Projects (Morgan & Jaspersen, 2022) is written by two university educators, with a focus on innovation management and organisation studies. Morgan previously worked for a multinational technology corporation, inter alia as "chief innovation officer." The book starts from the premise that universities should support their students in developing "employability skills" such as problem-solving, change management, and commercial awareness. According to the authors, a key value of design thinking lies in further supporting universities in "helping their students gain these skills through team-based projects, utilising innovation to solve real-world problems" (preface). The book targets and addresses students as main readers, stating to be "suitable for undergraduates and postgraduates across all disciplines" (preface). At the same time, it includes (online) resources for educators aiming to use design thinking and related approaches in their teaching.

The book chapters cover topics such as "Innovation," "Design Thinking," "Loving the Problem," "Commercial Awareness and Value," and "Pitching Innovation and Wow Factor." Each chapter combines thematic

introductions of key issues, with practical instructions as well as input from educators and industry professionals. Chapters 2 and 3, titled "Innovation" and "Design Thinking," were chosen for an interpretative analysis, as these shed light on how the two notions are conceptualised in relation to each other. Rather than analysing the chapters separately, they will be jointly discussed in Sections 6.2 and 6.3. The main aim of Chapter 2 is described as equipping students with the knowledge to engage in innovation themselves. Subsequently, Chapter 3 presents design thinking as a process and practice. Both chapters are divided into different sub-sections: thematic parts, for example defining key terms and explaining their relevance; "exercises" and "reflection points," inviting students to link what they have just read to prior knowledge; and short "expert" interviews with representatives from industry and higher education.

6.2. "Innovation Is Whatever the Client Says It Is"

Chapter 2 starts by defining innovation. This is done notably in relation to organisations and economic activities. Drawing on Morgan's experience in corporate contexts, it is stated that "innovation is whatever the client says it is" (p. 27). Here, the authors stress that understanding a client's idea of innovation is crucial for success in corporate contexts, and proceed by outlining a more general understanding of innovation, notably highlighting links between creativity, entrepreneurship, and innovation. Organisations, that is companies and corporations, are presented as main entities engaging in innovation, while civic innovation is left out. Consequently, innovation is also defined as an activity that is, and should be, tied to value creation (p. 27). Examples of innovation are only broadly mentioned, referring repeatedly to the iPhone or companies that are framed as key innovators, such as Apple or Alphabet/Google. As a key learning point, the authors summarise that "innovation is the application of new ideas, or existing ideas in a new context, which results in change that delivers value" (p. 56). While the textbook mentions that value does not necessarily need to be monetary, the latter is emphasised in examples mentioned throughout the chapters. Moreover, despite potentially different understandings of *value* being indeed mentioned, these are not discussed as normative tensions in innovation.

This observation relates back to issues concerning normativity in design and innovation practices, also raised by Jakobsone (2017) and DiSalvo (2014), as well as Smith et al. (2014) with regard to civic grassroots innovation. On the one hand, this occurs in privileging economic value as a benchmark for innovation; on the other hand, this is related to value conflicts in design and innovation being ignored. By blending out civic innovation examples and repeatedly yet broadly asserting major technology companies as key innovators, the textbook neglects examples that could represent "a vision for innovation processes more inclusive towards local communities in terms of knowledge, processes and outcomes" (Smith et al., 2014, p. 114). While innovation of "questionable value" (Morgan & Jaspersen, 2022, p. 29) is raised as a potential problem, students barely receive input on how to deal with normative issues in design thinking. Such critical material might (and should) be added by educators in situ, but this cannot be taken for granted and will vary depending on the disciplinary institutional context too. Reinforcing this point, the examples used to illustrate best practices in design thinking, in Chapter 3, also highlight cases such as adventure-themed MRI scanners for children—thereby implying a misleading symbiosis of economic interests and common good values such as effective healthcare.

Chapter 3 starts by introducing design thinking as a "human-centred approach to innovation," citing Tim Brown from the IDEO consulting and design corporation. It differentiates between the typical five stages

"empathise, define, ideate, prototype, test" (p. 67), mentioning that this is not necessarily a linear and likely an iterative process. The authors propose design thinking and innovation management as complementary processes. The former is presented as a means for overcoming setbacks in innovation processes. While acknowledging that innovation projects "rarely proceed in a straight line," it is suggested that students "can use Design Thinking and other techniques to fix them" (p. 69). Emphasis is put on the need to "love the problem," warning students to not hastily proceed by looking for solutions.

Despite seemingly trying to avoid solution-centric approaches, solutionism appears to be re-introduced in two ways. First, the chapters encourage students to approach societal problems by design and through innovation. Thereby, they also put emphasis on issues that appear "fixable," or can at least be presented as "fixable" on the surface. This avoids a more substantive confrontation with issues that cannot be fixed, neither by a design thinking process nor through corporate innovation. Second, the approach encourages an engagement with "problems" that are constructed rather than encountered: Instead of putting emphasis on potentially broad and unsolvable societal challenges, students are encouraged to frame their observations as problems that can and should be solved. As Morozov (2013) warns too, such framing of economic activities as "problem-solving," encourages techno-fix mindsets that are problematic, because they neglect issues that are indeed too "wicked," too complex and challenging, to be simply solved, and blur the lines between actual societal issues and social needs constructed to sell products.

This observation can further be illustrated by the emphasis on an understanding of innovation as an economic necessity and "arms race": citing, for example, an IBM representative stating that "innovation is vital because your competitors are doing it" and "you either innovate or die" (p. 29). Apart from competitors, social change is identified as a key factor necessitating innovation, as the latter "helps organisations respond to changes in the environment" (p. 29). At the same time, the link between innovation and change is deterministically presented as a causal relationship, e.g., stating that innovation "results in change that delivers value" (p. 56). By outlining possibilities for managing innovation, it is presented as steerable too. The authors draw on notions of "pull" and "push" innovation, i.e., the idea that societal needs might either call for and trigger new ideas vis-à-vis organisations looking for ways to identify or even construct needs that their products could feed into. Building on innovation management as a strategy to "deliver innovation activities by design" (p. 37), they also suggest products and notably technologies as drivers of "transformative innovation" and social change, referring, without providing much detail, to for example the iPhone as a technology considered to have transformed communication or Netflix as a service transforming viewing practices. To guide innovation, according to the authors, students need to consider key "innovation enablers," that is "tools, leadership, people, funding, culture, and process" (p. 53). Here, the authors put forward ideas of innovation as a process that can be steered in certain directions (Dobbins, 2009), by managing key factors and by drawing on design thinking as an approach to guide this process. While open innovation is addressed, a three-phase model of an innovation management process is introduced (p. 40) and used throughout the book—starting from "idea generation" and a "pull" vs. "push" paradigm.

6.3. It Is Complicated

Chapters 2 and 3 present design thinking as a relevant educational subject and as effective in directing innovation. To make this argument, complex connections between societal needs and social change as well as economic interests and societal issues are simplified. Two points appear striking in this context: First,

innovation and social change are largely discussed in terms of a causal relationship, that is innovation being key in steering social change. This is also done to pave the way for presenting design thinking as an important component of "innovation management." While such a simplification may be partly explained considering the textbook format, it does raise questions about its educational implications. Notably, it risks fostering techno-fix approaches and mindsets among students, also by encouraging them to favour "fixable" challenges and to tackle economic interests disguised as societal issues. Consequentially, students likely move on to solving the "problem" before its deeper roots have been fully understood (Dobbins, 2009). Second, the textbook avoids a confrontation with normative issues, a broader tendency observed by design thinking critics (Kimbell, 2012; Ozkaramanli & Desmet, 2016). By glossing over tensions between economic and societal interests, it also discourages students from considering responsibilities and risks in their own innovation practices. This is also facilitated by cherry-picking examples implying a convergence of commercial and societal interests, returning repeatedly to the case of adventure game-themed medical scanners for children. At the same time, examples illustrating the risks of innovation and tensions between public and corporate interests are hardly discussed. In implying and emphasising that technology and innovation mean to benefit the common good (see also Tunstall, 2013), this suggests a misleading, symbiosis between economic and societal aims. Little is moreover said about the implications and limitations of the adventure-themed MRI scanner as a key example, for example in terms of uptake in hospitals and inequalities in access to such a redesigned scanner room.

Design thinking is broadly promoted as an approach relevant to higher education, by presenting social change as steerable through innovation and by promoting design thinking as a driver of innovation in turn. In doing so, socio-technical complexities and normative concerns, for example, considerations regarding social inequalities, are neglected. Thereby, such an approach neglects insights from critical design thinking and critical making literature, which stresses inter alia the politics of design (DiSalvo, 2014). While the textbook authors hint at some of the complexities, such as normative tensions between societally relevant innovation and corporate interests or non-linear innovation processes, students receive little guidance when it comes to the implications of their engagement with design thinking. In a class setting, such guidance may be provided by educators; however, it can barely be derived from this and other instructive sources—also stressing the need for offering students a variety of sources on design thinking and innovation. Here, the relationship between innovation and social change is largely presented as a causal one. Design thinking, if done the right way, is then—in a solutionist manner—suggested as a pathway to realise social change through innovation.

7. Conclusion

Design thinking is widely framed as an effective strategy for sparking innovation, thereby aiming to steer social change. While a growing body of more critical literature cautions against the risks and shortcomings of solutionist design thinking, such solutionist approaches continue to ooze from corporate contexts into higher education. By zooming in on one textbook as an example, this article made a start at analysing how innovation and social change are concretely conceptualised in design thinking guides aimed at tertiary students. The above analysis highlights two main observations: First, a causal simplification of interrelations between innovation and social change, encouraging techno-fix approaches and mindsets; and second, an avoidance of normative questions, suggesting a misleading symbiosis between economic and societal interests. The latter is reinforced by conflating innovation with corporate activities, with examples broadly highlighting technology corporations, and by neglecting civic grassroots innovation which has been shown

to foreground issues of "poverty, social inclusion and sustainability" (Smith et al., 2014, p. 114). Starting from such an understanding of innovation, design thinking becomes notably promoted as an approach relevant to higher education in presenting innovation as steerable and as a key factor in "managing" social change. This seems particularly momentous since innovation also becomes predominantly located within corporate organisations and their activities, ignoring for example the values and norms driving civic or grassroots innovation. The issues selected in such design thinking are in turn more likely to misleadingly frame economic interests and corporate needs as societal "problems." At the same time, they encourage students to focus on what appears "fixable," discouraging a confrontation with large-scale societal issues and falling back on (technological) solutionism.

Such observations may be less surprising when considering higher education in economics departments as opposed to its increased influence on, for example, teaching in the humanities. Little is known however about how they play out in different educational scenarios, pointing at the necessity for further research into this field too (see also Glen et al., 2015; Retna, 2019; Sauder & Jin, 2016). Considering that design thinking is being increasingly taken up across disciplines, comparative insights into potential disciplinary differences (in terms of practices but also educational implications) are needed. Design thinking emphasises an urgent need to move from talk to action, and to tackle pressing societal issues by becoming involved in design and innovation activities. Textbooks for students then aim to reduce complexity, to allow participants to become involved in design thinking swiftly and efficiently. This need for simplification is understandable from a practical viewpoint. Yet, considering that the world is at a turning point, urgently requiring students to approach innovation in societally and ecologically responsible ways, matters of (in-)equality, discrimination, and privileges should be more widely incorporated in design thinking in education. Therefore, the didactic question of whether and how instructional design thinking literature can emphasise questions of normativity and responsibility of proposed activities appears (practically and as such normatively) rather pressing. Further research, and an increased acknowledgement of existing *critical* research, on design thinking and innovation, is needed: Also to examine how we might mediate between the complexity and normativity of innovation and social change, and reasonable simplification requirements of instructional media in higher education. A guiding question for this could be if and how educators can inspire design thinking practices that neither aim for answers before questions have been fully asked, nor construct problems geared at commercial fixes. Instead, we should allow for the outcome that a problem can't be fixed through (technological) innovation but is yet well worth discussing in a design thinking context.

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Innovations in Journalism as Complex Interplay: Supportive and Obstructive Factors in International Comparison

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Abstract

Where does innovation in journalism come from, how is it implemented, and what factors drive or hinder its development? Scholars have explored these questions from different perspectives for over two decades. Our research holistically considers the broader factors that influence the development of journalistic innovation at the macro, meso, and micro levels, and whether it is internally or externally driven. In a three-year international research project, we have unpacked innovation with this multidimensional approach, looking at the most important innovations in journalism in Austria, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, and the UK. Our study focuses on the mutual interplay between journalists, media organizations, and society. We investigated 100 case studies with 137 guided interviews with senior managers or project leaders. The results show that the focus of supporting and obstructive factors is internal and on the meso level and that many parallels exist between media systems. Internal factors are the intrinsic motivation of individuals, which need the support of open-minded management, allowing a culture of experimentation without economic pressure and assembling interdisciplinary teams. Across countries and independent of the respective media system, three external key drivers of innovation in journalism can be identified: technology, societal change, and change in the digital media universe. The study confirms once again as if through a magnifying glass that journalism is primarily a public service, especially for those innovations that strengthen the role of journalism in a democratic society.

Keywords
Austria; Germany; innovation; journalism; media organizations; obstructive factors; Spain; supportive factors; Switzerland; UK

1. Introduction: Innovation in Journalism

Innovation is based on processes that identify the existing problems in an organization and solve them in a successful way, often using technological tools (Chesbrough, 2003). The implementation of innovation in media organizations usually accounts for the interplay of different actors, such as professionals, processes, practices, technologies, products, and achievements (Evans, 2018). Innovation dynamics might shape not only the production of journalistic content, but many other fields like organizational structures, business models, role expectations, and news quality assessments (Bélair-Gagnon & Steinke, 2020).

Despite a general view that innovation is crucial to the survival of news organizations (Hermida & Young, 2021), scholars have found that individual journalists play an important role in the maintenance or transformation of organizational culture and norms (Bunce, 2019), and implementing change in newsrooms is difficult and is often resisted by media workers (Ekdale et al., 2015). Some studies have expressed misgivings about the growing interest in innovation, demanding more reflection on the nature of change and technological adoption (Peters & Carlson, 2019). Areas of concern include the weakening of leadership and journalistic culture (Küng, 2020), the consequences of failed projects (Bossio & Nelson, 2021), a fascination with technology and short-term experimentation without strategic purpose (Posetti, 2018), and perceived challenges to journalistic standards and practices (Ferrucci & Perreault, 2021).

On the other hand, some studies have highlighted positive aspects of the implementation of innovation such as the increase in collaboration among departments, the role of interdisciplinary teams (Koivula et al., 2023; Westlund et al., 2021), or its contribution to achieving news organizations' sustainability and success in terms of audience engagement or financial income (Klaß, 2020). A strategy of innovation both by legacy media companies and digital-only news players even in times of crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic was also noted (García-Avilés et al., 2022; Olsen & Furseth, 2023).

Where does innovation come from, how is it implemented, and what factors drive or hinder its development in media outlets? Scholars have explored these questions from different perspectives for over two decades, through a diverse and often limited framework of analysis (Bélair-Gagnon & Steinke, 2020). Some studies attach a decisive role to technology and the use of tools to implement innovations, often falling into a determinism that downplays the contribution of other non-technological factors such as productive processes, work organization, and the creative and intellectual contributions of individuals (Pavlik, 2021). Our research aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of the sources of innovation in a cross-national comparison. Although news organizations have distinct features in each country, scholars have tended to investigate media companies, audiences, and outputs in their own markets, often neglecting the value of comparative studies (Livingstone, 2012). Large-scale comparative projects have increased in the last decades in the field of media studies, promoted by universities, funding agencies, and professional associations. However, few studies have compared the state of journalism innovation across countries in depth (Job, 2017; Meier et al., 2022).

2. Innovation and the Interplay Between Journalists, News Organizations, and Society

According to the literature, diverse types of companies might have different innovation objectives due to the structural changes in the environment in which they operate (Leiponen & Helfat, 2010). Every innovation brings about positive or negative consequences, which might span the intra-firm level, the sectoral level, and, ultimately, the social sphere. In this regard, Guan et al. (2009) found significant differences in the relevance of innovation objectives according to company status (high-tech versus generic companies), ownership (public versus private firms), innovation resources (having an R&D department or not), and size (small- and medium-sized firms versus large firms and conglomerates).

Macro-level analysis of innovation explores institutional laws and regulations, market factors, and the socio-economical context to examine the impact of innovation policies in specific countries or regions (van Kranenburg, 2017). Medium-level analysis focuses on companies as agents of innovation, including management, organizational factors, strategies, and the diffusion of innovations (Evans, 2018; Nel et al., 2020). Micro-level analysis deals with individual agents and units of innovation such as newsrooms, labs, start-ups, etc. (Bisso-Nunes & Mills, 2022; Borges-Rey, 2020; Hogh-Janovsky & Meier, 2021). It is rare to find studies that combine all three levels of analysis.

From an institutional perspective, innovation processes are seen as the result of a complex interplay of structural factors related to organizational strategies, available resources, as well as news organizations' own professional practices, standards, and culture (Koivula et al., 2023). However, the institutional perspective alone is not sufficient to understand the implementation of innovation processes. Shifting the focus from the institutional to the individual level helps to identify the agents of change in an organization and to explore the different ways in which innovation processes are developed. Individuals known as "innovation champions" (Shea, 2021) also play an important role in driving organizational growth to pull innovation through the system by exercising influence over strategy, resources, and decision-making (Kriz et al., 2013). Thus, innovation champions include professionals who hold managerial positions, rank-and-file staff members, or those involved in entrepreneurial activities within their organizations, and thus they emerge at lower and middle levels to "'push' the innovation upward" (Kriz et al., 2013, p. 123).

Innovation in journalistic practices can add depth to news coverage; improve the processes of capturing, editing, design, and publishing; expand users' access to more complete and diverse information; and enhance the abilities of journalists (Álvarez-Macías, 2022). According to this study, by reconfiguring their practices and attitudes, journalists also changed how they valued the profession, which eventually resulted in an improvement in journalistic quality.

The existence of a wide diversity of innovation processes in different types of media (legacy, digital natives, start-ups, public service media, etc.) suggests that there are structural barriers to innovation that can be avoided or mitigated by individual or corporate actions (Bossio & Nelson, 2021). In this way, the processes of change in the media are influenced by how structural elements are accomplished or renegotiated through professional practices in the newsroom (Nel et al., 2020). As media practices and social practices are inherently entwined in journalism's public service role, innovation in news organizations could also be a source of societal change (Bruns, 2014, p. 19). These innovations might enhance the democratic function of journalism, by promoting a critical monitoring of day-to-day events, launching products that help explain complex issues, stimulating debate in the public arena, and fighting misinformation (Meier et al., 2022).

3. Drivers and Barriers of Innovation in News Organizations

Media innovations emerge not only as a response to the threats from technological disruption, the instability of the market, and industry competition, but also the prominence of social media and interactive audiences are increasingly playing a decisive role in fostering early adoption (Atkin et al., 2015). Innovative processes can arise from the grassroots, i.e., through the involvement of employees who propose and develop new ideas; from the top, through strategies implemented by management; or from both directions, with a cross-cutting initiative from above and below that strengthens the diffusion of innovation and its reach throughout the company (Ekdale et al., 2015).

Typically, diffusion of innovations theory has been applied to the spread of a particular technology or practice rather than the interplay of a cluster of innovations and it suggests technological change faces the fewest hurdles, as journalists recognize the need to adapt their practices to newer capabilities (García-Avilés, 2020). Many factors, including the availability of information concerning technology, adopters' past experiences, management support, the input of change agents, and internal communication strategies, contribute to the adoption decisions in news organizations which might help advance or hinder innovation processes.

Drivers of innovation encompass both internal and external indicators that influence how innovations are implemented in different areas of the organization. Internal drivers refer to aspects such as available human, financial, and technological resources, work processes, company practices, knowledge and talent, and professional culture (Meroño-Cerdan & López-Nicolas, 2013). External drivers are related to the regulatory framework, the characteristics of the market, the economic situation, and audiences' consumption habits (Ferrucci & Perreault, 2021). Process innovation objectives include goals such as reduction of labor costs, use of tools, and manufacturing flexibility, while product innovation objectives may relate to improving product quality, expanding product assortment, entering new markets, or increasing market share (Leiponen & Helfat, 2010).

In addition, innovation processes can be implemented internally, within the inner structure of an organization, or externally, by promoting collaboration with different organizations and creating innovation networks that might generate open innovation so that valuable ideas can come from outside the company (Chesbrough, 2003). This approach places both external ideas and paths to market on the same level of importance as that reserved for internal ideas and paths.

Research should holistically consider the broader factors that influence the development of journalistic innovation at the macro, meso, and micro levels. To date, few studies have been devoted to understanding the drivers for the adoption of organizational innovations within news organizations (Atkin et al., 2015; Klaß, 2020; Meier, 2007). Furthermore, there is a pressing need for comparative research that sheds light on innovation in diverse contexts and markets. This work attempts to fill these gaps. In the three-year international research Journalism Innovation in Democratic Societies: Index, Impact and Prerequisites in International Comparison (JoIn-DemoS), we unpack innovation with a holistic approach, not only looking at digital novelty. Earlier, we identified the most important innovations in journalism in Austria, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, and the UK (Meier et al., 2022). Now, this study focuses on the mutual interplay of these innovations between journalists, media organizations, and ultimately, society. It also attempts to identify the

drivers and barriers of journalistic innovations in five countries with similar (Austria, Germany, and Switzerland) and different media systems (Spain and the UK). According to Hallin and Mancini (2004), media in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (DACH countries) correspond to a "democratic corporatist model" which is characterized by a high degree of system stability, with strong public service media and legacy media houses under comparatively less pressure to initiate and unleash innovation processes. Both in the UK and Spain which belong to the North Atlantic "liberal model" and the "bipolarized pluralist model," media innovated earlier than in the DACH countries to meet the challenges of the digital era. The research questions are:

RQ1: What are the supportive factors of innovations in journalism?

RQ2: What are the obstructive factors of innovations in journalism?

RQ3: Are there patterns and commonalities in countries with different and/or similar media systems?

4. Method

To address these questions, we investigated 100 case studies of the most important innovations in the five selected countries. As already mentioned, we first identified the 20 most important innovations in journalism in Austria, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, and the UK in the decade 2010–2020. This initial empirical step, whose methodology is explained in detail by Meier et al. (2022), serves as the starting point for the second study presented here. In each country, journalistic media organizations have been selected for the respective 20 innovations to shed light on the questions of how innovations are implemented and realised in journalism and which drivers support and impend the implementation. For this purpose, we applied a multiple case-study approach involving best practice examples which have played a formative and influential role in the respective field of innovation in the different countries. For example, in Germany, for the innovation area of social media, the *tagesschau* was chosen because it was one of the first journalistic formats to experiment in this field and is today considered to be one of the most successful German players with a journalistic background in social media. Furthermore, media organizations could be selected for more than one innovation area if they had been identified as pioneers in different areas. ORF in Austria, for example, was not only chosen as a case for social media but also for data journalism. Table 1 gives an overview of the top 20 innovation areas in the five countries and the case studies selected for each.

In each of the selected cases, we interviewed people directly involved in the implementation process of the innovation. Overall, interviews were conducted with 137 persons (Austria: 23 persons interviewed; Germany: 35; Spain: 32; Switzerland: 28; UK: 19), with one to three interviews per innovation/case. The interviews were conducted between November 2021 and September 2022, and they lasted one hour on average. In most cases, due to the pandemic, digital conference tools (Zoom, Teams, Google Meet) were used. To compare the interviews, a common category system was designed for all countries. Among other aspects, the interview guideline asked for the strategic goals of the innovation, supportive and obstructive framework conditions, and the impact on society. The interviews were then transcribed and examined with content analysis methods, developing a uniform coding sheet that was used as a template and adopted by all countries. Following Mayring's (2022, pp. 96–103) strategy of structuring within the framework of qualitative content analysis, the central variables (aims of innovation, supportive and obstructive factors, and

societal impact) were deductively derived from the guideline. This strategy of structuring includes developing categories before analyzing the data material to then systematically record all those text elements that can be subsumed and clustered under those categories (Mayring, 2022, p. 96) both at a national level to identify country-specific characteristics and at an international level for comparative purposes. The analysis software MAXQDA and Microsoft Excel were used for the coding process. To be able to compare the data across countries, the codes were subsequently transferred into a uniform Excel data mask. In this way, the researchers were able to compare the data and identify similarities and differences, for example, relative to the aims of the innovation. In each country team, the most important findings from the interviews were summarized and enriched with general information about the selected media organization.

In summary, the complex methodological approach, especially the inductive formation of innovation categories (or the supportive and obstructive factors in this article) based on the experts' explanations, was an essential condition to operationalize the concept of innovation, to cluster all the elements, and to tackle the RQs.

Table 1. Top 20 innovations in journalism in the five countries Austria, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, and the UK between 2010–2020 and the selected case studies for the respective innovation areas.

Top 20 innovation and selected cases				
Austria	Germany	Spain	Switzerland	UK
Collaborative/ investigative: *Dossier*	Collaborative/ investigative: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*	Data journalism: *Datadista*	Journalism start-ups: *Bajour*	Data journalism: *Our World in Data*
Mobile journalism: *Der Standard*	Engagement (data): Ippen Verlag	Storytelling: RTVE	Citizen participation: *20 Minuten*	Storytelling: BBC
Data journalism: *ORF*	Social media: *tagesschau*	Fact-checking: *Maldita.es*	New organizational teams: *Südostschweiz*	Engagement (data): *Financial Times*
Paywalls/paid content: *Kleine Zeitung*	Citizen participation: *Westfalenpost*	Social media: *Sphera Sports*	Data journalism: *NZZ Visuals Team*	Collaborative/ investigative: *Bellingcat*
Diversity: *Biber academy*	Data journalism: BR Data	Mobile journalism: *Diari Ara*	Targeting: *RSI*	Fact-checking: *Fullfact*
Audio/podcast: *Erklär mir die Welt*	Storytelling: *Der SPIEGEL*	Membership models: *elDiario.es*	Storytelling: *Reflekt*	Local journalism: *The Bureau Local*
Journalism start-ups: *Die Tagespresse*	Constructive journalism: *Perspective Daily*	Audio/podcast: *Podium Podcast*	Automation: Software LENA (Keystone SDA)	Remote work: TBD
Tools discourse quality: *Der Standard*	Audio/podcast: *Die Zeit*	Newsletter: *Kloshletter*	Social media: *SRF Tagesschau*	Citizen participation: *Bristol Cable*
Personal/digital meetings: *Der Standard*	Membership models: *Steady*	Remote work: *Heraldo de Aragón*	Engagement (data): *Ringier*	Diversity: *Black Ballad*
New organizational teams: *Kleine Zeitung*	Diversity: *Auf Klo*	Paywalls/paid content: *El Mundo*	Local journalism: *Tsüri*	Automation: *Urbs Media*

Table 1. (Cont.) Top 20 innovations in journalism in the five countries Austria, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, and the UK between 2010–2020 and the selected case studies for the respective innovation areas.

Top 20 innovation and selected cases				
Austria	Germany	Spain	Switzerland	UK
Automation: *APA*	Fact-checking: *BR Faktenfuchs*	Para-journalism: *Mr Underdog*	Collaborative/ investigative: *Tamedia*	Mobile journalism: *The Times*
Social media: *Zeit im Bild* (*ORF*)	Paywalls/paid content: *BILD*	Engagement (data): *El Español*	Para-journalism: Tamara Wernli (individual company)	Constructive journalism: *Tortoise*
Citizen participation: *Regionauten*	New organizational teams: *Mainpost*	Automation: *Newtral*	Quality management: *Radio Central/Sunshine*	Paywalls/paid content: *Financial Times*
Newsletter: *Falter.morgen*	Science journalism: Science Media Center	Foundation funding: *porCausa*	Remote work: *We.Publish*	Niche media: *On Our Radar*
News-only TV channel: Puls24	Mobile journalism: *ntv*	Collaborative/ investigative: *Civio*	Diversity: *SRF*	Foundation funding: *The Conversation*
Engagement (data): *Ländlepunkte*	Automation: *Rheinische Post*	Diversity: *Píkara Magazine*	Audio/podcast: Science Podcast *Durchblick* (Ringier)	Media labs: BBC
Video by print media: *krone.tv*	Remote work: VRM	Media labs: *El Confidencial*	Paywalls/paid content: *Tamedia*	Other financing models: *Axate*
Media labs: *APA Media Lab*	Crowdfunding: *Correctiv*	Science journalism: *Materia*	Newsletter: *Heidi.news*	Membership models: *The Economist*
Entrepreneurial journalism: *diesubstanz.at*	Other financing models: *Relevanzreporter*	New organizational teams: *El País*	Niche media: *Babanews*	New organizational teams: The Bureau of Investigative Journalism
Crowdfunding: *Dossier*	Corporate Culture: SWR X-Lab	Branded content: Vocento	Crowdfunding: *Hauptstadt*	Social media: BBC

Source: Authors' work based on Meier et al. (2022).

5. Results

To present the results, we first structure the answers to the first two research questions by country. We then highlight similarities and differences according to the three levels elaborated in theory: micro, meso, and macro. In addition, the results show that it is useful to distinguish between internal and external factors. Due to the limited length of this article, we focus on the most essential factors.

5.1. Supportive and Obstructive Factors in Austria

The 25 interviewees of the Austrian case studies consider internal factors at the company level as the most relevant for innovation. An open-minded management that is receptive to experimentation and allows trial-and-error as well as a motivated team were mentioned most frequently. Moreover, according to some

interviewees from large media houses, it is an advantage to have the backing and the name of such a company, for example when applying for licenses. The breaking up of old structures and the cooperation of different departments and hierarchies are also emphasized. Thus, the head of the reader/user market at the *Kleine Zeitung* highlights the role of eye-to-eye communication and the inclusion of young colleagues. "You suddenly saw the energy and innovative power that is in the company," he explains. Also, the micro level, which means personal relationships within the news organization, should not be underestimated: Individuals who persistently drive the project forward and/or protect it internally due to a certain standing may play a crucial role.

The obstructive framework conditions show the counter image. Thus, apart from the usual complaints about a lack of money and personnel, it is above all cumbersome apparatuses, rigid structures, and colleagues who are suspicious of anything new that are counted among the—again mainly internal—factors that are hostile to innovation. However, this emphasis on internal factors at the company level needs some contextualization. Most of the Austrian case studies involve, in line with the interviews in the first project study (Meier et al., 2022), legacy media. It is striking, although plausible, that it is primarily these legacy media that place internal factors in the foreground and external factors are mentioned less frequently. The tendency is reversed in the case of smaller, independent start-ups without a long-standing apparatus and persistent structures. Here, external factors from the macro perspective, such as zeitgeist ("that society is ready for it," as the head of the *Biber* academy puts it) or subsidies, are more often mentioned as positive framework conditions and, for example, the intertwining of politics and media as an obstacle.

However, sometimes the differences are only in the details: Interviewees of both legacy media and start-ups consider looking to others and learning from best practices to be a conducive factor for successful innovation. Thus, big media companies seek and pay for external consulting, and less wealthy young initiatives rely on imitation.

5.2. Supportive and Obstructive Factors in Germany

For Germany, it is striking that the 35 interviewees particularly emphasize factors at the internal organizational level as drivers of innovations: The interviewees define an open-minded leader and support from management, great decision-making freedoms, an open failure culture, the principle of learning by doing to gain experience, and trust of colleagues as factors that support a positive culture of innovation. In addition, the formation of new organizational forms through new positions and departments linked to the innovation is seen as an important booster. The integration of new external employees with different competencies and perspectives is mentioned several times in this context as conducive to the development of innovations. At the micro level, the interviewees highlight a necessary intrinsic motivation of the employees involved, who drive the innovation forward even against the resistance of colleagues. Factors outside the organization itself also support innovation and relate especially to collaboration: The interviewees named the exchange within the industry with colleagues working in the same innovation areas as well as the collaboration with external partners outside journalism, who have expertise primarily in the technical area, as key drivers of innovation.

Technological progress is also seen as a push factor by some interviewees. More often, however, it is specified as a challenge because the dynamics of technical change are happening faster than the German media industry

is reacting to. In this context, lack of technical equipment and lack of technical know-how in the organizations are mentioned repeatedly as the main barriers to innovation growth. It is also striking that the interviewees refer more often to the macro level in the case of obstructive conditions, in contrast to supportive conditions: Lack of political support and the fossilized structures in the media system, which hardly allow new financing models, are viewed as obstacles to innovation in the German media sector. Furthermore, the relationship with the audience is seen as a hindering rather than a supporting factor: The interviewees argue that a lot of persuasion is needed to convince a skeptical audience of the benefits of new innovations. Mistrust from colleagues is also perceived as an obstructive factor at the organizational level, as well as the rigid existing structures and long or missing coordination processes. Finally, it is a question of resources in economically difficult times: High costs, large amounts of time and staff needed, and a non-guaranteed success obstruct the willingness to develop innovations.

5.3. Supportive and Obstructive Factors in Spain

The analysis of the 32 interviews in the Spanish case studies reveals some patterns concerning the drivers of innovation. Most interviewees agree that the staff's commitment to trying new formulas and products is crucial for the emergence of innovation. Some highlight the input of grassroots innovation and personal initiative. In several instances, the development of innovations by a member of the news organization, regardless of their function or seniority, is essential. According to the head of innovation at *El Español*: "Innovation is quite a cross-cutting job. People are willing to try new things and take the initiative." At the fact-checking organization *Newtral*, they also emphasize the horizontality of the process: "*Newtral* is very flat. By this, I mean that a trainee who has just come in can talk directly to the CEO. Innovations might arise very much from the bottom up."

Other external supportive conditions are underscored. At least three interviewees mention the importance of open innovations, where valuable ideas come from other industry environments, such as advertising or the videogame sector. Five interviewees refer to audience demands for content diversity, especially in areas related to gender equality and migration, or products adapted to new formats and channels. Besides, practitioners give importance to the role of managers, especially in terms of providing time and financial resources for the staff to implement innovations.

Regarding the obstructive conditions, almost half of the interviewees argue that barriers to innovation stem from journalism's own internal culture and pre-existing structures and routines of the print industry. "It is very difficult to introduce a change of flow in most newsrooms. The culture of old journalism is still prominent," says the head of AI at *Newtral*. A member of *El Confidencial*'s media lab explicitly mentions the stiffness of some legacy media editors, who are not open to listening to new ideas or taking risks.

The shortage of resources and the lack of time to focus on new projects are considered the greatest barriers to innovation. A manager at *Civio*, a start-up specialized in investigative data journalism, describes the difficulties due to the country's own framework conditions:

> Survival promotes innovation in the Spanish market. You must be very innovative to survive as a news organization in Spain. And what holds it back is the lack of money. I think there is a big shortage of resources, not only in innovation but in the media in general.

5.4. Supportive and Obstructive Factors in Switzerland

The results of the 20 interviews in Switzerland indicate that predominantly internal, organizational aspects positively influence the implementation of innovations. Nearly half of all case studies emphasize the importance of experimental freedom which consists of aspects like the permission to test and fail, move forward in small increments, work in interdisciplinary teams and not have the pressure to be commercially profitable as quickly as possible. This freedom of experimentation is the most frequently mentioned aspect among the supporting criteria and is particularly pronounced in legacy media where often more resources are available than in start-ups. For such experimental phases, the organizational institutionalization of innovation is considered useful, for example in the form of dedicated innovation teams, commissioning boards, or data and technology units. Cooperation with all hierarchical levels in the organization as well as an exchange with other industry companies are also noted as inspiring. Furthermore, both journalistic start-ups and legacy media agree that an agile, solution-oriented, and open-minded management that leads teams in a competence-oriented manner is essential. Such innovation management can be understood as a form of change management, requiring a strategy, accompanying change communication.

However, for various start-ups, external influences like third-party funds through crowdfunding or media foundations, available infrastructure like social media channels or free content management systems, as well as journalism awards and journalism training at educational institutions play an important role. In the case of the obstructive factors, the micro level is significantly more involved than in the case of the supporting conditions, and external factors on a macro level represent a more significant influence in addition to internal hurdles. The dominant aspect represents internal animosities or mistrust of employees, especially with legacy media. Older journalists and print journalists, who intervene particularly against new, automated processes, are highlighted. An in-house culture inertia when it comes to change management, missing institutionalization of innovation, insufficient collaboration between organizational department teams, as well as an elaborate hierarchical structure and an inadequate culture of mistakes and learning in the journalism industry are named as further stumbling blocks.

The numerous external influencing factors include developments in society, such as digitization, shifts in values through public discourse, and the change in culture among the public, additionally reinforced by the pandemic. The datafication of the media industry makes numerous data-driven innovations difficult due to restrictive Swiss data protection laws and a prevailing national narrative that the collection of user data is "evil." An increased anti-media attitude among the population as well as professionalized, legal resistance to journalistic reporting are further problem areas.

5.5. Supportive and Obstructive Factors in the UK

In the case of the UK, the 20 interviews show that the main supportive conditions for the realization of innovations can be found both at the meso as well as the macro level. Overall, the most supportive conditions can be identified at the organizational level in terms of the availability of financial resources, well-orchestrated team management, and the ability to come up with new and innovative ideas. Among these elements, money plays a dominant role given that it represents the make-it-or-break-it variable when it comes to the realization of innovations: It allows innovations to be realized and implemented, it can help to get the right people on board, and it can contribute to further developing already existing infrastructures. Besides the organizational

level, media structures in the form of contextual factors are as important as money. In relation to these specific external factors, the case studies show that outlets need to be able to adapt quickly to changing contexts (e.g., the pandemic) and to what competitors—in particular the large publishing houses—are coming up with. Sometimes, supportive conditions also include the ability to implement new approaches and concepts that are uncommon in journalism and the news, such as a culture of sharing.

There is a certain parallelism between supportive and obstructive factors when it comes to the capability of realizing innovative projects. Money is not only one of the main supportive conditions (if you manage to get enough funding), but it is also the main obstructive factor, especially if you are unable to secure enough financial resources. Money issues are particularly frequent in the case of journalism start-ups: If people do not know a new brand, and this is often the case for entrepreneurial journalism, it is hard to convince funders, investors, and even the public at large. Another serious obstructive factor (equally mentioned as central to the implementation of innovations) is related to newsroom culture: Journalists are often rooted in a traditional professional mindset, which is why they can feel threatened by innovation such as, for example, automation. Sometimes, the issue can also be located at the executive level, as senior management is unable to perceive the usefulness of novelties. Or company policies about experimentation can be off-putting. Moreover, cultural aspects are often intertwined with organizational issues: Sometimes organizational structures and decision-making processes obstruct tinkering and the implementation of agile structures intended for innovative thinking. As a result, some news outlets show a certain inertia connected to innovation.

5.6. Comparison

When comparing countries and levels, three core results can be noted (Table 2): First, it appears at first glance that the focus of the supporting and the obstructive factors are in the internal area and on the meso level. Second, there are many parallels between the media systems. Third, supporting and obstructive factors are often formulated in a contrary complementary way: If certain support is missing, this absence is noted as an obstacle.

Table 2. Comparison of countries, levels, and internal and external factors.

	Internal factors	External factors
Micro level		
Supportive	AUT: Personal relationships within the news organization	
	GER: Intrinsic motivation of the employees	
	ESP: Staff's commitment (grassroots innovation and personal initiative)	
Obstructive	AUT: Suspicious colleagues	
	GER: Mistrust from colleagues	
	ESP: Stiffness of some legacy media editors	
	SUI: Animosities or mistrust of employees; missing institutionalization of innovation	

Table 2. (Cont.) Comparison of countries, levels, and internal and external factors.

	Internal factors	External factors
Meso level		
Supportive	AUT: Open-minded management and committed teams (experimentation, trial and error, breaking up of old structures) GER: Open-minded leadership, support from management, decision-making freedoms, open failure culture; formation of new organizational forms (new departments, new external employees with different competencies and perspectives) ESP: Managers' role in providing time and financial resources SUI: Experimental freedom (trial and error, small increments, interdisciplinary teams, no pressure to be commercially profitable as quickly as possible); dedicated innovation teams, innovation funds, and innovation platforms; agile, solution-oriented, and open-minded management UK: Availability of financial resources, well-orchestrated team management, getting the right people on board and further developing infrastructures, implementing new concepts (e.g., culture of sharing)	AUT: Looking at others, learning from best practices GER: Collaboration within the industry and expertise outside of journalism ESP: Ideas come from other industry environments SUI: Exchange with other industry companies
Obstructive	AUT: Lack of resources (money, personnel), persistent structures GER: Lack of technical equipment and lack of technical know-how; long or missing coordination processes; high costs, large amount of time, and staff needed ESP: Internal culture, pre-existing structures and routines of the print industry, shortage of resources and the lack of time UK: Start-ups' money issues (hard to convince funders, investors, and even the public at large), newsroom culture (traditional professional mindset), organizational structures and decision-making processes obstruct tinkering and the implementation of agile structures	

Table 2. (Cont.) Comparison of countries, levels, and internal and external factors.

	Internal factors	External factors
Macro level		
Supportive	AUT: Well-known brand SUI: Start-ups' third-party funds (crowdfunding, foundations) ESP: Audience demands for content diversity	AUT: Start-ups' zeitgeist (that society is ready for it) and subsidies SUI: Zeitgeist, developments in society as a whole; for start-ups, journalism awards and journalism training
Obstructive	GER: Relationship with (often skeptical) audience	AUT: Start-ups' intertwining of politics and media GER: Dynamics of technical change, lack of political support, and fossilized structures in the media system SUI: Insufficient culture of mistakes and learning in the journalism industry, restrictive Swiss data protection laws, increased anti-media attitude among the population, start-ups' insufficient options for third-party funding, generalist nature of many journalism degree programs (without focus on start-ups)

Note: AUT = Austria, GER = Germany, ESP = Spain, and SUI = Switzerland.

As external factors, looking, learning, and networking with others play a central role both at the micro level of individuals and at the meso level of the organization. Competitiveness through concurrence is hardly mentioned, which is probably due to the lack of resources: In the media industry, one simply cannot afford to engage in fierce competition for innovation. Opportunities therefore lie in collaboration and imitation. Innovations in journalism rarely bring competitive advantages, for example, as in other industries in the form of patents or economic leadership. Journalistic added value through innovation rarely brings economic added value, but sometimes costs more money than it brings in. Thus, social and political support, especially subsidies, but also funding by foundations, is a central desideratum at the macro level, especially in the DACH countries. It is noteworthy that in Austria and Switzerland, developments in society are seen as essential supportive conditions: the right idea at the right time.

As internal factors, the intrinsically motivated drivers of innovation are confronted at the micro level with distrustful colleagues who throw a spanner in the works to prevent innovation. At the meso level, they need the support of open-minded management, which allows and implements a culture of experimentation and freedom without economic pressure and assembles interdisciplinary teams. Lack of internal funding is seen as one of the main problems in all countries.

6. Conclusion: Drivers and Concepts of Innovation at the Intersection Between Journalism and Society

The international comparison of factors supporting and obstructing innovation in journalism has shown the mutual interplay between journalists, media organizations, and society: Despite different media systems, many

common drivers of innovation in journalism exist on the micro, meso, and macro levels. Although the individual levels do help to systematize the impact of innovations on journalism, they cannot be considered as being completely separate, because our results have shown that each level can influence the others in some way. This is in line with García-Avilés' (2021) literature review on media innovation; the author has so far identified scant cross-level research but ideally recommends a combination of all three levels for analyzing its impact. Our findings can serve as a starting point for closing this gap.

Scholars found that innovation implementation usually relies on the interplay of different actors (Bossio & Nelson, 2021; Evans, 2018); however, our results indicate that this interplay is deeper than it appears and is not only relevant in news production but also in areas such as commercialization, organization, and audience engagement. Our research matches previous studies (Ekdale et al., 2015; Peters & Carlson, 2019) that underline the role of professional culture in the development of innovations. The rigidity of newsroom structures, the proliferation of distrust among colleagues and managers, and the difficulty of changing inherited work processes are common obstacles to innovation in this study. We found that some shortcomings can also be drivers; therefore, personal relationships should not be underestimated, since a large part of innovation input lies in the human capital of companies (Koivula et al., 2023; Westlund et al., 2021).

It is also evident that the state of development of the respective media organization has an impact on the level of supporting and obstructive factors across countries: While the success of innovations in established media organizations is often determined by internal factors at the micro and meso levels, journalistic start-ups describe external factors at the macro level as the sticking point. The different innovation dynamics between fee-financed public service media and market-financed commercial media organizations also reveal themselves across national borders and are particularly evident in Germany, the UK, and Switzerland. Public media organizations therefore mainly highlight the possibility of failure and the importance of open-minded management, while commercial organizations very often emphasize non-existent resources (staff, time, money), in line with Bunce's (2019) findings.

The study confirms once again that journalism is primarily a public service and not as marketable as other commercial products, especially for those innovations that strengthen the role of journalism in a democratic society: innovations that bring depth and variety instead of accelerating the rapid speed of news and pushing clickbait; innovations that focus on a relationship with the audience and strengthen audience engagement instead of selling the audience to the advertisers; and innovations that emphasize original reporting instead of forcing the often criticized churnalism (van Leuven, 2019). Of course, more and more people are willing to pay for this kind of quality journalism triggered by intelligent paywalls which tie citizens to the journalistic brand but exclude citizens who do not want to or cannot afford the costs and thus limit an understanding of democracy that relies on the participation of many.

The sample countries studied are assigned to different media systems according to Hallin and Mancini (2004; see Section 3). However, it turns out that the external specifics of the national media systems do not seem to have a significant influence on the degree of innovation of the respective media industry. Country differences in media policy, as in the rigidity of data protection, or systemic differences in the importance of start-up culture are relevant but do not have a primary impact. In some details however, not all innovations are understood in journalism practice in the same way or applied homogeneously in each news market:

For example, fact-checking in Spain is an organizational innovation after the launching of completely new fact-checking initiatives, while in the DACH countries it is considered both a production and process innovation in legacy media organizations.

All in all, it has become clear that across countries and independent of the respective media system, three external key drivers of innovations in journalism can be identified: *technology*, *societal change*, and *change in the digital media universe*. Of course, these drivers overlap and cannot be analyzed separately, but they have spurred a professional response in newsrooms and subsequently a number of innovations in journalism. Here are some examples: AI/automation, data journalism, social media, and audio/podcasts are driven primarily by technological change and the resulting changes in media usage behavior; journalism picks up on these technologies coming from outside its system and integrates them into production processes. Diversity as an area of innovation is a response to the social zeitgeist: Journalism, for example, is making newsrooms more diverse or using gender-sensitive language. Fact-checking departments are a reaction of innovative journalism to the rapid spread of fakes and manipulation attempts in the digital sphere.

Comparative studies allow us to highlight the enduring relevance of inherited national differences in how journalism evolves (Levy & Nielsen, 2010). Besides, as Livingstone (2012, p. 421) argues, "It is no longer plausible to study one phenomenon in one country without asking, at a minimum, whether it is common across the globe or distinctive to that country or part of the world." Thus, the comparative analysis of factors that explicitly and implicitly shape innovation could contribute to a better understanding of the complex evolution of journalism and serve as a starting point for new theoretical frameworks and learnings.

Our main findings reveal fundamental patterns in democratic societies in Europe, independent of the specifics of the respective media systems. But our study is also limited: First, the results are based on interviews with professionals who were directly involved in the innovations and who therefore were more focused on their immediate internal production conditions than on regulatory or macroeconomic framework conditions. Hence, further research should focus even more on the changing media policy frameworks, nationally and across the EU. Second, despite the high number of interviews overall, there is still a lack of a broader view, because for the full picture, especially on the meso and macro levels, there is a need for further information, for example from other stakeholders inside and outside the industry. Finally, some difficulties were encountered in adapting the interview questionnaires for each country, especially when dealing with the case studies. Not all innovations were understood in the same way, as mentioned, for example, in relation to fact-checking. However, commonalities were established to explicitly examine the barriers and drivers of innovation, and this qualitative information could be analyzed homogeneously through a single spreadsheet by all researchers.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Transforming Crises Into Opportunities: Self-Managed Media in Argentina

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Abstract

The current situation for journalism in Argentina represents a great challenge due to the continuous economic changes linked to inflation and labour precariousness. Faced with this, a phenomenon known as self-managed media has grown over the recent years, also connected to recovered media that promotes innovation, providing material for use in newsrooms to produce novel content and connect with audiences. For this explorative study, based on journalists' roles and innovation, we conducted a mixed-methods design to analyse self-managed media composed of recovered, cooperatives, community, popular, and alternative media. First, a focus group was held with 10 communicators to understand their current situation; second, 60 journalists were consulted about their roles and innovations; finally, in-depth interviews were conducted with three communicators who work on self-managed media at the Community and Cooperative Media Confederation. The findings reveal the presence of innovative actions, reported by 90% of respondents, and confirm that 70% of the consulted journalists had assumed new roles in management and administration. In addition, 80% of the journalists praised community work as fostering a sense of belonging and its associated benefits regarding motivation and freedom. These sentiments were further validated by the insights shared by the three interviewees. This sense of belonging could be included in the fifth area of innovation in journalism, which centres on the social dimension.

Keywords

Argentina journalists; community media; cooperatives; innovation; journalist roles; news reporters; self-managed media; sense of belonging

1. Introduction

An increasing body of empirical research has addressed the media's different alternative organisational and business schemes, how their forms of collective property are composed, and their ways of transcending the limitations and contradictions associated with capitalist companies (Pickard & Stearns, 2011). The self-managed media (SMM; cooperatives, recovered, alternative, and community-based) comprise a wide spectrum of communication spaces (Sel, 2009). Andrade and Molinari (2021) note that there is no single form of self-management, and just as journalism is a profession that is perfected with practice, self-management is shaped by experience. In recent years, the journalistic field has become "increasingly fragmented, networked and with an atypical nature of the labor market" (Deuze & Witschge, 2018, p. 168), which stimulates different business models.

Argentina is known for the creation and upkeep of SMM (Grohmann, 2020; Segura et al., 2019) in a country whose economic context poses daily challenges; in August 2023, the interannual inflation reached 124.4% (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos, 2023) and it is expected that by the end of the year, inflation will reach between 140% and 190% (Escobar, 2023). The SMM have proven to have a high adaptive capacity to navigate economic crises through various strategies; since the mid-90s, cooperativism has been noted as a key agent in economic recovery and employment (Parnell, 2001), where the social and solidarity economy played a crucial role (Yunus et al., 2021) by prioritising the maintenance of activity and employment (Calderón & Calderón, 2012).

Scholarly literature focuses on the positive relationship between the economic crisis and the creation of cooperatives (Serrano et al., 2018) and better behaviour in periods of economic contraction and job losses (Birchall & Ketilson, 2009; Carini & Carpita, 2014) where these workers transcend the logic of the system on which their economy is built (Magnani, 2009). The issue of SMM attracts the attention of professionals, the public, and researchers because those experiences have multiplied worldwide in the last decade (Barranquero & Sánchez, 2018; Boyle, 2012; Cagé, 2016; Camps-Durban, 2021; Escudero, 2020; Grohmann, 2020; Price, 2020; Siapera & Papadopoulou, 2016).

These experiences and business models respond to what was confirmed by Cagé (2016, p. 14), "Traditional media are now threatened and desperate." For instance, recovered media, which in Argentina corresponds to three coordinated actions of the workers of companies that presented bankruptcy: occupy (the space closed by its owners), resist (from said space, the pressures and threats from owners or shareholders), and produce (in a continuous and organised way; Escudero, 2023). These actions are in response to the growth of unemployment together with the social and economic chaos that led to the factories' recovery by the workers in the closing phase, in which self-management is proposed as the direct assumption of responsibilities by a group of workers (Hudson, 2012). Within this context, the workers consider survival and resistance strategies, differentiated trajectories of exclusion/inclusion, which seek to break with the reproduction cycles of poverty and move away from classical wages and their protections (Elisalde et al., 2013). Thus, the links that seek to establish labour solidarity are re-created (Wyczykier, 2009), becoming an alternative to workers' isolation and vulnerability (Weisz, 2013).

This study aims to introduce the SMM in Argentina and, on the basis the work of Hanitzsch et al. (2019), understand the roles of SMM journalists and learn about their innovation experiences based on the five

areas of innovation in journalism proposed by Carvajal et al. (2015) and Storsul and Krumsvik (2013). To advance our understanding of SMM, we refer to the definition presented by the Buenos Aires Press Union (Sindicato de Prensa de Buenos Aires [SiPreBA], 2019) in which it considers self-managed, alternative, cooperative, and community media as forms of journalism transformed by the emergence of counter-informative experiences developed outside of large industry holdings or from traditional companies that were emptied and later recovered. This study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: Do SMM journalists assume a change of role in these spaces?

RQ2: Do journalists recognise the implementation of innovative strategies within the SMM?

2. Literature Review

To understand the process that SMMs have followed and why it is so distinctive, we must consider that the history of self-management constitutes a field in which there is dispute over the meaning and appropriation of autonomy practices developed in different spaces and socio-historical moments. In relation to social movements, it acquires centrality and is reflected in collective processes of recovered factories, movements of the unemployed, housing cooperatives, assemblies in defence of the environment and habitat, and media. Authors such as Sopransi et al. (2011) suggest that in Latin America, the new governability that emerged in response to social revolts against neoliberalism promotes processes of community self-organisation based on self-management as a way of ensuring new forms of domination that capture the creativity of social movements. In Argentina, self-management represents actions of various social movements that emerged in response to the consolidation of the "neoliberal model" during the 90s and will inspire journalists to extrapolate the experience to their areas of work with the creation of SMM. It should be noted that for the creation of self-managed spaces, journalists not only took as reference the experiences of other social movements but also received the support of workers and unions from other sectors to also begin work on their experiences. In this transversality that enables self-management, journalists were forging contacts outside the journalistic field in which it is necessary to understand the meaning and scope of self-management in Argentina, a country recognised for its constant economic crises where self-managed spaces stay afloat.

As Avron (1978) points out, in English, the term self-management has a double translation: On the one hand as self-government, which refers to the citizen's will to participate in the democratic functioning of society; and on the other, as self-management, which implies the willingness to transfer decision-making power to all members of a company. For this study, we will use the second translation, which prevailed to the detriment of the first. Hudson (2010, p. 582) analyses the definitions of self-management. He concludes that they "agree on the same point: self-management implies the direct assumption by a group of people—without intermediaries or specialised sectors—of the preparation and decision-making in a given territory—factory, commune, country, etc."

More precisely, the self-management modalities adopted by the emerging movements in Argentina since the popular insurrection of December 2001 "are rehearsals of new collective experiences" (Sopransi et al., 2011, p. 303). Self-management has become a nodal concept within the praxis of these movements, with several authors agreeing on the centrality of self-management in the collective processes of recovered factories,

SMM, neighbourhood assemblies, cultural centres, and movements of the unemployed, among others. Fernández and Borakievich (2007) point out that self-management is not a model but that there are self-management moments in the future of a group; for Ferreyra and Jaime Bacile (2010), self-management is centrally a social position concerning the productive process, they highlight the relevance of self-management in relation to the configuration of new individual and collective identities at work. Authors such as Salgado and Kasparian (2010) conceptualise self-management as a process of equalisation in the area of power, in parallel to a process of equalisation in the area of material remuneration. This process has two main characteristics: the managerial function is personified in collective work, and the assembly nature of work in decision-making (formal and informal); following Ciolli (2010), self-managed experiences create and question mechanisms that allow increasing the margins of autonomy where other types of interpersonal relationships are built.

As has been argued by several authors, self-management experience is not only limited to the production of goods and services but also to a new way of linking workers that allows them to develop innovative approaches to problems. Argentina is a fertile ground for creating SMM due to the successive economic crises and continuous inflation. According to SiPreBA (2019), between 2018–2019, around 3,100 journalists lost their jobs in Buenos Aires and over 4,500 in the country. The Argentine Journalism Forum (Foro de Periodismo Argentino, 2021) highlight that most local journalists work in precarious conditions and find themselves forced to deal with high levels of instability. SiPreBA's research (2022) confirms that one in ten journalists works for a SMM company and reveals that 14% were fired from a press company during the last five years: "This can be interpreted because a large part of the workers who are fired in private media seek to recover their income and journalism activity" (SiPreBA, 2022, p. 8). The latest study conducted by SiPreBA (2023) shows the precariousness in the media industry (private, public, and self-managed): 57% of journalists from the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires have more than one job; 45% of journalists have salaries below the poverty line. Also, a rapid change in news reporting after the pandemic accelerated the decline of printed newspapers: circulation fell by 21% since 2020, forcing more publishers to focus on digital subscriptions (Newman et al., 2022). This confirms the positioning of SMM when establishing new business models and aligns with laws that support this type of communication service, which will be explained below.

2.1. SMM and Regulations

Argentina's political and economic crisis has been headline news worldwide (Marzi et al., 2020; Muñoz & Zamora, 2021). In response, workers seized control of many abandoned factories following the recovered factories' procedures: occupy, resist, produce (Klein & Lewis, 2004). In this context, the implementation of the Bankruptcy Law (1995, modified in 2011), which enabled workers to take over bankrupt companies, was extended to workers in the media, while modifications were made to the statutes of journalists so that those who worked at SMM could be represented in the unions:

> An activity of journalistic work would be taken as that of natural persons regularly carrying out acts or providing services belonging to the profession, whatever the technical support for broadcast through which these journalistic acts or services are expressed (radio, audiovisual, digital), including workers who, within the same conditions of regularity and continuity, provide services for the media of non-profit social organisations. (SiPreBA, 2019)

Since 2004, and for the first time in broadcasting history, "twelve countries have recognised community, alternative, and popular radio and television stations as legal providers of audiovisual communication services" (Segura et al., 2019, p. 75). In Argentina, Law 26522 of Audiovisual Communication Services was enacted in 2009, recognising non-profit media as legal providers of audiovisual services. Since then, the struggle has not only been obtaining their licenses but also finding solutions for their sustainability and growth in the new conditions (Segura, 2015). After the passing of the Law 26522 of Audiovisual Communication Services, several studies analysed its impact on the community and broadcasting stations (Beltrán & Becerra, 2017; Burgos, 2015; Segura & Waisbord, 2016; Vinelli, 2011). The Argentine Federation of Press Workers (Federación Argentina de Trabajadores de Prensa, 2021) notes that there are 261 SMM: 124 radio stations, 102 online and print magazines, 20 newspapers printed and online, nine television, and six news agencies.

2.2. Alliances and Representations

Since their inception, the self-managed factories and media have demonstrated an interest in strengthening their ties with workers who find themselves in similar situations throughout the country and strengthening their relationship with the different institutions. In this line, the National Institute of Associations and Social Economy (Instituto Nacional de Asociativismo y Economía Social, 2023) presented an initiative to give support to SMM: "With the spirit of promoting more democratic communication…and generate specific policies for the cooperative, mutual and community media sector."

However, one of the broadest and most representative spaces at the national level is the Community and Cooperative Media Confederation, created in 2021 to achieve federal integrity in the representation and coordination of SMM (Ansol, 2021). This confederation is made up of the Argentine Forum of Community Radios (founded in 1998), the Association of Newspapers and Cooperative Communicators Federation of the Argentine Republic (founded in 2009), the Association of Independent Cultural Magazines (founded in 2012), the National Coordinator of Alternative Television (founded in 2018), and the Argentine Digital Media Network (founded in 2019). These spaces for articulation and exchange allow SMM journalists to come together and advance joint strategies. These SMM representations have not gone unnoticed by authors such as Rosa and García (2022, p. 578), who note that "the longest-lived cooperatives with the most participation in federations and confederations are the ones that best withstand the crisis."

3. Theoretical Framework

The ongoing economic crises experienced in Argentina opened what Bruno and Nielsen (2012) describe as a period of creative destruction in the media industry, both in traditional and emerging sectors. However, the crisis is not limited to economics but to the business model (Deuze & Witschge, 2018), which leads us to delve into the journalists' roles and experience of innovation.

3.1. Journalist Roles

Presenting the roles of journalists in media reveals the interest throughout history in defining the features of a profession characterised by its dynamism and social function at local and global levels. The first studies on the roles of journalists were introduced by Cohen (1963), Nimmo (1964), and Chittick (1970). However, it is

observed that it will be through the investigations of Johnstone et al. (1972) with empirical classifications based on the functions: neutral, objective, and participatory. Janowitz (1975) defined the journalist as a "gatekeeper" (neutral) and "advocate" (participatory); Weaver and Wilhoit (1996) classified the professional as a "diffuser" (neutral), "interpreter" (participative), "adversary," and "citizen mobiliser." Hanitzsch (2011) refers to the journalistic field as a space of struggle between distinct professional milieus, resulting in four global professional milieus. Berganza et al. (2017) analysed the roles of Spanish journalists, distinguishing them as "watchdog," "diffuser," "citizenship speaker," "audience instructor," "public opinion entertainer," and "favorer of the status quo." Mellado et al.'s (2017) study of journalist performance in Latin America notes "interventionist," "watchdog," "civic journalist," "service orientation," "infotainment," and "loyal facilitator."

In analysing journalists' roles, we consider Hanitzsch et al.'s (2019, p. 161) views: Journalists are primarily location-based and likely to adapt their role to their local situations, "If roles are stimulated and defined locally, a wide variety of journalistic roles is likely to exist around the world." Our study focuses on their roles and activities in SMM that respond to the local conditions of Argentina.

3.2. Innovation

SMM companies are numerous and comprise a diverse population; Hepp and Loosen (2021) indicate that these actors are often pioneers when adopting innovative approaches to content, production, financing, and internal management. These are professionals who work outside traditional newsrooms, on the peripheries of the field, where there are more possibilities for innovation (García-Avilés et al., 2018). Although innovations in media and journalism have been classified into four areas—the product, production, marketing, and business model (Carvajal et al., 2015; Storsul & Krumsvik, 2013)—a fifth is added, the social. This is due to innovations in media products and services that pursue "social objectives" and that are not necessarily developed in commercial projects (Storsul & Krumsvik, 2013, p. 18).

Even if in journalism, the concept of innovation is usually limited to the commercial concept and the preeminence of the technological factor (Creech & Nadler, 2018); for this study, we rely on what was stated by Bhroin and Milan (2020, p. 1), who argue that media innovation is integrated increasingly in processes of activism for social change—understood as the achievement of social justice and the eradication of socioeconomic inequalities—and argue that these innovations "are implanted beyond, or on the margins, of the media industries," in contact with organised civil society." Along these lines, Altuna and Gorrotxategi (2021, p. 26) propose the concept of "transformative social innovation" to emphasise the disruptive nature of the initiatives that want to "build another alternative model that confronts capitalism" and confronts "exclusion, alienation and the scarcity of resources" and promote new spaces to communicate (Vinelli, 2011) where new production spaces are created and innovations made institutionally, aiming to increase and promote social power (Segura & Waisbord, 2016; Wright, 2010).

4. Methodology

To overcome perceived difficulties, we employ a triangulation of qualitative and quantitative approaches to obtain a more comprehensive picture. Triangulation can be used in quantitative and qualitative research (Wilson, 2014) and "provides a justification for the use of mixed methods" (Mertens & Hesse-Biber, 2012, p. 76). Following Creswell (2003), if we have access to quantitative and qualitative data, we can use both

data sources to understand the research problem in greater depth and breadth. Using mixed-methods research allows the development of a systematic research program. The results obtained will be validated and extended in each application, providing a global understanding of the study phenomenon (Morse & Chung, 2003).

For this research, data collection and analyses were planned sequentially. The first phase was the qualitative exploration through a focus group (FG); themes from this qualitative data were then developed into the second phase—the development of an instrument to survey journalists about their roles and experience of innovation. In the third phase, a script for semi-structured in-depth interviews was developed for three journalists who held a representative position in the media (TV, radio, written press, web, and magazines) before the Confederation of Cooperative and Community Media. This exploratory study aims to describe an emerging reality (Marshall & Rossman, 2011), and our sample selection criteria are based on SiPreBA's (2019) definition.

4.1. FG

This study used an FG approach for the first phase of data collection. Kitzinger (1994) defines the FG approach as group discussions to explore specific issues. Other researchers refer to it as a group interaction process that generates data for analysis (Templeton, 1994). Schindler (1992) and Kitzinger (1995) argue for the overt exploration and exploitation of interactions between FG participants; this approach is characterised by the interaction and collective reflection promoted among their participants, and it can be very productive in media studies (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999). FG contributions can be an excellent combination with other data collection methodologies since it constitutes a culturally sensitive methodology, and it can also be done online since online-based interaction tends to be similar to in-person (Hoffman et al., 2012).

For the FG, using the Zoom platform, 10 journalists were selected under the SiPreBA criteria and were actively working at SMM. The participants, who had previously been informed about this study's goals through email or WhatsApp, consented to the meeting recording and use of their answers for this study.

During the FG activity, we followed a script in which the introduction, questions, and spaces for dialogue were established: The researcher and moderator presented at different moments of the meeting two open questions to which opinions and experiences were exchanged. The session ended with a summary of the discussion; following this, a survey was designed to gain a broader understanding of the situation of SMM journalists. The participants are introduced as Journalist Focus Group (JFG): JFG1, JFG2, etc.

4.2. Online Survey

In this second phase, the survey was produced through the Google platform (based on reading the material and the FG's summary) and sent by email and WhatsApp. The 60 journalists chosen for this survey were asked for their consent; they met the criteria of SiPreBA's (2019) definition and were actively working in SMM at the time of the survey. The questions covered demographic (name, age, professional status, media) and research-related questions about their roles and experience of innovation. After analysing and categorising the responses, the script for in-depth interviews was produced.

4.3. Interviews

In this third phase, in-depth interviews were conducted with three journalists who met the SiPreBA's definition, to which two other criteria were added: to be actively working in media at the time of the interview and who hold a representative position within the Community and Cooperative Media Confederation. Through the interviews, we delved into details that allowed us to gain greater control over respondent selection (Cassell & Symon, 2004), especially for sensitive or personal topics (Robson & Foster, 1989). The interviews were conducted through Zoom, in Spanish, between May and June 2023 with a semi-structured script derived from the FG and field notes from the survey and covered five topics: general data, media, self-described experiences in the media, roles, and innovation. The journalists represented the following areas at the Community and Cooperative Media Confederation and were identified as J1, National Coordinator of Alternative Television; J2, Association of Independent Cultural Magazines; and J3, Digital Media Network of Argentina.

5. Analysis

5.1. FG

We employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that allowed us to know the first reactions, as is the case of JFG3: "The new ones have been helped by journalists who have been in cooperatives for a long time; they have experience, and they know almost everything about media cooperatives." JFG5 acknowledged, "We have been around for a long time, and yes, we do have experience, we give support, but we do not know everything; we are still learning." This statement is a strength of the technique to highlight differences and allow the researcher to assess various attitudes (Gordon & Langmaid, 1988).

In terms of internal organisation and roles, JFG6 pointed out: "Very interesting topics emerge from our assemblies, both problems and possible solutions; management and administration are also carried out by fellow journalists, and it indeed takes more time; not everyone wants to take on these activities." The rest of the members of the JFG agree with this statement while confirming the adaptation of the roles (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). All participants shared their experiences in plural, using "we," no opinions or personal experiences were presented. Likewise, the country's economic situation represents a concern for all of them, especially this year because there are presidential elections, and according to JFG3, they fear "the possible modification of laws that promote self-managed work."

5.2. Survey Analysis

Thematic analyses were used to organise themes around the two analytical groupings of roles and innovation/s in SMM. The thematic analysis allows us to distinguish and determine themes' prevalence. Participants included 24 women, 35 men, and one gender-diverse person. The fact that there were fewer women than men in the survey could be related to the fact that 70% of Argentine female journalists have a permanent contract (Foro de Periodismo Argentino, 2018) in the media industry. The surveyed journalists worked on radio (22), digital media (19), magazines (9), newspapers (7), and television stations (3). In terms of roles, 70% of the participants agreed that they had assumed new responsibilities such as administration and management activities; 90% of the respondents agreed innovation did occur in their media, which in most cases did not respond to a technological factor but was rather focused on the community (gender, ecology,

diversity) and having work environment that was based on healthy spaces that are open for dialogue; this confirms that although assemblies may last longer than agreed, they are considered spaces that allow group cohesion and promote health and well-being. The survey's respondents are identified in this study as SJ1 up to SJ60.

5.3. Interview Analysis

The approach for analysing the three interview transcriptions followed the grounded and inductive methods proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1994), with analytical categories being inductively derived from the data without pre-defining them before reading the interviews. The interviewees were asked about roles, innovation, and the experience of being part of an SMM. In terms of roles, J1 expressed: "It is not about doing everything, but about learning, understanding the importance of the different roles in television production. Egos are transcended; there are no star journalists here; we all do everything."

A combination of roles and innovation is presented by J3: "One of our goals is to improve the sustainability of the media and provide support in the administration through workshops." Concerning J2:

> There is a monopoly concentration of communication. A few commercial media design an informative agenda conditioned by immediacy, effectiveness, and the number of likes. This process differs from the way in which information is produced and disseminated in the territorial, cultural, community, and cooperative media, where space for analysis and research is enabled.

In that sense, J2 and J3 clearly distinguish the type of journalism produced by SMM, which alludes to social innovation beyond generating profits (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Tull & Hawkins, 1993). The three journalists interviewed agree that one of the great strengths of these media is staying united.

5.4. Triangulation and Discussion

In order to reinforce our knowledge and verify the validity of the results, we will follow Amezcua and Gálvez's (2002) recommendations for triangulation. For our analysis, triangulation consists of selecting the information obtained in the fieldwork; triangulating information by category, triangulating the information between all the strata investigated (comparison between the interviewees), triangulating the information with the data obtained through other instruments (FGs, survey), and triangulating the information with the theoretical framework (re-take the bibliographic discussion and discuss it with the results; Cabrera, 2005).

In the three phases of this study (FG, survey, and interviews), we identified a pattern in the responses, the time factor: firstly, administrative and management work that implies a greater workload; secondly, the assemblies in which various issues are decided and important decisions are voted on could be too long. Both issues are presented as taking up too much of their time, although they do not have a solution for this problem. In addition, journalists also present the time factor as a positive point when they specify the freedom to delve into topics that conventional media do not cover in depth. Through these responses, we observe that SMM workers do not idealise their workspaces and, depending on the occasion, they will compare themselves to journalists from traditional media.

In terms of roles, two interviewed journalists agreed that "our roles are not like those of a journalist who works in a traditional media" (J1 and J2). As SJ5 pointed out, "Many of us had to focus on administration; it takes time, but it is necessary." SJ18 shared, "Management and administration continue to be the activities we like the least but the most necessary to stay afloat." Confirming the adaptative role (Hanitzsch, 2011), JFG8 stated, "We have had to start managing our own media, and we continue to learn about it." From the answers obtained through the FG, the survey, and the in-depth interviews, it is confirmed that new roles are assumed in SMM in administration and management, representing 70% of the survey participants. Innovative roles and actions find their points of union as expressed by J2:

> Management requires a greater amount of time and a lot of willingness to work. New roles are effectively assumed. It is something that is learned on a day-to-day basis. Media management does not exist in the study programs of tertiary institutes, universities.

In line with J2, Bruno and Nielsen (2012, p. 102) noted that "they all pursue different forms of excellence, aiming to break news, curate content, host conversations, change formats, and invent new genres" in addition to producing communication as a right and not as merchandise (Bhroin & Milan, 2020; SiPreBA, 2022). For learning on a day-to-day basis, J2 confirms Hanitzsch et al.'s (2019) view that they adapt their roles to the local situations they face.

Journalists' new roles are combined with innovative practices:

> Innovative experiences come from freedom and the possibility of gradually defining and re-defining the identity of the media through the debate of ideas. (SJ21)

> Innovation is related to common actions; the renewal of the structure of our news portal, carried out in 2022, from which we gave centrality to sections that are not the main ones in the traditional media such as genders, human rights and eco-social. (SJ16)

Those answers allude to what Altuna and Gorrotxategi (2021) argued in relation to transformative social innovation, in which the disruptive nature of the initiatives is distinguished.

Where adaptation to the needs of SMM seems to be key, J3 states, "Innovation has a double edge; in our case, we were focusing on the administrative training." J1 shared, "There is a before and after in the community television media after the enactment of the law: new physical spaces were opened, and we opened up to new ways of making television, learning to manage equipment and spaces." These experiences correspond to innovation for social change (Bhroin & Milan, 2020).

"Our innovation is to be the link between the community and state organisations. People write to us asking for information and help" (SJ23); "Our innovation is committed to social justice and rights" (SJ17) which is related to what was stated by Nielsen et al. (2020, p. 27), arguing that these media should offer "a distinctive and valuable product that plays an important role for their audiences and in their communities since subscriptions and memberships represent more stable income than advertising."

"Some media have presented innovative projects to the European Union and the United States," explains JFG3, which demonstrates the association of innovation with technological projects; these responses

represented 5% of the sample. However, 33% agree that the innovation associated with the roles within the media alludes to independence, belonging, and better organisation of assets, for which the innovative roles category was created. Likewise, there are experiences of innovation in the media that refer to an organisational issue, representing 34% of the responses in which it is exposed: spaces for reflection, staff training in administration, and time management. Many workers find themselves in multiple jobs and seek ways to adapt the meetings for active participation. For these responses, the organizational innovation category was created.

JFG4 shared an example of organizational innovation and demonstrated the importance given to a sense of belonging and well-being:

> In our newsroom, there was a situation of tension between two colleagues; we decided to contact an organisation of psychologists who worked with these two people, but at the same time they shared tools to improve our bond. We allocated money from the cooperative for this expense, and we would do it again because it is a service that improves the internal organisation; it has to do with our well-being.

Several responses gave relevance to the alliances and federations: "We have articulated ourselves"; "we are a force that has its own consensual voice"; "our claims and joint actions represent a broad population of media and journalists" (S17). "Being federated allows us to generate spaces with a greater incidence; we know this and are committed to it" (S24).

Over 65% of the journalists noted the importance and satisfaction of being part of a federation "to reduce economic inequalities and maintain freedom of expression" (SJ3), which responds to the social media innovation presented by Bhroin and Milan (2020). Through the various responses from journalists, the sense of belonging is recognised: "Being part of a federation allowed us to articulate ourselves better" (SJ9); "we are a coordinated force" (SJ21). Several responses obtained through the FG, survey, and in-depth interviews allow us to suggest a journalistic ideology shared by the SMM in terms of a sense of belonging: being federated represents a point of union and strength (41), allows a better exchange of experiences and mutual help (36), and belonging to a federation allows a better articulation of the SMM (14). From here emerges a sense of belonging in tune with Fenster's (2007) view since it is found within human needs and in the set of feelings built around practices developed in a daily environment to which Vidal and Pol (2005) adhere the principle of identity: "It is a very strong challenge to be autonomous and accompany the community" (SJ53). For JFG8 to be part of an SMM: "It is essential to follow the values of the cooperative principles—solidarity, horizontal decision-making, mediation instances and agreements—by each partner." This agrees with the definition of self-management pointed out by Ciolli (2010): other types of interpersonal relationships are built.

As Vidal and Pol (2005) explain, it is related to the principle of identity insofar as this is a source of symbolic and referential identification of the person with the group to which they feel they belong and with the environment where they live and interact individually and socially. J2 shared: "We can proudly say that this entire Community Media Confederation has become a seedbed of professionals who were not formatted in the commercial media factory and who, on the contrary, are people who know how to associate." SJ35 shared: "We have the ability to work in the community, organised through different representations," followed by SJ44, "We innovate by working collectively and collaboratively. It is our way, and I am proud of it."

SJ35 and SJ44 respond to Dávila de León and Jiménez-García (2014) statement: The sense of belonging concerning direct work is visualised as interpersonal links and, in relation to the organisational sphere, as a dimension of organisational identification and conclude that a sense of belonging is the construct that seems to have the strongest link with well-being.

6. Conclusion

This study responds to what Hanitzsch (2011, p. 477) presents as the need to move towards a more universal approach, "to go beyond corporate and commercial factors in order to account for the realities of the journalistic field in non-western countries." Thus, this research examined the experiences of journalists who are outside the corporate/commercial sphere and provided a new dimension to the journalists' roles and innovative experiences in SMM, where a sense of belonging presents an essential factor that allows them to survive economic crises and keep their jobs. The time factor is something that worries them and that they want, or rather need to improve. Journalists who find themselves under this enormous umbrella of self-management have the support of workers from other sectors with greater experience in self-management, which allows them to feel the ability to unify claims and transcend crises. This research confirmed that SMM journalists assume new roles, which imply longer hours, and new learning (RQ1), demonstrating how they adapt their role to local situations. The innovation factor associated with the role (innovative roles) has to do with the sum of knowledge outside of journalism that they assume: administration and management of the media, with responses to the innovative roles category.

On the other hand, innovation is perceived by most journalists as a social action, and it is presented as organizational innovation (RQ2). However, this study reveals a factor the authors had not planned to study: a sense of belonging evoked in the FG, the survey, and the in-depth interviews that could be incorporated into the fifth area of innovation in journalism.

Despite the challenges that self-management can pose, it is confirmed that the transformation of the crisis into opportunities is not an individual action; it is not simply subordinated to journalists but to an organised force of workers, united in self-management, who seek to maintain their spaces of production, freedom, and leadership. This study has limitations as it was focused on a single country, and the sample is small; a follow-up and more extensive overview of the sense of belonging will provide more accurate results.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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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 (Kueng, 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, Kueng (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, Buozis 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" (Buozis et al., 2021, p. 70).

The period that Buzois 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 Buozis 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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ARTICLE

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Contextualization: A Path to Chinese Traditional News Media's Integration Into Social Media

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Abstract

Meyrowitz's media context theory proposes that new media and their contexts will lead to new behaviors. This article adopts media context theory as a framework and utilizes a textual analysis approach to analyze what Meyrowitz termed middle region behaviors and the contextualization strategies of the traditional Chinese news media (*People's Daily*) on the social media platform Weibo. The findings reveal three of *People's Daily*'s Weibo news' innovation strategies: the middle regionalization of news contexts (live news, vlog news, chatbox news); personalized production of important news (Weibo commentary, user-produced news); and equal dialogue with the public (daily greetings, holiday greetings, popularizing science). The study also indicates that traditional news media can utilize social media to consolidate communication effectiveness and reconstruct their credibility while actively participating in social governance. In light of these findings, we think that the "contextualization" strategies employed by *People's Daily* on the Weibo platform offer meaningful possibilities for traditional news organizations' integration into social media, such as exploring innovative approaches to news presentation, emphasizing audience interaction, appropriately providing "non-news content" for the audience, and maintaining a commitment to objectivity and fairness in news reporting.

Keywords

China; innovation strategy; news organizations; People's Daily; social media; traditional media

1. Introduction

With the rise of social media, many traditional Chinese news media organizations have suffered negative impacts from outdated media technology, brain drain, lack of sponsorship and funding, and self-published

media stealing audience attention (Wang, 2023). In 2017 alone, nearly 1,000 newspapers in China ceased publication, and over 300 others went bankrupt (SOHU, 2018). In order to survive and thrive, many traditional news media organizations have had to learn about the interests and needs of their audiences and seek business growth by developing new communication channels.

Due to limited capital and resources, most traditional news media cannot independently develop apps and websites. Consequently, many newsgroups have opted to join Weibo, China's largest social media platform (Xu et al., 2023). By registering accounts and posting news on Weibo for free, these news organizations leverage their existing credibility and influence to attract users' attention (Plantin & de Seta, 2019). Initially, many news media simply replicated content from their original channels to Weibo, failing to fully exploit the communication advantages offered by social media (Tong & Zuo, 2016). However, as the media environment and technology evolved, mainstream media in China, such as *People's Daily*, Xinhua News Agency, and China Central Television, gradually expanded their range of innovations in Weibo news including news genres, expressions, presentation forms, and content (Jian & Liu, 2018; Wang, 2022).

People's Daily, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of China (CPC), holds significant influence as a traditional media organization in China. Its official entry into Weibo took place on July 22, 2012, with a post titled "Beijing, Go." Over eleven years, the Weibo account of *People's Daily* (@Peoplesdaily) has attracted far more followers than any other media account, exceeding 150 million (Zhang et al., 2023). Bolsover (2013) discovered that news published by *People's Daily* and other news publishers on Weibo often generate extensive public engagement, including many reposts and replies. Therefore, @Peoplesdaily best represents traditional Chinese news media's digital practices and social media innovations.

Given the evolving communication environment, media technology, and user habits, innovation and development have emerged as critical issues for many news media organizations (Eldridge et al., 2019; Wagemans et al., 2019). This article utilizes the media context theory of Meyrowitz (1985) as a framework and employs textual analysis to analyze the innovative practices of *People's Daily* on Weibo. To distill the practices that hold value for current and future media, the study focuses on the ongoing and recent innovations that @Peoplesdaily has adopted. At the theoretical level, this article will reinforce the applicability of media context theory to social media and depict the hybrid situation and changing trends of the social media news context. At the practical level, this article will distill @Peoplesdaily's innovative communication experiences on social media and raise generalizable strategies and recommendations. These recommendations will be available to news media in various countries to help them better adapt and develop their social media news operations (Bao et al., 2021; Vu, 2014).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Media Context Theory in the Age of Social Media

Meyrowitz (1985) published *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*, and provided a comprehensive exposition of media context theory. In media context theory, the so-called context refers to information systems (Meyrowitz, 1985). Information systems blur the boundaries between the private and public contexts, resulting in corresponding changes in people's social behaviors and roles (Ilan, 2022; Meyrowitz, 1990). Influenced by Goffman's mimesis, and the media studies of Innes and McLuhan

(Silverstone, 1999), media context theory emphasizes that electronic media and the social context interact (Meyrowitz, 1985). It points out that any factor that can change the structure of the social stage or reorganize the social audience can significantly impact social behavior (Meyrowitz, 1990). What's more, contextualization refers to reinterpreting and disseminating symbolic material from one media context to another (Gruber et al., 2023; Gumperz, 1992). Contextualization can be used to describe the state of content production and dissemination in the media and can be used to explain how the media builds up context and exerts influence on society and audiences (Dahlberg, 2015; De Wolf, 2020). For example, the headline of a news article might cite a movie scene, mixing the movie context with the news context, thus triggering greater audience attention and empathy (Rameshbhai & Paulose, 2019).

Although media context theory was proposed based on the context of television media, it provides an appropriate perspective to understand the relationship between different types of media and society (Meyrowitz, 1985). According to media context theory, the more blurred the boundary between media and reality, the more likely it is that context crossover and integration will occur (Arnaboldi et al., 2017; Fortunati et al., 2003). In the current age of social media, thanks to the increasingly close relationship and blurred boundaries between media and society (Jurgenson, 2019), the idea of media context theory, instead of becoming obsolete, has gained more comprehensive application (Marwick, 2013). Badham and Mykkänen (2022) argued that the interaction between the media and the general public has been transformed on social media, making social dialogue more accessible and frequent. Public discourse is increasingly integrated into mainstream media and has the potential to lead public opinion to some extent (Barberá et al., 2019; Gorodnichenko et al., 2021). In the era dominated by radio or television, the media reshaped the concept of physical locations by replacing them with information systems, blurring geographical boundaries (Meyrowitz, 1993). In the age of social media, the media and the human body coexist in the same geographic space and move in tandem, allowing for potential intersections between media and natural scenes (Qvortrup, 2006). The mediated and natural scenes interact more frequently, and the boundary between them is no longer solely defined by differences in information access, but rather by the nature of the information itself (Ilan, 2022). The penetration and influence of mediated context becomes ubiquitous on social media, implicitly transforming the form and content of the social context and exerting an influence on people's perceptions, emotions, and behaviors (Ilan, 2022; Torous et al., 2021).

In the age of social media, the media context and the reality context are not only interactive and permeable, they can even co-create hybrid contexts through deep integration (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). Meyrowitz (1990) introduced the concept of the "middle region" to describe the changes in contexts and behaviors brought about by new media, building upon Goffman's theory of "front stage" and "backstage." Essentially, the middle region is a hybrid context, and the emergence of new behaviors in hybrid contexts can be referred to as middle region behaviors (Meyrowitz, 1994). Increasingly, news organizations are beginning to conduct news production and dissemination activities in hybrid contexts (Lee & Tandoc, 2017), and these middle region behaviors erode the traditional distinction between the front and backstage (Hogan, 2010). On the one hand, some news production and dissemination behaviors are shifted to the middle region of social media, impacting the boundary between the front and backstage. For example, in the case of journalists producing personalized video-blogs when reporting the Wuhan lockdown during Covid-19, audiences can see both the front and backstage of news production through video (Meng & Wang, 2023). On the other hand, audiences can reach the middle region and interact with news producers instantly. For example, in live network news programs, audiences can participate in news production through video

barrages or comments, including asking reporters to respond to questions or switch cameras (Engstrom et al., 2022). As the framework of this article, media context theory acts as a guide to focus on *People's Daily*'s middle region behaviors in social media and explore the news production and dissemination strategies that lead to changes in both the media and reality contexts.

2.2. Innovations of People's Daily on Weibo

In the early days of the *People's Daily*'s registration on Weibo, some scholars argued that its move onto Weibo was an innovation in itself (Noesselt, 2014). Zhang and Lei (2013) argued that the opening of @Peoplesdaily signaled that the CPC's official newspaper was presenting the features of commercial media, and to some extent, it had diluted the color of its political ideology and achieved communication with netizens. Over the subsequent 10 years, many scholars have studied the news published by @Peoplesdaily from different perspectives, aiming to analyze the innovation strategies of traditional news media in the social media era (Deng et al., 2021). Most of these existing studies analyzed communication strategies in the context of specific events or topics, with small sample sizes and mainly cross-sectional surveys (Huang & Wang, 2013). Although these case studies focused on @Peoplesdaily's specific practices in social media and failed to summarize the overall trends behind different content production and communication strategies, they still depicted the path of @Peoplesdaily's transformation from seriousness to accessibility (Pang et al., 2022).

Some existing studies have explored the differences and similarities between the news of @Peoplesdaily and *People's Daily* newspaper (Wu & Pan, 2022). In terms of similarities, some studies have found that both @Peoplesdaily and *People's Daily* newspaper follow the same values and positions, and together, they play a vital role in leading Chinese public opinion (Zhang et al., 2023). Both @Peoplesdaily and *People's Daily* newspaper consider the state's logic and the people's logic in the content and expression of news, with an increasing focus on evoking positive emotions (Pang et al., 2022). For example, they work together to provide important news and comfort the public during sudden disasters (Shi & Luo, 2015). In terms of differences, many scholars have suggested that news of @Peoplesdaily presents greater characteristics of timely information dissemination, rich and diversified content, proactive voices, and folksy expression (Huang & Wang, 2013). It has been found that Weibo news spreads at a faster pace than traditional channels (Xu et al., 2023). Social media's advent has diversified news production in *People's Daily*, blurring the boundaries between news producers and audiences (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). @Peoplesdaily can utilize public comments and feedback as indicators for adjusting their news production efforts (Pang et al., 2022). It coincides with some of the ideas in media context theory.

Other studies have analyzed the strategies and effects of the @Peoplesdaily's news in more detail. With the background of the early establishment of @Peoplesdaily's account, Huang and Lu (2017) found that @Peoplesdaily enriches news content and shifts the reporting approach from the traditional model of "delivering to ordinary audiences" to the model of "ordinary people telling their own stories," using informal language to attract audiences. Taking @Peoplesdaily's news on the Tangshan restaurant attack as an example, An et al. (2023) found that its strategies are primarily based on thematic framing, actively embracing unofficial discourse space, and allowing for the emergence of diverse voices and expressions. By analyzing 36 online news items from the *People's Daily*, Wu and Pan (2022) thought that @Peoplesdaily adopts strategies such as emphasizing proximity, personalization, positivity, and human interest in news

values to engage audiences. In the context of the sinking of the Eastern Star, Shi and Luo (2015) argued that @Peoplesdaily combines the content production capability of newspapers with the information presentation advantages of Weibo, resulting in favorable effects in reporting breaking events. These studies summarized many of @Peoplesdaily's innovative strategies, but due to their specific research context and restricted sample size, the strategies identified are difficult to generalize to a comprehensive journalistic practice (Wallace, 2018). Still, their experience inspired this article in terms of how to generalize @Peoplesdaily's news practices regarding news interactivity, framing, presentation, and communication.

3. Methods

The development of social media has brought about a dynamically changing communication context (Kent et al., 2017), which has forced many traditional media to innovate (Belair-Gagnon & Steinke, 2020). This article examines the innovation experiences of traditional Chinese news media in social media by using @Peoplesdaily's news as samples. *People's Daily*, as the official newspaper of the CPC, the media account with the largest number of followers on the Weibo platform (Zhang et al., 2023), and one of the most important media outlets in China, *People's Daily* has been a pioneer of media innovation in the digital era. Taking @Peoplesdaily as the research object can explore the most "Chinese characteristics" of traditional Chinese media's innovation experience in social media and ensure the representativeness of the research findings.

3.1. Sample Collection and Analysis

During the analysis process, we first collected all Weibo posts posted by @Peoplesdaily from July 2013 to December 2022 (N = 131,120). Second, the researchers conducted a stratified sampling of Weibo posts, sampling 5% of Weibo posts (N = 6,556) equally spaced by post time. Third, the researchers read and analyzed these Weibo posts to isolate @Peoplesdaily's news (N = 2,452, see Section 2.2 for exclusion criteria) with innovative features. These 2,452 Weibo posts are the valid sample for this article. Fourth, the first author of this study conducted textual analysis to examine the valid samples in terms of form, content, expression, and genre. The innovative strategies of the samples were then documented provided after the samples, such as spoken news expressions, using webcasts, brief news commentary, and providing non-news content, etc. The other two authors of this study checked the marked innovative strategies. Finally, the researchers discussed and analyzed the annotated results of the text analysis and summarized the communication strategies of @Peoplesdaily.

3.2. Exclusion Criteria for Samples

Previous research showed that the news of @Peoplesdaily achieved great success by implementing numerous innovations in form, content, expression, and genre (Wu & Pan, 2022). However, some initiatives, although popular for a while, no longer apply to today's communication context. To perform sample cleaning and summarize the strategies that are still viable in the present, we have only included the samples with the following characteristics: (a) The Weibo must reflect @Peoplesdaily's unique and innovative strategy, not the old one used by the *People's Daily* newspaper; (b) innovative strategies in Weibo which have not gone out of style and are still frequently used by @Peoplesdaily in the last three years; (c) strategies in Weibo which are innovative and can provide valuable insights for other media outlets.

4. Findings

Guided by media context theory, this article summarizes three aspects of @Peoplesdaily's middle region behaviors and contextualization strategies: middle regionalization of news contexts; personalized production of important news; and equal dialogue with the public. By demonstrating and interpreting typical cases below, it is possible to explore the contextualization strategies and experiences of China's traditional news media (*People's Daily*) in social media (Weibo).

4.1. Middle Regionalization of News' Contexts

By broadcasting news as live news, vlog news, and chat box news, @Peoplesdaily has blurred the boundaries between the news backend and the public and constructed many middle regions. In these middle-region news contexts, @Peoplesdaily carries out a large number of news communication activities to reduce the psychological distance between the audience and @Peoplesdaily.

4.1.1. Live News

People's Daily's live news on the Weibo platform differs significantly from live TV news broadcasts. Traditional live TV newscasts have distinct journalistic boundaries. They require pre-scheduling in a news program, where the subject matter, presenter, location, connecting journalists, and duration are all designed and confirmed in advance. As a result, the producers precisely control the front and backend of the news, and the audience only receives news content that has been designed. However, live news on Weibo has relatively fewer clear boundaries, with the production and dissemination of news taking place in the middle zone. Weibo's live news belongs to a kind of webcasting, which is more approachable and not limited by the production scene. @Peoplesdaily's live newscasts have a civilian perspective, allowing viewers to interact with live reporters at any time through comments and video barrages.

The duration of live news by @Peoplesdaily varies, ranging from a few minutes to a few hours. It encompasses a wide range of types, including political, social, economic, science and technology, and sports news, among others. As early as 2016, @Peoplesdaily started broadcasting live news on Weibo and offered free live playback for its audiences. During the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in 2016, @Peoplesdaily conducted several live broadcasts to disseminate the conferences' resolutions. In 2017, @Peoplesdaily once again live-streamed the entire launch of the Long March 5 Remote Rocket, which took a long time to report the whole event in detail without any pictures or sound being edited, attracting a large number of viewers. Despite the less polished visuals and occasionally shaky footage, the live news is more likely to capture the public's attention and gain their trust due to its novelty news contexts.

4.1.2. Vlog News

From 2019–2023, during the NPC and CPPCC, journalists from *People's Daily* documented the work of filming the conference from a first-person perspective (including the entire process of preparing at home, waiting for the venue, filming the conferences, and editing the footage, etc.), and posted vlog news on Weibo. Traditionally, journalism is embedded in the performative nature of the front stage, and vlog news

breaks down the distinction between the front and back stages. Vlog news follows the logic of life, and does not alter the form, sequence, or content of news events. It aims to record the process and details of the reporter's participation in the news event, and to lead the audiences to enter the news events and behind the scenes from the first-person perspective.

In the early years, the topics of vlog news published by @Peoplesdaily were mainly political news, and then gradually expanded to social news, sports news, and other areas. For important events such as the Chang'e Five launch in 2020, the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, and the Boao Forum for Asia in 2022, much of the news has been reported in vlogs. The vlog news focuses on the news event while exposing the stories of journalists in front of the stage and behind the scenes. The sharing of time and space between journalists and audiences aligns with Meyrowitz's "middle region" theory, and the new communication scenarios greatly stimulate the public's interest in watching. Although these vlogs differ in genre and duration, they all share the core feature of a first-person perspective.

4.1.3. Chat Box News

In 2017, @Peoplesdaily launched a #Letters to Young People campaign during the 19th National Congress of the CPC, sending messages to its followers for eight consecutive days via Weibo chat box. The eight days of chat box news were "editorials" written by the *People's Daily*'s Commentary Department and other departments, and centered around Chinese youth-related issues, including patriotism, career choices, health, etc. These chat box news days received favorable responses from young people due to their novel format and friendly expression. Sending news directly from the back office to the public's chat box is a break from the multiple traditional boundaries surrounding the news production and distribution processes.

Some studies have argued that young Chinese are under tremendous pressure in their careers and lives, and many cannot find the time and energy to pay attention to national events (Lyu, 2012). To attract their attention to national issues, @Peoplesdaily customizes news content that young people care about, so that they know that these issues are closely related to the country's development. @Peoplesdaily takes an egalitarian stance and sends news to its followers via a Weibo chat box. Chat box news can also be perceived in terms of the performer (@Peoplesdaily) being influenced by the reactions of its audiences (Chinese public) and adjusting its news communication behavior.

4.2. Personalized Production of Important News

To cover some important issues, @Peoplesdaily launched Weibo commentary and news jointly produced with users. These two forms of journalism further expand the middle regions, allowing news content and audience discourse to interact and even transform each other in these regions.

4.2.1. Weibo Commentary

In response to current affairs of public concern, @Peoplesdaily has launched a new form of news—Weibo commentary, which is less than 140 Chinese characters and mainly focuses on social, political, legal, and cultural issues. Weibo commentaries are expressed in a very approachable way; some have even begun to use internet buzzwords in recent years. For example, the Weibo commentary "what does it say about six

academicians teaching one course?" told the story of academics teaching, the enlightenment they bring, and called on universities to pay attention to the quality of teaching. It used the colloquial word "cow's nose" (which means the key point or part as the Chinese proverb goes "if you lead a cow, you should lead it by its nose") and the internet buzzword "bird course" (which refers to a course that is unimportant or has no substance). Compared to serious and formal traditional editorials, these Weibo commentaries are more likely to attract audiences with their colloquial language:

> *What does it say about six academicians teaching one course?* Wuhan University has six academicians teaching one course. The lineup is impressive. This story demonstrates the responsibility of *academicians*. They are teaching rigorously, but also informatively. No wonder the students feel "classes are as fun as watching a TV show." Undergraduate education is the colleges' and universities' "cow's nose." Academics and professors should teach more classes to undergraduates. Don't let "bird course" be in school.

4.2.2. News Jointly Produced With Users

In some important feature stories, @Peoplesdaily guided the public to follow the news and participate in the discussion by creating Weibo topics. During the 19th National Congress of the CPC in 2017, @Peoplesdaily created the topic #I Love You China, attracting tens of thousands of netizens to leave messages in the Weibo square, "I'm a fan of the motherland for life." In 2018, during the NPC and CPPCC, @Peoplesdaily created the topic #China is Excellent, attracting many netizens to speak "your strength makes me never lack security." In 2019, on the 70th anniversary of the founding of the PRC, @Peoplesdaily once again created the topics #30 Days of Showing Love to China and #China Has Me. These topics bolstered Chinese national pride, achieving the spread of patriotic sentiment.

In addition to creating Weibo topics to attract the public to discuss together, @Peoplesdaily also places netizens' notable comments on posters (these posters have brightly colored backgrounds and netizens' comments are prominently placed in the middle of the poster). In 2017, @Peoplesdaily published several Weibo posts to celebrate the 96th anniversary of the founding of the CPC. It made posters of the most popular comments, which were individually sent out on Weibo. These posters triggered emotionally solid resonance among the public, garnering 121,000 reposts and 23,000 comments. Obviously, the content of netizens' comments provided @Peoplesdaily with material for news production. @Peoplesdaily not only uses the public's discourse as material for news production, it also uses the public's speech to support some of their points of view, realizing the mutual transformation of public discourse and news discourse.

4.3. Equal Dialogue With the Public

Through daily greetings, holiday greetings, and popularizing science, @Peoplesdaily communicates and interacts with its audience on an equal footing. These types of content further break down the boundaries between the front and backstage of the news, shaping a hybrid context filled with warmth. They also have become a means for @Peoplesdaily to evoke the public's positive emotions and calm the public in the face of life pressures.

4.3.1. Daily Greeting

@Peoplesdaily's greetings sever the boundaries between news coverage and public life to a certain extent. Every morning, @Peoplesdaily posts Weibo greetings to its followers. Weibo posts of the morning greetings are short, primarily inspirational quotes or life truths, encouraging audiences to work (or study) optimistically, and cultivate healthy habits and hobbies. For example, the audience is exhorted to be grateful, down-to-earth in life, and progressive and friendly in work. In order to make these inspirational messages more attractive, @Peoplesdaily also makes the texts into posters for distribution.

@Peoplesdaily set up a special Night Reading section to send out good night greetings to its followers. Weibo posts of good night greetings are long, often exceeding 1,000 Chinese characters. These Weibo posts are primarily short stories that contain philosophies about life with both text and audio versions. Many audiences commented that listening to (reading) the Night Reading programs of @Peoplesdaily before bed can help them calm down and fall asleep better.

4.3.2. Holiday Greeting

@Peoplesdaily is very good at finding the "meaning" of each festival, searching for festival elements from real-world landscapes, objects, and customs, and delivering visual festival greetings to the public. To entertain the public on national holidays such as Labor Day, National Day, and New Year's Day, @Peoplesdaily posts many exciting videos and live broadcasts introducing China's scenic spots. During some important traditional festivals (e.g., Spring Festival, Lantern Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, etc.), @Peoplesdaily will send out greetings to the public, and briefly describe the customs and the histories of the traditional festivals through beautiful pictures or videos (e.g., during the Dragon Boat Festival, it will report on the different flavors of rice dumplings). When the seasons change, @Peoplesdaily also publishes photos and videos of landscapes in season (e.g., showing the public the opening of rapeseed flowers and cherry blossoms when spring comes, and revealing the beauty of maple trees and ginkgo trees in autumn). It delivers beautiful scenery and greetings to every audience, allowing the public to escape life's stresses briefly.

4.3.3. Popularizing Science

@Peoplesdaily also plays the role of "life teacher" for the public, delivering scientific knowledge by publishing Weibo posts. The topics covered in popular science Weibo posts include science and technology, health knowledge, astronomical phenomena, etc. For instance, during the Covid-19 outbreak from 2019 to 2022, @Peoplesdaily published numerous Weibo posts to popularise accurate prevention and treatment measures for Covid-19. These Weibo posts have gone a long way in calming public anxiety and curbing the spread of some disinformation. Furthermore, @Peoplesdaily frequently invites experts and scholars from relevant fields to produce popular science videos. For example, on World Sleep Day 2023, @Peoplesdaily invited senior doctors to explain the causes and countermeasures of insomnia in a Weibo video. Many users have commented that the expert's advice does help to improve the stress in their lives and the quality of their sleep.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This article adopts the media context theory proposed by Meyrowitz as its framework and summarizes the innovation experiences of a pre-eminent traditional Chinese news media organization (*People's Daily*) on the social media platform Weibo. Compared with the "serious big newspaper" impression left by the *People's Daily* newspaper, @Peoplesdaily is more likely to use the reporting methods that netizens enjoy. It shows an innovative journalism strategy of "contextualization," whether when releasing information or elaborating opinions. All of these strategies break down, to a certain extent, the partition between the front and back stages of news (i.e., the boundary between news production and public life), allowing the news and the public to interact and communicate in the middle region.

As a traditional Chinese news media organization, *People's Daily* uses social media platforms to create new products such as live news, vlog news, chat box news, Weibo commentary, and news jointly produced with users. These works start with the decentralization of discourse. Then, through the "middle region" of the communication context and the personalized creation of important news, @Peoplesdaily builds a closer relationship with the audiences, consolidating or reconstructing their authority and influence. Ultimately, while the public participates in constructing the news context, @Peoplesdaily achieves the reclamation of discourse.

The expansion and reshaping of the @Peoplesdaily's discourse is due to its news innovation and division of labor. On the one hand, @Peoplesdaily continuously creates "middle regions" through live news, vlog news, and chat box news, absorbing much public/personal discourse. Zhang et al. (2014) found through a large-scale survey that *People's Daily* is regarded as the most credible media outlet by the Chinese public. The live news, vlog news, and chat box news published by @Peoplesdaily has transformed the inherent seriousness and monotonous context of the past and allows multiple languages and words in front and backstage to mix and weave together to present a "hybrid context." The coexistence of front and backstage "hybrid context" creates a new way of presenting news, i.e., the "middle region" presentation. On the other hand, @Peoplesdaily has taken the public/personal discourse of the "middle region" into its own power through Weibo commentary and news jointly produced with the user. According to Meyrowitz (1994), discourse is diffused and shifted in the "hybrid context" created by the internet. On social media platforms such as Weibo, individual discourse gradually enters the mainstream, and the public sphere changes its expression into individual discourse to cater to the public and the market, contributing to a new form of official discourse. This idea aligns with the reality of Weibo commentary and news jointly produced with users by @Peoplesdaily. @Peoplesdaily has changed the old model of "you broadcast, and I watch" to one that encourages audience interaction (Huang & Lu, 2017). It pays close attention to users' real-time discussions and comments on social issues. At the same time, it takes the audience's speech as a news source, and selectively displays the users' comments, borrowing these to support its reports and opinions. It can be seen that @Peoplesdaily has consolidated and reconstructed its discourse power in a "hybrid context" through innovation and cooperation in news production. Audience participation does not decrease the authority of @Peoplesdaily but becomes a source of influence for it.

Multiple studies have indicated that official Chinese propaganda outlets have achieved a delicate balance between positive and negative emotions to evoke emotional resonance and creative engagement (Zhang, 2022). The findings of this article further confirm this view. Through daily greetings, holiday greetings, and popularizing science, @Peoplesdaily communicates with the public on an equal footing. @Peoplesdaily not

only plays the role of a news publisher, but also assumes the role of a social governor. It constructs a hybrid context full of goodwill to regulate the public's life stress and emotions.

As Liu and Zhou (2011) noted, although the Weibo accounts of Chinese state media serve as a tool to capture the public voice, a platform to collect sources, and a channel to obtain social news, they also serve as propaganda tools to facilitate the spread of positive news and manage crises. As China's largest newspaper, *People's Daily* has always been involved in China's social governance in different ways. Previously, official social media accounts, such as *People's Daily* and China Central Television, often served as the voice of government or administrative institutions (Li & Liu, 2020). As a result, *People's Daily* has carried its authority over to Weibo, providing serious and objective reporting to the public. Over time, @Peoplesdaily has gradually shifted from "tough propaganda" to "emotional mobilization" in social governance work. The discourse of @Peoplesdaily is no longer condescending, and the interaction with society at large is becoming more and more egalitarian (Gorodnichenko et al., 2021). Through equal dialogue with the public, @Peoplesdaily constructs a more diversified media context and plays the role of "friend, teacher, calendar, message board, and so on" for its audiences. In the Weibo posts related to daily greetings, holiday greetings, and popularizing science, much of the content is not news in the traditional sense, but short stories, inspirational quotes, famous people's sayings, and scientific knowledge. These non-news messages published by @Peoplesdaily convey the core values of Chinese society and are the primary means by which *People's Daily* participates in social governance today.

6. Implications

This article has tried to overcome the previous case studies' limitations of small sample sizes and poor generalizable conclusions to summarize and analyze @Peoplesdaily's communication strategies from a contextualized perspective.

Theoretically, this article develops the application of media context theory in social media. The article finds that the states of backstage, middle region (hybrid context), and front stage still exist in news reporting on social media. However, as more and more social media news emphasizes interaction and communication, the middle region is becoming more common.

Practically, this article finds that the "contextualization" strategies employed by *People's Daily's* Weibo news offer important experiences for traditional news organizations' integration strategies into social media. Based on the results, we encourage other traditional news media to open accounts on various social media platforms, leveraging them for news dissemination and fostering news' innovations. The specific journalistic practice recommendations include the following four points.

Firstly, we believe that the strategy of "contextualization" employed by *People's Daily*'s Weibo news is replicable. @Peoplesdaily utilizes formats such as live news, vlog news, chat box news, Weibo commentary, and news jointly produced with users to create "hybrid context/middle regions." It then achieves an expansion and reconfiguration of discursive power. Other news organizations on social media can imitate @Peoplesdaily's innovative initiatives to create a more diversified communication context, absorb the audience's discourse and attention, and ultimately enhance their influence.

Second, we emphasize the importance of "interaction" in the future of news media. In the social media hybrid context, news and public communication become more and more frequent. Interaction is a prerequisite for a change in the communication context (Barberá et al., 2019) and a key for news organizations to gain attention. We argue that news organizations need to be aware of the influence of public/personal discourse in the media context and actively engage the public in the discussion to expand the communicative power of news.

Third, we believe that "non-news content" may be the key to future innovation and development for news media. @Peoplesdaily, by providing non-news content such as short stories, inspirational quotes, and scientific knowledge, has changed the initially serious and monotonous communication context, and attracted a large audience (e.g., those who had got used to listening to books while going to bed began to use the audio of the Night Reading program of @Peoplesdaily; Wu & Pan, 2022). We encourage other news media to provide their audiences with interesting, informative educational and cultural content, where appropriate, to enhance audience engagement.

Fourth, we believe that news organizations that are present on social media must still maintain their original credibility and do their social duty as news media. The journalistic field is never autonomous from external forces, including audiences as critics (Banjac & Hanusch, 2022; Craft et al., 2016). In addition, news accounts on social media are more susceptible to the influence of funders and the public. Therefore, we call on the news media not to be obsessed with traffic and attention, but to provide objective and neutral news to the public and fulfill their social monitoring and accountability roles.

7. Limitations

In this article, we have selected @Peoplesdaily as a representative source to explore the experiences of Chinese traditional news media in social media innovation. While the sample chosen is highly influential and showcases significant innovations, it is essential to acknowledge that the social media innovation strategies of smaller and medium-sized traditional news media may have been overlooked. In future studies, we intend to expand the sample size moderately to include a broader range of news organizations, thereby exploring more Chinese news media's innovative experiences.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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Media-Tech Companies as Agents of Innovation: From Radical to Incremental Innovation in a Cluster

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Abstract

During recent decades new players, forms, and practices have been entering the journalism field, prompting a re-examination of journalism's professional and organizational boundaries. Many scholars argue for expanding the scope of journalism studies beyond the newsrooms to encompass actors labelled as strangers, peripheral players, or interlopers. Those actors do not belong to traditional journalism but are becoming involved in the production of news, challenging journalism borders from the inside and out. Their influence has been growing and scholarship is increasingly mapping out these strangers and assessing their role in journalism innovation. In this article, we examine the role of one type of implicit interloper in journalism innovation: media-tech companies. We consider companies that provide video management and virtual reality services as implicit interlopers, due to their connection to journalism through the boundary object of news production and lack of claim over journalistic authority. We argue that media-tech companies have been under-researched based on a review of literature on innovation according to Holton and Belair-Gagnon's (2018) typology of interlopers. Therefore, we examine what kind of innovation comes from the periphery of journalism, and the prerequisites for and the role of those innovations in the context of a specific cluster. We conducted a case study of Media City Bergen based on a thematic analysis of semi-structured elite interviews with executives of media-tech companies. Our findings show how media-tech companies bring innovation to production and distribution, content, and content consumption. Furthermore, they show how disruptiveness and the degree of innovations change with the maturation of the cluster.

Keywords

interloper; journalism boundaries; media cluster; media innovation; media-tech companies

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the media industry has gone through transitions in structures, consumers, and business models, while journalism is becoming highly diversified in terms of actors and practices. The research on innovation has grown significantly alongside and encompasses a variety of perspectives, actors, and factors that influence innovation (Belair-Gagnon & Steinke, 2020). However, researchers mainly examine news work, media organizations, and business models, while the role of interlopers in innovation has only recently gained attention. Interlopers, also labelled as strangers or peripheral players, are actors or practices that do not belong to traditional journalism but are increasingly getting involved in the production of news, challenging journalism's borders from inside and out, influencing workflows, professional norms, and values. Scholarship is starting to map out these strangers and assess their position and role in journalism (Hanusch & Löhmann, 2022) and its innovation. Using Holton and Belair-Gagnon's (2018) typology of interlopers (intralopers, explicit and implicit interlopers) we review the literature on peripheral players and journalism innovation and identify media-tech companies as an under-researched type of implicit interloper.

In this article, we consider media-tech companies as implicit interlopers which are connected to journalism through the boundary object of news production and are a source of professional transformation and tech innovation, without challenging journalism's authority. We focus on media-tech companies that provide cloud solutions for video management, enhancement of video production, visuals, 3D graphics, and similar. Such media-tech companies have a different role than companies specialized in web analytics, which have been studied as implicit interlopers by other scholars (see Belair-Gagnon & Holton, 2018). Therefore, we believe that our research contributes to recent scholarly endeavours to obtain a more nuanced understanding of what happens at the periphery of journalism. At the same time, media-tech companies are an important part of the innovation system, and a source of professional transformation. As they infuse new tech solutions and ideas into journalism, they challenge journalistic norms, emphasize new values, and influence professional jurisdiction. Therefore, we believe our research contributes to innovation literature as well, by bringing new insights into how innovation happens in journalism, and what kind of innovation media-tech companies induce in a clustered setting. Since the media-tech industry is growing quickly, in both strength and scope, with new players, ideas, and tech solutions constantly appearing, we contribute to keeping track of these developments as well.

The main research question we pose is how media-tech companies as implicit interlopers contribute to innovation in media and news work. We address this question by undertaking the case study of a media cluster, Media City Bergen (MCB), examining what kind of innovations media-tech companies bring, the prerequisites for and the role of those innovations in the context of a specific cluster. Empirically this study relies on thematic analysis of eight in-depth semi-structured interviews with executives of the media-tech companies that operate globally from MCB, Norway. Given the number of internationally relevant media that these companies work with, partnerships with tech giants, and the number of employees and offices they have, these interviews can be considered elite.

Our study identifies accidental innovation as a catalyst for tech solutions upon which several tech companies have been built, eventually evolving into a cluster. This chain of events was initiated by a group of developers employed by a broadcaster who have developed a close collaborative network characterized by trust and exchange between technologists and journalists. Initial accidental, disruptive, and radical

innovations were switched by sustaining an incremental innovation with cluster maturation. Nevertheless, media-tech companies continue to bring innovation in three main areas: the process of production and distribution, content, and content consumption.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Expansion of Journalism Boundaries: Strangers, Peripheral Players, or Interlopers

During recent decades journalism has been undergoing a deep restructuring. New players, forms, and practices have been entering the journalism field, prompting a re-examination of journalism's professional and organizational boundaries. Many scholars argue for expanding the scope of journalism studies beyond the newsrooms (i.e., Deuze & Witschge, 2018) to encompass citizen or blogger acts of journalism (Singer, 2005), as well as the production of startup (Carlson & Usher, 2016; Slot, 2021) and interloper media (Belair-Gagnon & Holton, 2018; Eldridge, 2014, 2019). Notions of boundaries and boundary work are crucial for understanding this new fluidity within journalism.

Professions employ different (boundary) strategies to claim authority and demarcate themselves from competitors and outsiders performing similar roles. According to Gieryn (1999), these strategies are expansion (new authority assimilation), expulsion (revoking authority to other agents in the field), and autonomy protection (retaining power against competitors). Compared to other professions, journalists have always had more problems in defending their boundaries, because they are challenged from within and outside of news organizations. In that respect, Fontoura (2023) argues that a comprehensive matrix for considering contemporary boundary work in journalism should complement Gieryn's (1999) categories with Carlson's (2015) differentiation between agents, practices, and professionalism.

Following that matrix, boundary work lies in practices such as entrepreneurial journalism, merging economic and business tasks (Coddington, 2015). Also, boundary work lies within intersections of technological actors and their practices, which are "both internal and external to an organization, considered not central to the production of news nor performed by traditional journalists" as Royal and Kiesow (2021, p. 1549) phrase it. Those boundary roles usually ensure the application of the newest technologies in news production, for example, analysis of big data and data visualization for news stories, use of AI for generating content in news videos, etc. The number of technology-based positions in media is growing, along with the number of outside companies which provide services to enhance news production. Examples of those boundary agents include consultancy company Hearken, specialized in helping media to engage their audience (Fontoura, 2023), and web analytics companies that "have a connection to journalism through the boundary object of news production and an interest in the success of journalism" (Belair-Gagnon & Holton, 2018, p. 496).

Holton and Belair-Gagnon (2018, p. 72) have used Simmel's (1950) metaphor of strangers to explain the position of these newcomers (tech-savvy actors and practices) in the journalism field. According to Simmel (1950), the label of strangers always carries a stigma, because a stranger is "fixed within a particular spatial group" in which his position "is determined by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the beginning" and "that he imports qualities into it which do not stem from the group itself" (p. 402). Relating this metaphor to the journalism field, Holton and Belair-Gagnon (2018, p. 72) underline that journalistic strangers involve both individuals and institutions of varying kinds, who bring new ideas and innovations

that disrupt journalism from the outside or within. To encourage scholars to examine these strangers in all variations of actors and roles in co-shaping innovation, Holton and Belair-Gagnon (2018, p. 71) introduce a categorization of strangers or interlopers following Eldridge (2014, 2019).

Eldridge (2014, p. 2) introduced the notion of interloper media in examining WikiLeaks as challenge to journalism primacy and legitimacy, and in difference to reparative discourses of internal faults such as phone hacking. In his later work, he described interloper media as "digitally native media and journalistic actors who originate from outside the boundaries of the traditional journalistic field, but whose work nevertheless reflects the socio-informative functions, identities, and roles of journalism" (Eldridge, 2019, p. 858). Following up on his work, Holton and Belair-Gagnon (2018, p. 75) distinguish between explicit and implicit interlopers and intralopers. Explicit interlopers, such as bloggers and citizen journalists, produce journalistic content outside of news organizations and they are usually neither recognized as journalists nor welcomed into the field. Implicit interlopers also come from outside of media organizations but advance content production, dissemination, or audience engagement with IT solutions, web analytics, etc. They contribute to journalism without challenging its authority. Therefore, they are accepted by journalists more than explicit interlopers. Intralopers are non-editorial workers who supplement and complement journalistic work from within news organizations. Usually, they are considered "distant strangers" in the newsroom "less…by proximity than they are by the work they perform in relation to news production" (Holton & Belair-Gagnon, 2018, p. 75).

In a more recent effort to establish a comprehensive framework "for identifying, classifying and comparing different types of peripheral actors in the journalistic field," Hanusch and Löhmann (2022, p. 7) abstracted 10 main components of peripherality from the literature (values, experience, belongingness, professionalism, competencies, formats, transformativity, autonomy, audience-centricity, and organization). They further grouped components into three dimensions—identities, practices, and structures—completing a framework that could lead "to a more nuanced understanding of what happens on the periphery of journalism" (Hanusch & Löhmann, 2022, p. 7).

We undertake this research to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how innovation is brought into journalism by the peripheral actors. We focus on the type of actors that, to the best of our knowledge, have not received much research attention so far—technological companies that provide diversified tech solutions for easier, faster, more efficient news production and enhancing media content from outside of media organizations. We use the label "media-tech companies" to make a distinction from most similar interlopers that have been addressed by other researchers—companies that provide web analytics (Belair-Gagnon & Holton, 2018) and engagement consultancy (Fontoura, 2023). The similarity lies within the relation to journalism, which is neatly captured by Belair-Gagnon and Holton (2018, p. 5): "These companies have limited their encroachment on journalism by not claiming to be journalists, rather casting themselves as an aid and non-antagonistic to journalism."

We proceed with a literature review on media innovation structured according to Belair-Gagnon and Holton's (2018) classification of interlopers to show that media-tech companies (as implicit interlopers) have not received enough research attention in all its variety.

2.2. Previous Research on Interlopers as Agents of Media Innovation

Besides peripherality in journalism, recent challenges in the media industry have spurred academic interest in innovation as well. As a systematic journalism literature review of news innovation research from 1990 to 2018 highlights, interest in innovation has increased "dramatically" during this period, accelerating after 2000 and especially since 2015 (Belair-Gagnon & Steinke, 2020, p. 1731). This valuable study also showed that journalism scholars have employed different theories and concepts, including gatekeeping theory, diffusion of innovations, convergence, professionalization, and role conceptions, among others, to explore the dynamics, actors, factors, and interactions involved in the process of innovations (Belair-Gagnon & Steinke, 2020). In the neighbouring disciplines—media economics and media management—there is similar growth in research interest and scope. According to Dogruel's (2015, p. 154) literature review, media economics researchers usually use micro- and meso-level perspectives to understand product (new media titles, formats, services) and process (new communication technologies) innovation, as well as corresponding organizational restructuring. While García-Avilés (2021) identifies technology, management, organization, commercialization, and narrative as primary areas of media innovation research, in the most recent and broadest literature overview.

All authors of these overviews agree that most of the innovation research in journalism and media studies is centred around traditional actors, and examines news work, media organizations, and business models, while the role of peripheral players remains on the margins. Furthermore, we argue that many studies have examined peripheral players as a source of innovation without labelling or considering them as interlopers, or specific types of interlopers. In what follows, we review the literature on innovation and identify which type of interlopers were studied previously (with or without reference to interlopers) according to Holton and Belair-Gagnon's (2018, p. 75) differentiation (between explicit and implicit interlopers and intralopers), as we understand it. Since types of interlopers are partly defined by identity marks, some might disagree with our categorization of some actors. However, strict categorization of interlopers is not of the utmost importance for the main argument of this article.

Among the actors that we consider explicit interlopers, scholars have studied bloggers and citizen journalists as trendsetters in online content production. Singer (2005) described how journalists monitored the successes and failures of bloggers and experimented with their style of writing and content delivery accordingly. Initially, authors aligned in praising blogs for introducing new ways of producing, disseminating, and analysing news (Singer, 2005) but later studies voiced scepticism about the potential of blogs for innovation (Mitchelstein et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the influence of bloggers and citizen journalists in shifting the boundaries of traditional journalism has been investigated. From the perspective of innovative business models, start-ups, and news entrepreneurs were examined as agents of innovation. The lessons the traditional media should take from entrepreneurs are on how to develop successful reader membership schemes and promote synergies that underline the added value of collaboration (Zhang, 2019). Researchers explored start-ups as "role-models" for established media around how to adapt to market challenges and to be more "in tune with the needs of the public (Carlson & Usher, 2016; Slot, 2021).

The innovative potential of implicit interlopers has also been assessed. For example, innovation labs within most advanced news organizations have been explored as sites of experimentation with content, products, genres, tools, and boosters of technological, editorial and/or commercial innovations (Zayani, 2021). Lewis

and Usher (2016) examined processes of communication, exchange, and work production at the intersection between journalism and computer programming, based on a case study of an online Learning Lab aimed at journalism innovation through open-source software. Boyles (2020) undertook exploratory research of journalism hackathons as laboratories for developing news and showed how hackers and journalists collaborate with individuals located outside of news organizations, "facilitating an external and collaborative space for both product innovation and civic conversation within communities" (Boyles, 2020, p. 1339). Belair-Gagnon and Holton (2018, p. 492) focused on web analytics companies and examined how managers of those companies "understand and position their work in relation to news production as a boundary object." Fontoura (2023, p. 1533) shows how consultant company Hearken changes the conceptualization of daily work, by performing tasks related to those carried out in newsrooms, such as developing audience engagement plans.

Media scholars have also studied innovation brought about by actors that we understand to be intralopers—actors working in media organizations in non-traditional roles (product managers, programmers, experience designers, data analysts, engagement managers). Nielsen (2012, p. 959) analysed processes of technological innovation in two Danish newspaper companies that integrated blogs into their websites, by examining how three different communities—journalists, managers, and technologists—were involved in the development process. This "community of technologists" has dramatically gained importance since Nielsen's research, because news organizations increasingly hire staff with computational skills to perform tasks that journalists are not skilled at. According to Wu et al. (2019) the extent of the pressure that the technological field has on the journalistic field is yet to be seen. A few years ago, technological firms were inclined toward co-development of ideas and innovations, not acting as active agents in the journalistic field. However, they predicted more technologists would enter newsrooms as more organizations set up digital teams in-house. Technologists' skillset enables them to climb up the organizational ladder fast and take dominance in the field (Wu et al., 2019, p. 1253). Royal and Kiesow (2021) investigated product managers as intralopers, showing that they feel less influential than people with more traditional business or editorial functions. Also, this study highlighted a discrepancy between technological and journalistic approaches to change, with technology valuing innovation and journalism valuing consistency (Royal & Kiesow, 2021, p. 1561). Lischka et al. (2023, p. 1) examined editorial technologists as an emerging professional group and showed how "they critically reflect on their roles and strive to augment their agency in the field through normalizing their computational skills and accumulating social capital" to bring innovation in journalism.

As this literature overview shows, scholars have addressed the role of different interlopers in shaping innovations, but media-tech companies specialized in video management, video enhancement, visuals, and similar have rarely been the focus of research. Therefore, we aim to contribute knowledge about the role of implicit interlopers in journalism by examining the following research question (RQ): In what aspect of journalism do media-tech companies operating from the Norwegian media cluster bring about innovation?

We will answer the question in the following two dimensions: (a) disruptive-sustainable and (b) radical-incremental. In considering the first dimension we draw upon Bakker (2013, p. 162), who distinguished between sustainable and disruptive innovation, where the former aims to improve existing products and the latter aims to develop new products that can disrupt the market. Under degree of innovation, we differentiate incremental innovation as a gradual improvement from radical sudden changes (Bakker, 2013, p. 163). The dimensions of innovation will be discussed in the context of maturity of

the cluster. Our assumption is that innovation tends to become less disruptive and radical as clusters are institutionalized.

We organize the discussion of our findings according to Bleyen et al. (2014, p. 35) classification, which includes:

> 1) A production and distribution innovation (a new means of creating, producing, reproducing, distributing or showing content); 2) a consumption and media innovation (a new way of consuming content); 3) a content innovation in the core (a theme or message) and in the form (a new stylistic feature); and 4) a business model innovation (a new business model, including the reorganization of an industrial sector).

3. Method

To answer the outlined research question, we conduct a case study of MCB in Norway, considering media clusters as environments that allow for examining the interplay between media and media-tech companies in a "natural" setting.

Research on industry clusters in general and media clusters in particular finds that there are both internal and external drivers in cluster formation and growth (Komorowski & Fodor, 2020): urbanization economies, localization economies, agglomeration economies, and perception economies. In the context of MCB, the concept of "agglomeration economies" is particularly relevant, meaning closeness to similar businesses as well as competitors. Furthermore, arenas for collaboration, exchange of ideas and "knowledge spillovers" are important dimensions of a successful media cluster. Media clusters are different, depending on the composition of media companies in the cluster. Even though MCB was formally established in 2010 and co-located in one city centre building in 2017, the cluster has a history dating back to 1992. This was the year of the opening of a second national broadcaster in Norway. Based on competition between several consortiums, the Norwegian Parliament decided to locate the new broadcaster in Bergen, the country's second-largest city. TV2, as the channel was branded, became an engine for the audio-visual sector in the region and for technological innovations in the area of broadcasting. MCB has similarities with the media cluster type Komorowski (2017) labels as "the giant anchor." However, even though TV2 is the largest media company and was the driving force behind the cluster formation (co-location), the cluster currently has large members from regional news media, the national public service broadcaster NRK, University of Bergen, and international software companies like Vizrt and IBM. Thus, the cluster could also be classified as a "specialized area" (Komorowski, 2017), as it consists of approximately 100 companies in the urban area of Bergen, specializing in media production and media technology, sharing a pool of highly skilled manpower and combined collaboration and competitive relationships and the informal circulation of knowledge.

To approach the RQ we first identified influential media-tech companies in the cluster. As we will see in the empirical analysis, the media technology industry in the current cluster formation is to a large extent spun off from TV2. TV2 is the largest player in the MCB-cluster, very much driving the process of co-locating the media industry in the region, together with the regional University and the largest technology spin-off from TV2. We established contact with the CEO of that company with the help of the CEO of MCB. Furthermore, the CEO of MCB had additional suggestions about what companies to include in the research, after we explained

our goals. We established contacts with selected companies through her, asking their CEOs for interviews. The response rate was excellent, and only two companies did not respond.

The first author of this article conducted interviews with eight CEOs in March, April, and May 2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, all interviews were done online using software for online meetings. Interviews lasted from 45 to 90 minutes, and the conversation was in English. We have anonymized all interviews because some of these individuals wanted to remain confidential. We refer to them and quote their words using a code constructed simply by using the letters MT to refer to the executives of the media-tech companies and a number to point to the exact respondent—MT1, MT2, etc.

We consider our interviews as elite because selected MTs represent a small group of businesses who currently dominate the market of tech providers for broadcasters. Media-tech companies included in this study work with some of the most recognizable media globally, i.e., BBC, CNN, ESPN, FOX, US Today, and Al Arabiya. Also, the list of their partnerships includes tech giants such as Adobe, Amazon Web Services, Apple, and Microsoft Azure. The companies collectively employ more than 700 people in over 26 offices worldwide. Companies are owned by actors such as a private equity firm that has raised 17 billion euros in capital since its inception.

Given that media-tech companies have rarely been researched, we employed semi-structured interviews to help reveal how these CEOs see their position in the media industry, how they describe their role in relation to journalism, what kind of innovation they bring, and how they started as tech companies. Semi-structured interviews have a reflexive format, and we followed up on respondents' answers, raising questions in correspondence with the flow of conversation, rather than holding strictly to the interview guide. The guide included explanations and questions:

> It seems that the boundaries of media work are expanding with media-tech companies getting a stronger foothold on the market. What is the role of your company in the media industry? What do you provide for media and how do media use your products/services to make journalism better?

Interviewers varied these questions depending on the conversation:

> How do you work with news organizations to implement change? How are products developed for journalism? How do you see the role of your company in providing better news or service to society? Do you think your services are influencing the role of media in society?

The respondents were also asked to reflect on their career paths and the history of their company.

Once we collected and transcribed the interviews, we used NVivo software for qualitative content analysis to code, group, and further analyse respondents' statements. Initial coding was aimed at identifying statements that fell under predefined types of innovation. To understand in more depth the technical innovations our respondents talked about, we additionally cross-checked interview data in the available technical documentation of the various services that media-tech companies provide. Once statements were grouped, we merged co-occurring themes under which we presented our findings to showcase how disruptiveness and the degree of innovations change with the development of the cluster.

4. Research Findings

4.1. Accidental Disruptive, Radical, Cross-Sectional Innovation

The history of innovation in the context of MCB illustrates how innovation can be accidental and brought about by intraloper programmers employed in the media, not specifically with the intention of creating innovation but out of a desperate need for personnel. Disruptive, radical innovation started when an emerging broadcaster could not find qualified people for the newsroom, ending up employing software developers instead. As our respondent reflected on the beginning of his career, "Few people with experience in traditional broadcasting were available for hiring, so I ended up in the newsroom" (MT8).

Therefore, the case of MCB shows how innovations can begin accidentally and circumstantially. Additionally, innovations were accidentally disruptive. To explain the initial spark of innovation, our respondent needed to describe the state of the art in the journalism field at that time. His words resonate with the notion of isomorphism Boczkowski and de Santos (2007) introduced to refer to the process of homogenization of content across different media platforms, due to factors including the use of similar technologies and tools for content production, and the journalistic practices around them. Although our respondent (MT8) does not express this in so many words, his sentences clearly point to mimicry and rigidity in the media industry:

> All the broadcasters in the world were extremely alike. What one broadcaster did in Asia was the same as one did in the US and in Europe. It's incestuous because they didn't look much beyond their own little universe of things. So, their solutions were very predictable and evolutionary. Everybody was doing the same.

In more concrete reference to journalistic practice, MT8 talks about his shocking discovery of "where these broadcasters were in terms of treating information on the technology side." To illustrate he stresses how much time it took to get a map on the news broadcast back then. The way he describes the innovation that he and his fellow programmers introduced for creating maps, echoes journalistic doxa about the timeliness of news, and the relevance of breaking news:

> The map is what you need first in breaking news, so I was struck by the mismatch between what you need and how long time it takes, and the first thing we did was to create a map system so they could create maps automatically. (MT8)

This also indicates how important the intraloper position was in the newsroom: It enabled them to bridge very distinct universes—journalistic and technological. As MT8 remarked, "The technical department and the editorial departments used to be so segmented that the work processes in the editorial part were not clear to the technical department." Similarly, another programmer, MT6, succeeded in capitalizing on his innovative tool only after acknowledging how useful it could be for journalistic work, when he started working with media companies on a solution for searching media archives.

Regarding the distinction between incremental and radical innovation, the words of MT8 clearly indicate that solutions such as automation of making maps were radical. MT8 used the attribute "revolutionary" when he talked about the achievements of programmers, while he described changes that the media

industry implemented as "evolutionary": "Since we didn't have a background in the broadcast industry, we couldn't know that what we did was seen as quite revolutionary from the outside…we just applied the normal IT-based techniques" (MT8).

This quote brings us back to the most important condition that enabled these radical and disruptive innovations—the intraloper positioning of programmers in the newsroom. This is highlighted in the words: "Although I'm from the technology side, I was hired in the news department, and that was very important" (MT8). It was important because he was able to apply his technological way of thinking and logic to the journalistic field: "I worked in-between journalist and technologist within the news channel, so the crossover made it relatively easy to be innovative." This quote highlights interlopers as in-betweeners with one foot in journalism and the other in programming. Also, it echoes previous findings about intralopers as agents of innovation.

This case also shows how mimicry can work both ways, against and in favour of the diffusion of innovation:

> So very quickly other broadcasters from around the world came to see what our TV station was doing. They were very impressed with what we did with software and wanted to buy this stuff. After some years, it didn't make sense to run this from within the news department, and we started our own company. (MT8)

Similarly, one solution—a video management system built on cloud technology—outgrew the scope of the broadcaster. A different group of programmers created over-the-top (OTT) or a streaming service based on video management, but this was more through incremental innovation. As MT1 elaborates:

> The driving idea was basically that we had been developing a lot of technology and we've done a lot of trial and errors and gained experience from building what we believe was the first OTT service in the world. Then we started our company. Of course, having seen other companies spinning out of a broadcaster, and making success outside Norway was an inspiration.

We argue that when initial intralopers distanced themselves from the journalistic field by establishing their own companies, the character of innovation they were able to generate was modified towards sustaining and incremental innovations. Nevertheless, media-tech companies bring innovation in three out of four aspects of journalism according to Bleyen et al. (2014) classification, as we demonstrate in Section 4.2.

4.2. Incremental, Sustainable Innovation in Production and Distribution

Several companies established by the extended group of programmers initially employed in the broadcaster have brought innovations to production and distribution, such as innovation in visualizations, video management, automation of live production, and sports analytics. They have also been upgrading broadcasting (distribution), through the development of streaming services.

Innovation in visualizations includes all graphics, from nameplates to the most advanced 3D visualizations displayed on the television screen. One of the tech companies provides a process tool for media to create visuals, basically a large set of templates from which journalists select the appropriate template for their

story and then fill in the content: "If they are working on nine o'clock news, they find a template set for that. Of course, content is isolated from expression, so anyone can use it in their own way" (MT8).

Another product innovation is related to video management—creating a system for storing, archiving, preserving, and finding videos. Stored content is tagged with metadata manually or automatically to make content easily searchable. AI is employed in those systems to enrich metadata, or to create suggestions for editing a video story. In explaining how companies use AI developed by tech giants, our respondents echo previous findings about collaboration as an important part of the tech doxa that supports innovation. On the other hand, the words of programmers also correspond with journalistic doxa. News timeliness was mentioned once more as the driving force behind the solution for cloud video editing. Innovation was aimed at accelerating work, enabling journalists to record a video, upload it into the cloud, edit it quickly, and then distribute it using social media in the first instance. MT4 explains:

> There are other ways to use that tool, but in these times of high-velocity content, it's very important for news organizations to get content out and to create that kind of buzz around the story in a very short time.

These words demonstrate a deep understanding of the production process and at the same time put weight on the "Silicon Valley ethos consisting of (1) a focus on the needs of audiences, (2) a desire to provide widespread access to data, and (3) the drive to create easy-to-consume products," according to Wu et al. (2019, p. 14).

The third innovation is the automation of live content production—doing every task that is known upfront before the live show. In the words of MT8:

> So if you are covering a sports event, you know possible outcomes. Take a football game. There are yellow cards, red cards, and goals, I mean, it's a very limited set of possibilities that can happen. So, you set those predefined possibilities in the system.

In such a way, automation significantly reduces the number of people that need to be involved in production, the amount of work, and enhances the quality of the product.

Fourth, media-tech companies have created innovation through sports analytics, providing tools for making analytics of games and goals, assisting in recognizing the players, drawing a live path for the ball, players' movements and more. These systems include tools to insert ads, sponsorships, or commercials onto the field in the process of production. AI is crucial for identifying and tracking players on the field and replacing billboards in the arenas. This system is somewhat related to the business model because it enables the media to replace commercials and sell different commercials in different countries.

The fifth production innovation was started by the developer who was involved in an attempt at "categorizing the web" when the internet was growing. According to him, this venture was far ahead of its time:

> When the internet was growing, we realized a need for information retrieval. At the time, everyone said it was impossible to make money from search engines. But we thought the content was growing exponentially and we needed ways to access this information, so we built the search engine and

> text analytics tools to see connections between documents. And this proved very useful with publishers. (MT6)

Our respondent additionally explained that his media-tech company provides real-time analytics of what people in the country are reading. Basically, they collect all the news published in one country, check those articles on social media, and show which are most shared:

> Journalists use it to pick up stories. They see what stories are popular elsewhere and republish that or see what's trending within local news and make national news. Other media use it to see how they are doing over time, compare themselves to competitors, or to stay on top of the current events. (MT6)

All these production innovations were clearly described as the outcome of previous tech solutions. Also, our respondents mentioned the building blocks of these innovations, discussed how innovations proceeded from previous examples, and stressed continuing progress, so we consider them sustainable and incremental innovations.

The main innovation in distribution was already mentioned as maturation of the radical tech solutions accidentally initiated by a broadcaster—a service that allows content owners to stream to end users. The media-tech company that developed this streaming service continued with fine-tuning its product, to overtake the competition: "We differ in our offering with a curation tool which allows a human touch on top of AI-based recommendations. So, editors can go in and filter the AI and give it parameters" (MT1). Besides underlining the sustainable and incremental traits of distribution innovation our respondent also highlights how their customers use the tool in innovative ways: "I know several of our customers are using the data to predict who is most likely to leave the platform, to see what they can do to prevent that" (MT1). This way of using the tool gives us reason to echo scholarly concerns about the discrepancy between tech and traditional journalistic understandings of audience needs: Technologists tend to push journalists to accommodate audience needs seen through analytics, while journalistic practice is traditionally pulled by an idealized image of audience needs.

4.3. Incremental, Sustainable Innovation in Consumption and Content Innovation

Consumption innovation was discussed by one of our respondents as a development that began when one of his internationally relevant news providers decided to go beyond their accustomed B2B (business to business) model to start catering to consumers directly. In the words of MT1, their client "decided to create a news production that could mimic a studio production. This is like nine o'clock news, but always up-to-date, always there when you click, and always personalized" (MT1). This required several levels of personalization to be integrated into the existing system. The first level allowed every user to obtain a personalized selection of stories based on their previous consumption. In the second level, users were able to set the duration of viewing: "If you want to dig deep, you can dig deep and have a lengthy news programme or you can go short and just have a five-minute brief" (MT1). Developers consider personalization as empowerment of users: "System is driven by the consumers. So, if they don't like a certain type of news story, they can swipe it away. And the system would learn about the user behaviour and then target news to them" (MT4). During the interview, MT4 aligned first with techno-optimists who argue that personalization enhances people's news autonomy and fosters more diverse news choices among others (Heitz et al., 2022). However, when asked to assess if

and how media-tech companies assist media in serving the public, he explicitly mentioned the risks of users ending up in "rabbit holes." His initial stance was relativized when he was posed a question that required him to put on his journalistic hat—Then he aligned with scholars criticizing social media algorithms for causing citizens' disengagement from the political process and polarization of the public sphere (Sunstein, 2018).

Another CEO started their company because of his personal experience as a user. He was missing bonus material on streaming services, as he puts it. He used to search for additional information about the actors, situations, or places all the time while watching various content. So, he decided to develop a solution to add information he would usually look for, on top of streamed content. He describes the innovation they bring to the streaming services as "access to a library," equipped to help users with questions like, "I've seen this woman before, what is her name?" In a nutshell, this company develops "an overlay that pops up on the screen," containing various information, such as "GPS coordinates of a beach, information about the song playing in the background, the clothes people on screen are wearing" (MT5). This can also be considered in part a business model innovation since it opens doors for product placement and similar marketing possibilities—opportunities to partner with Booking.com, for example. When a place is shown on screen, information about hotels can be relevant. Similarly, scenes from a Christmas movie could be overlaid with information from a shopping website (MT5).

The second content innovation comes from a media-tech company engaged in transforming broadcasting from physical into virtual reality:

> Everything you see in some of the news channels that we are working on now is virtual. Soon, the only physical part on TV will be the human telling the story in front of a green screen or LED screen-based environment. (MT7)

Basically, they simulate the surroundings of a person, although technology allows them to simulate a person as well. Our respondent is aware of the ethical implications of this technology, but he believes the progress will continue and soon we will be telling stories in a different way despite the possibilities for misuse. During the pandemic they simulated a meeting between officials of two countries in a virtual setting: "We were able to create a room where they could sit and speak as if they were in the same room" (MT7). In his opinion, that was a groundbreaking event, not only on a technological level, but also on a societal level, because leaders of the world can be in the same room and discuss important issues without leaving their physical location. Although these words might indicate the disruptiveness of innovation, we argue that sustained innovations in virtual reality coming from the gaming and film industry have led to incremental enhancement of broadcasting studios.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Adding to the previous research that started to unpack the highly relevant role of different types of interlopers in media innovation, our study offers a dimensional portrayal of the innovative role of media-tech companies in three aspects of media work: production and distribution, content, and content consumption. We also examine the degree and sustainability of innovation and showcase how accidental changes can have longstanding effects. Our case study reveals innovations beginning from the boundaries of a new broadcaster as disruptive and radical innovations but due to accidental circumstances—a group of

developers starting to work in the editorial department of the broadcaster. Importantly, the developers were hired out of desperation, as broadcast technicians were in short supply in the regional workforce. Our research documents the value of these outsiders' views on existing practices in media production in relation to the initial innovation. Applying computer science skills to existing practices—highly mechanical and physical—led to new solutions, that were more cost-effective and creative both technically and content-wise. New solutions were not only welcomed by the management of the new broadcaster but encouraged. They facilitated a culture of innovation, founded upon a close collaboration between journalists and technologists with backgrounds in computer science.

Based on the technological solutions of this group, several media-tech companies were built along with the media cluster in which they operate today. Initial innovations of this group were enabled by several factors: the crossover between media and technology; the characteristics of the broadcaster; and the culture of experimentation, collaboration, and trust that was created. Such culture continued in resulting ventures (media-tech companies established by that group of intralopers) and expanded into the media cluster. Within the dynamics of the media cluster, media-tech companies continue to bring innovation but in a sustained and incremental fashion. Even though the cluster today is institutionalized and creative processes are formalized, the cluster has preserved a vibrant culture of collaboration and knowledge sharing between technologists and journalists. This collaboration is still vital for innovation in the three areas of media work, but as the companies and the cluster develop the importance of international partnership for the technology companies is increasing, and there are tendencies to staff in-house technology departments in the media companies.

In the context of previous research that approached innovation as an internal or external incentive (Zayani, 2021), our study outlines the interplay between internal and external sources of innovation and suggests that future research should go beyond discussing various start-ups and labs as "examples of good practice" and innovation only in the dissemination phase. Although the identification of factors that contribute to resistance or embracing of novel technologies in the newsroom is highly valuable for understanding innovation, we believe that the success story of one accidental crossover highlights that we need more knowledge of accidental innovation. Such innovation might be more widespread than we realise, more potent for disruptive innovation, and potentially more valuable in times of scarcity in the media industry.

All conclusions we draw must be taken with respect to the scope of this study. It is a single case study with a meso-level approach. Media clusters, as Komorowski (2017) and Komorowski and Fodor (2020) have documented, are different in composition and have various regional and national prerequisites. MCB is unique, and the historical and industrial specificity of the cluster must be recognized, as we have underlined in this study. However, the companies that were included in this research work with very influential media organizations from around the world, they operate in a competitive and innovation-driven environment of a media cluster and on the media market which could be representative of the highly developed and financially stable markets. Nevertheless, we believe that comparison with other clusters or media-tech companies in different markets and settings could bring important insights in the future.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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ARTICLE

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Securing the Future of UK Public-Interest News: Navigating Change With Foresight and Innovation

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Abstract

This article delves into the factors driving change in the UK's public-interest news sector, pinpointing key uncertainties that shape its future. Through a participatory action research approach and scenario planning, the study News Futures 2035, seeks to answer the pivotal question: How can the UK ensure the ongoing supply of trustworthy, public-interest news? It stands out for its unique focus, enriching the debate among industry, academia, policymakers, and civil society on safeguarding the sector's future. The research identified two primary, unpredictable elements with significant influence: the realm of policies, regulations, and governance; and the industry's capacity for innovation to maintain the relevance of public-interest news for all stakeholders. The study highlights the indispensable role of collaborative action research and continuous dialogue among key stakeholders. It emphasizes the need for structured, cooperative efforts to navigate the complexities of policy, regulation, and consumer relevance, introducing the concept of back-channel deliberations, akin to track 2 diplomacy, as a valuable strategy for engaging diverse stakeholders in informal yet structured discussions. This method promises to foster a platform for innovative solutions and mutual understanding, addressing the challenges to the future supply of public-interest news. The participants' commitment to advancing this dialogue through a dedicated forum underlines the importance of ongoing stakeholder engagement to ensure the sector's relevance, sustainability, and societal impact.

Keywords

action research; foresight; news innovation; public-interest news; track 2 diplomacy; trust in news

1. Introduction

UK public-interest news is at a crossroads. Research shows this sector is being reshaped by changing consumer habits and new technology, raising concerns about its future and its role in democracy. While change and innovation are often seen as key to journalism's future, with Peters and Carlson (2019, p. 638) going as far as to say that we are a "change-obsessed discipline," some experts, like Posetti (2018), believe focusing solely on tech innovation can lead to stagnation. They suggest a shift towards meeting audience needs with technology as a tool, not the driver. However, this audience-first approach isn't without risks. Logan and Coddington (2020) express concern that focusing too narrowly on audience preferences can have negative effects. This approach might result in oversimplified, clickbait-type content and create specialised niches with reduced content quality, diversity, and relevance. Such a trend could weaken the news media's role in supporting informed communities, robust markets, and democratic processes, as discussed by Peters & Witschge (2015) and Pickard (2020).

Indeed, academics such as Castells-Fos et al. (2023, p. 2) argue that scholarship tends to define relevance as media reputation, visibility, and audience loyalty, omitting how the media might enable consumers to participate in the democratic process, say. Consequently, the causes of both crises are considered to be technological or economic and, as such, the solutions are also sought in the techno-economic sphere. As Drok argues, "This might work for the financial crisis, but it is not enough to deal with the functional one" (2018, p. 274). What is lacking is "a thorough reflection on the social and personal meaning journalism can have in the context of the 21st century" (Drok, 2018, p. 274). In addition, as pointed out by Drok (2018, p. 274), the challenges journalism is facing, on the one hand, the financial crisis, i.e., diminishing numbers of people willing to pay for news (Newman et al., 2023, p. 11), and on the other, its functional crisis, i.e., diminishing relevance of news to the general public (Castells-Fos et al., 2023), are seen by the industry as one and the same. Scholars such as Creech and Nadler (2018, p. 182) agree, writing that an overfocus on innovation as a way to meet journalism's challenges comes at the expense of "normative concerns about journalism's democratic purpose." To make matters worse, when looking to innovation for solutions to these crises, scholars have found that the industry is "mainly focused on solving contextual companies' problems instead of having a broader perspective on solving the challenges of journalism as a whole," (Nunes & Canavilhas, 2020, p. 53). This is a point also made by Berglez et al. who, citing Goyanes (2014) and Kammer et al. (2015), highlight that research too has been focused on "merely how to transfer the existing business model into a digital world, rather than how to actually transform or renew the business itself" (Berglez et al., 2017, p. xxi). Moreover, what constitutes innovation within journalism is contested. For example, "Schumpeter (1934) takes it that opportunities emerge in times of uncertainty, change and technological upheaval," (Nel et al., 2020, p. 47), while "Kirzner (1973; 1997) posits that individuals secure entrepreneurial profits on the basis of identifying gaps in knowledge and information that arise between people in the market" (Nel et al., 2020, p. 47). In turn, Drok (2018, p. 271) argues that in the news industry "innovation is mainly defined in terms of technology and commerce, and often the cultural component is missed." The issue of shortsightedness is echoed by Creech and Nadler (2018, p. 194), who point out the uncritical discourse of think tanks, which fetishise innovation geared toward market sustainability as an end in itself rather than "identifying what values should guide the design of a sustainable media infrastructure that supports democratic society." This leads us to the pivotal question that forms the crux of our research: How can we ensure the ongoing supply and relevance of trustworthy public-interest news in the UK? This question is not just about survival in a changing landscape but about reimagining and reinforcing the role of public-interest news in a modern democracy.

Many of the anxieties about journalism and public-interest news in particular were expressed formally through government reports and inquiries including the *Cairncross Review* (Cairncross, 2019), the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee's (2020) inquiries into the future of journalism, the funding of the BBC (House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee, 2022), the House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport Committee's (2023) *Sustainability of Local Journalism* report, amongst others. As a result, and in answer to previous issues facing the industry, a number of interventions have been ignited by industry, policy, and civil society actors, such as the establishment of the Media Reform Coalition, the independent press regulator IMPRESS, the Independent Community News Network, and the Public Interest News Foundation on the one hand, and, on the other, industry and academic initiatives, often with support from technology companies, such as the Google News Initiative and the Facebook Community News Project. However, despite numerous studies and interventions, a significant gap persists in our understanding of how to effectively adapt to and navigate these changes. The existing responses, while well-intentioned, have not fully addressed the fundamental challenges facing the sector. There is an evident disconnect between the current strategies and the evolving needs of the industry, leading to concerns about the sustainability and relevance of public-interest news.

The April 2022-ignited News Futures 2035 study thus emerged from recent industry and academic debate about the anxieties regarding the future supply of public-interest news as well as reports that have identified a downward path of trust in news both in the UK (Edelman, 2023) and globally (Newman et al., 2023), as well as questions about the accuracy of such reports, which journalist and Nobel peace laureate Maria Ressa claims fail to take into account misinformation campaigns against publishers in countries where governments use their powers to attack free media (Graham-Harrison, 2023).

Our research introduces a novel approach by integrating participatory action research with scenario planning methodology. This unique combination offers a forward-looking perspective, enabling us to explore and prepare for multiple future scenarios rather than being confined to reactive measures. We anticipate that our findings will highlight the importance of policy frameworks, regulation, and governance in shaping the future of public-interest news. Moreover, we expect to uncover insights into how innovation within the industry can be harnessed not just for technological advancement but also for enhancing societal relevance and connection. This research contributes to the broader discourse on the future of journalism by moving beyond conventional problems and focusing on the future we, as an industry, want to create.

2. Research Design

2.1. Action Research

Action research in journalism studies, and particularly in exploring the future of news, is rare (Bélair-Gagnon & Usher, 2021). Among the three main types of action sciences—action learning, action research (Cook, 2020, p. 95), and other inquiry forms like appreciative inquiry (Watkins et al., 2011)—action research was chosen for this study. This approach combines action and research, involving practitioners as partners in creating knowledge (Bradbury-Huang, 2010, as cited in Wagemans & Witschge, 2019, p. 213). It includes participants who may not be research-trained but represent the interests of the study's focus group (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020, p. 1). The ideal scenario involves academic-community partnerships collaborating to meet the needs of the research and its participants (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020, p. 5).

To our knowledge, this is the first time a participatory action-research approach with scenario planning has been used to study the future of public-interest news in the UK. Previous studies using this methodology focused on journalism and news industry futures in the Netherlands (Deloitte, 2022; Dutch Journalism Fund, 2021). As such, the News Futures 2035 study stands out for its innovative approach, contributing significantly to both practical knowledge and theoretical understanding.

2.2. Beneficiaries

Implicit in the design of the study, whose broad aims were defined as: (a) creating shared visions of the futures of public-interest news; (b) considering the implications and opportunities of various scenarios for key stakeholders inside, alongside, and outside the news industry; and (c) fostering and inspiring constructive networks amongst those actors who have agency to shape the news ecosystem, is that its ultimate beneficiaries are the public. However, it was recognised that the immediate beneficiaries would be the news industry and, as such, the first task was to establish a steering board representative of the media ecosystem which included the Society of Editors, the Public Interest News Foundation, the Independent Community News Network, the Digital Editors Network, Bloomberg, Reach Plc, and HBM Advisory. In collaboration with the steering board, we adopted the snowball sampling methodology to recruit further participants, with the steering board first reaching out to civil society groups, such as the Media Reform Coalition, before we went public with a call for participation. This process was repeated throughout the study and in addition to representatives of the industry, technology companies, think tanks, and academia, policymakers also participated in data collection and sensemaking, taking part in consultations, plenary roundtables, and surveys that took place between October 2022 and April 2023 (see Figure 1), with over 300 participants involved in the process.

2.3. Definition

The research question was co-designed with the steering board to take into account that notions of trust and trustworthiness are understood differently by different actors and as such, news providers may endeavour to be trustworthy but whether they are trusted depends on the perception of audiences (Rawlins, 2008). They also recognised that what constitutes public-interest news, and how to measure its public value, are also debated. For example, public-interest news is defined differently by organisations such as the Public Interest News Foundation and the National Union of Journalists and can be understood both from a producer and a consumer view. As noted by scholars Murschetz et al. (2023, p. 86), the academic debate about the public value of media is also complex and, at times, confusing. They point out that three schools are fighting out for academic hegemony:

1. Mark Moore's 1995 concept presented public value "as a normative theory of strategic management in the public sector and saw it as the equivalent of shareholder value in the management of private companies" (Murschetz et al., 2023, p. 86);
2. Barry Brozeman's conceptualization of public values as "those that provide a normative consensus about the rights, benefits, and privileges to which citizens should (and should not) be entitled; the duties of citizens to society, the state and each other; and the principles on which governments and policies should be based" (Murschetz et al., 2023, p. 86);

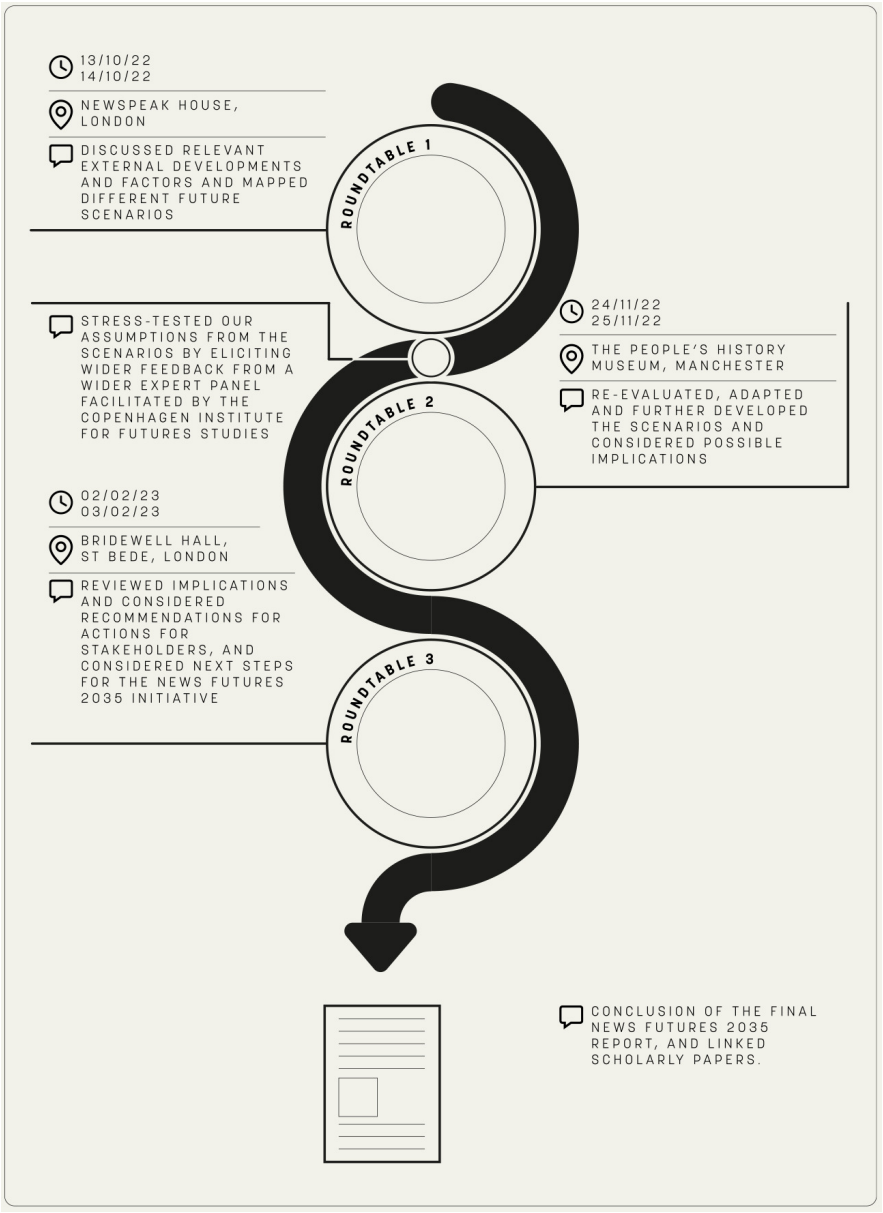

Figure 1. News Futures 2035 process roadmap. Source: Nel and Rymajdo (2023).

3. Timo Meynhardt's concept posits that "an organization is valuable to society when it contributes to the common good as perceived by the public" (Murschetz et al., 2023, p. 86).

From debates of these different views, it was agreed that the study's use of the term "public-interest news" would mean news and other information produced according to high standards of ethical conduct and best practice in journalism and made accessible to the public, who are able to recognise its authorship, understand it, and assess for themselves its benefits. In turn, in the use of the term "supply" is implicit the assumption that the news ecosystem is fuelled by an industry that consists of an identifiable group of public and private establishments, large and small, that are all actively and constructively engaged in providing public-interest news. Finally, by using the word "secured" it was agreed that we take this to mean to make certain that the industry supplying trustworthy public-interest news is sustainable and protected from danger or risk.

3. Method

The study's preliminary research indicated that the public-interest news space in the UK was characterised by rapid change, growing complexity, and critical uncertainty. Moreover, experts interviewed for the study's initial Discussion Paper (Nel et al., 2022) felt that an appropriate response would require preparing for the unexpected. Foresight, with its "ability to incorporate into the present decisions of organizations (organizational foresight) or specifically into the strategic decisions (strategic foresight), the expectations of future conditions" (Bui et al., 2019, p. 838) was an apt methodology, especially as it "is a unique and highly-valued human capacity that is widely recognized as a major source of competitive advantage and cultural renewal within nations and corporations" (Chia, 2002, as cited in Bui et al., 2919, p. 838). Indeed, as stated by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (n.d.), "Strategic Foresight is required whenever there is a high degree of uncertainty surrounding changes to the relevant future context." Moreover, foresight inspires participants to act, catalysing action in and across companies, building alignment, igniting change, and fostering learning organisations (Bishop et al., 2007).

Foresight uses a range of methodologies, such as scanning the horizon for emerging changes, analysing megatrends and developing multiple scenarios, to reveal and discuss useful ideas about the future. The study chose the foresight methodology "scenario planning" as its chief method of enquiry as it had a proven track record of effectiveness. Attributed to American physicist Herman Kahn (Gosselin & Tindemans, 2016, p. 23), it has been employed in various settings, from business to geopolitics, to help make long-term plans. The horizon of 2035 was chosen as a way to adopt the Three Horizons model of innovation (Baghai et al., 1999) whereby focus on each "horizon" of the future inspires innovation for the short, medium, and long-term.

4. Findings

4.1. The Drivers of Change

Participants of the study's first plenary roundtable considered the drivers of change that will affect the future supply of trustworthy public-interest news in the UK. Discussions ensued around a number of themes and specific questions, such as the role of the media in a democratic society, the relevance of public-interest news to the public, and who should be setting the public-interest news agenda. Participants also considered specific threats to the future supply of public-interest news, such as increasing news avoidance, especially among young people, lack of funding, and crucially, a lack of innovation within the sector. They considered increasing distrust of the media as a whole and the fact that public-interest news might not be how citizens get their information needs met in the future, which led to fundamental questions about the future role of the journalist. Concerns were raised about the future of local news providers especially, the impact of evolving technology on existing business models, and how the industry might protect the standards and integrity of news gatherers. Participants also considered the role of policymakers in shaping the future of public-interest news providers and what role the BBC will be playing in the supply of public-interest news in the UK.

Through the consolidation of the points made by the participants during the group discussion, key driving forces were identified as likely to shape the future supply of trustworthy public-interest news in the UK. A total of 16 driving forces were agreed upon, as summarised in the Table 1.

Table 1. From driver of change to critical uncertainties: Identifying the two factors that have the highest impact on the focal question and are the most difficult to predict.

From driver of change to critical uncertainties: These forces were identified during roundtable discussions and then voted on by all participants to identify priorities and further examined in the Delph study					
Cross-cutting contextual factors	Technology (21 votes)	Wider economic outlook (10 votes)	Societal resilience (1 vote)		
Critical uncertainty X: body of policy, regulation, and governance at international, national, industry, sector, and organisational levels	Wider role and shape of UK institutions (5 votes)	The role of the BBC (5 votes)	Democratic functions (5 votes)	Regulation (3 votes)	Pressure of environmental sustainability (3 votes)
	Level of freedom of speech (1 vote)	Geopolitics (1 vote)	Role and operation of markets (0 votes)		
Critical uncertainty Y: relevance of public-interest news to audiences, institutional missions, business models, media workers, and society at large	Nature of news (e.g., ownership, formats, relevance, origin, etc.) (8 votes)	Needs of audiences (7 votes)	Business models (7 votes)	Shifting social identities and values of audiences (5 votes)	Capabilities and role of journalists (0 votes)

4.2. Critical Uncertainties

The driving forces that were identified during roundtable discussions and prioritised through participant voting were subsequently examined in a Delphi study, a consensus-building process which is often used to consider complex and uncertain issues, leveraging the collective knowledge, insights, and perspectives from an expert panel. A total of 34 participants took part in the Delphi study which was conducted in November 2022.

The trends and drivers that emerged as both highly important for the future of public-interest news in the UK and highly uncertain in the external or macro-environment (such as consumer beliefs, government policies, or plays made by other actors in the space) were termed "critical uncertainties."

Seven critical uncertainties were thus identified. They were: The wider economic framework; nature of news provision (e.g., ownership, formats, origin, etc.); the relevance of public-interest news to the public; the role of the BBC; the role of technology; the wider role and shape of UK institutions (e.g., breakdown of trust, authority); and the public's changing information ecosystem.

Participants assessed the influence of various uncertainties on the UK's future supply of trustworthy public-interest news through 2035. Seven key uncertainties were explored in greater depth by contrasting two fundamentally different potential outcomes for each, enhancing understanding of their unpredictability.

This analysis aided in selecting the axes for scenario development in the study's second roundtable in November 2022.

Among the uncertainties, technology and the broader economic environment were identified as overarching contextual elements. The remaining factors were categorized into two groups: (a) the body of policy and regulation; and (b) the relevance of public interest news to audiences, media workers, organisational objectives, business strategies, and the broader society.

In choosing two pivotal uncertainties for further exploration, discussions included insights from the Institute for Government's 2022 *Better Policy Making* report on policy challenges within the government, such as short-term focus, inadequate policy expertise, subpar policy execution, insufficient interdepartmental collaboration, and a narrow Whitehall perspective (Sasse & Thomas, 2022, p. 6).

Regarding regulation, the contentious history of press regulation in the UK, notably post-2012 Leveson Inquiry and media misrepresentations following the News of the World scandal, were highlighted (Ogbebor, 2020). Political instability's impact on media policy, including frequent changes in the Culture Secretary position, delays to the Online Safety Bill, and dilution of its provisions due to lobbying and free speech concerns, was also examined (Newman et al., 2023, p. 58).

A consensus emerged on viewing policies and regulation across various levels—supra-national (EU, UN, etc.), national (UK or its component nations), industry, and organisational levels. These policies may directly affect public-interest news content (e.g., Section 4 of the Defamation Act 2001) and operations (e.g., the Broadcasting Act 1990, subsidies for local democracy reporting, Press Complaints Commission, etc.), or have indirect impacts (e.g., General Data Protection Regulation, UK competition policy, Online Safety Bill, etc.). Furthermore, the relevance of public-interest news was seen through four lenses: relevance to the audience (meeting needs, content framing, product fit, etc.); relevance to the organisations that supply it (i.e., vision, mission, business model); relevance to the aspirations and values of media workers; and relevance to society at large (to the democratic functioning, social cohesion, wellbeing).

4.3. Scenarios

Using these factors as X and Y axis (i.e., the "scenarios framework," see Figure 2), the participants developed four scenarios with a 2035 horizon. To enable a better understanding of the methodology for wider stakeholders, they also came up with an analogy that connected the different scenarios, with the environments of a nature reserve, a zoo, a museum, and the wilderness chosen as analogies for frameworks where public-interest news was either of low or high relevance and operating in a highly enabling or highly constraining policy and regulatory environment.

The wilderness scenario was where there was no or little effective regulation and where the public-interest news providers were left to fight it out in the marketplace with a variety of mis-, dis- and malinformation actors. In turn, the zoo was characterised by highly supportive and protective policies and regulations that had the unintended consequence of stifling the innovation needed in the industry to ensure that public-interest news is not only produced but is also highly relevant to audiences and society. The museum was characterised by highly constraining policies and regulations that both stifle innovation and impede the supply of relevant

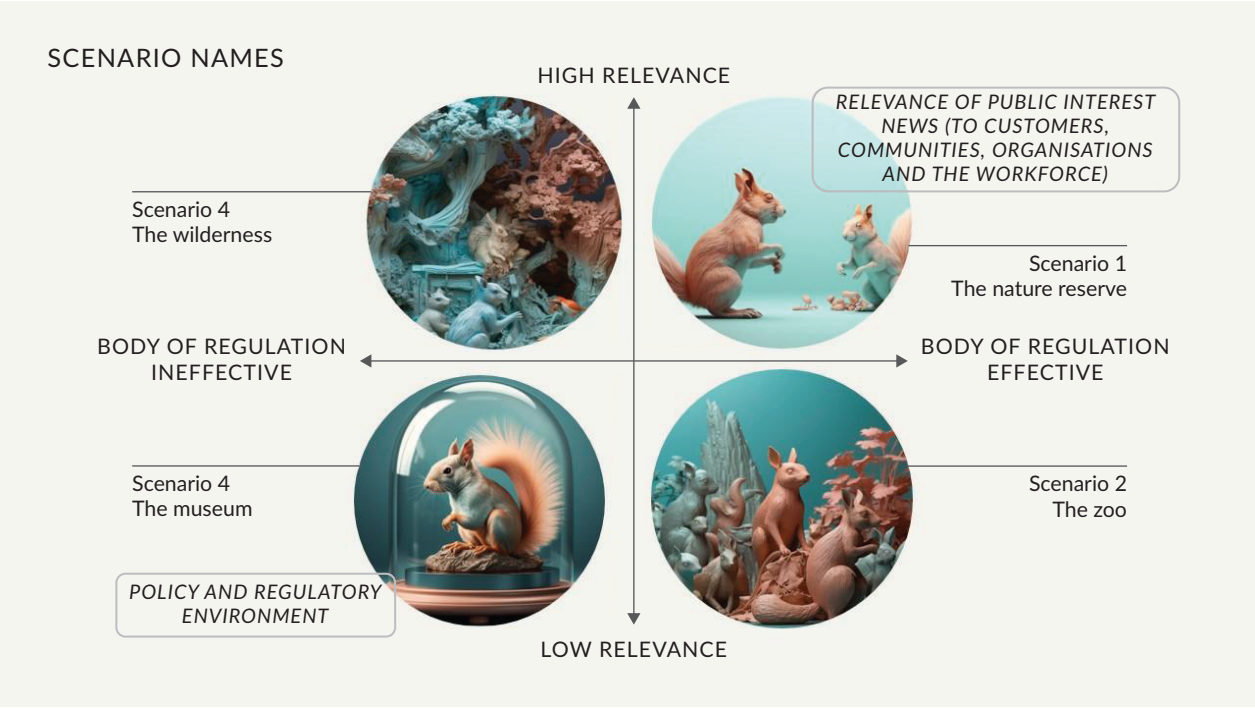

Figure 2. News Futures 2035 scenario framework.

public-interest news whereas the nature reserve was characterised by policy and regulation that seeks to protect, preserve, and promote healthy information ecosystems that encourage and promote the ongoing innovations that are essential to the supply of highly-relevant trustworthy public-interest news.

In the most accommodating scenario, the nature reserve, innovation was understood as both the adoption of new technology by legacy media companies that leads to positive change such as decreased costs, new audiences, and the flourishing of independent, local, and niche publishers and the diversification of revenue streams. It was also understood as new thinking in terms of the information ecosystem and journalism's role within it which results in positive initiatives such as local communities coming together to create their own platforms (e.g., for the London Borough of Hackney), with the data owned by its users and serving these local communities. The most important innovation in the scenario, however, is a cultural change to enable equitable access to public-interest news which leads to increased trust in the media, higher media literacy which leads to better engagement with the democratic process, and a public willing to pay for news. To achieve it, actors such as publishers and policymakers come together and negotiate which leads to a change in competition law resulting in news being widely available in different formats and users paying one fair price for all news content. In turn, in scenarios such as the museum and the zoo, where developments lead to the collapse of the ecosystem, a lack of innovation within the business models of publishers as well as a lack of new thinking in the distribution of public subsidies is what is cited as key reasons for the downward spiral, characterised either by oversupply or news becoming too expensive leading to diminishing trust in the media, the public turning to alternative sources of information, and an increase in mis- and disinformation. Lack of foresight about the effect that changing laws pertaining to climate change and the sustainability of existing formats for news are also cited as leading to the collapse of business models.

4.4. Key Recommendation

During the plenary sessions, participants delved into the ramifications of the devised scenarios and pathways to actualize a preferred information system, recognising the urgent need to foster greater understanding and cooperation among stakeholders. Reflecting on the complexity of the challenges, it was recognised that peacebuilders and diplomats increasingly rely on so-called "track 2" dialogues—often termed as "back channel" diplomacy—to navigate difficult policy landscapes (Diamond & McDonald, 1996). This perspective was reflected in the consensus that leaders from industry, government, technology, academia, and the broader community should unite to bolster the information ecosystem through similar collaborative and indirect approaches. Consequently, it was suggested that the study evolve into a News Futures Forum, a multi-stakeholder initiative aiming to:

- Cultivate a shared systemic insight and vernacular concerning the evolving ecosystem and its backdrop, especially for pinpointing pertinent and efficacious intervention points, such as regulatory measures. This approach mirrors the strategic and nuanced engagements found in track 2 diplomacy, leveraging indirect and informal dialogues to foster mutual understanding and cooperation.
- Encourage a diverse representation from the stakeholder spectrum, increasing public engagement and inclusivity, for instance, by involving groups like the Media Reform Coalition and the Sir Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity, to ensure comprehensive participation. The inclusion of such a wide array of stakeholders reflects the inclusive nature of back-channel diplomacy, where varied perspectives contribute to a more robust and inclusive solution.
- Adopt a demand-driven methodology for producing reliable public-interest news, akin to how track 2 dialogues address specific policy challenges by engaging directly with the needs and concerns of involved parties.
- Establish the agenda through collective analysis and identification of gaps, a method that resonates with the preparatory phases of track 2 dialogues, where understanding the terrain is crucial for effective engagement.
- Commit to ongoing efforts that encourage news providers to persistently offer reliable public-interest news, ensuring it is well-supported and aimed at informing, educating, and interacting with all societal segments and communities. This sustained commitment mirrors the long-term engagement often seen in back-channel diplomacy, where trust and relationships are built over time to support lasting solutions.

Mirroring the study's multi-stakeholder approach, the Forum would engage entities from within and outside the public-interest news ecosystem. The anticipated outcomes of the Forum's successful execution include shaping the industry's, policymakers', technology firms', and news consumers' approaches to public-interest news, leveraging the principles of track 2 dialogues to foster a collaborative and comprehensive strategy.

The Forum is advised to concentrate on three pivotal areas:

1. Enhanced knowledge exchange and production, involving cataloguing existing studies and insights for broader accessibility, refining and prioritizing research questions for better coherence, and promoting collaboration among private and public researchers to augment the quality, effectiveness, and value of research outcomes for benefactors. This mirrors the knowledge-sharing and collaborative research efforts typical in back-channel diplomacy.

2. Improved policy and regulation, focusing on elevating expertise and sector-specific knowledge among officials across Westminster and Whitehall. This enhancement would stem from a profound, systemic comprehension of the challenges, facilitated by engaging with accomplished researchers and fostering closer connections with all stakeholders, a principle central to the success of track 2 dialogues.
3. Increased proficiency and capacity within the public-interest news sectors, promoting news literacy broadly—among consumers, creators, policymakers, academia, and civil society—and addressing various critical issues highlighted in governmental reports and inquiries, akin to how back-channel diplomacy seeks to build capabilities and address underlying issues through informal yet focused dialogues.

5. Discussion

The study identified several driving forces poised to impact the future supply of trustworthy public-interest news in the UK. Echoing insights from recent research like the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023* (Newman et al., 2023) and Ofcom's *News Consumption in the UK: 2023* (Ofcom, 2023) report, these forces indicate that the challenges facing public-interest news are not only imminent but are compounded by a variety of factors, each potentially exacerbating the others. Among these forces, two critical uncertainties stand out for their likely significant impact on the survival of public-interest news: its relevance and the policy and regulatory environment.

While analysis of the study is ongoing, participants' findings correlate with Drok's (2018, p. 274) argument regarding techno-economic solutions at the expense of a more holistic analysis of journalism's role in the 21st century. For example, they recommended that what is needed is public-interest news that is accessible to all of society, and delivered in a way that makes citizens feel empowered to participate in public life. To achieve this, they argued, journalism needs to become more inclusive of a variety of voices and opinions, to reconceive the public as consisting of "an interpreting, acute audience of citizens, rather than one of informed readers" (Harrison, 2019, p. 1). The industry should also be wary of putting too much emphasis on niche journalism outlets, which as Peters and Witschge (2015, p. 20) point out, are "frequently posited as sites for more robust democratic notions such as civic empowerment and active citizenship," but actually have less reach than established news outlets. Moreover, they recommended that the industry should move on from prioritising audience needs. Rather, it should focus on the audience in a more encompassing way, to conceive of it as society as a whole, that is, both society as represented by government as voted for by citizens but also actors who represent the voices of society beyond legislators. What this refocusing on serving the whole of society and empowering citizens to participate in public life means, however, is making public-interest news accessible to all. But, as the lack of scalable solutions for sustainability from the government-funded Future News Fund that resulted from a recommendation in the *Cairncross Review* (Cairncross, 2019) demonstrates, simply funding a wide range of unrelated ideas for the sustainable provision of public-interest journalism does not result in meaningful insights on innovation for the rest of the industry.

Solutions are also not forthcoming from academia. Scholars have found that the number of academic publications on journalism innovation peaked in 2019 (Lopezosa et al., 2023, p. 821), that "methodological, conceptual and systematic analyses of innovation have also received fragmented attention" (García-Avilés, 2021, as cited in Meier et al., 2022, p. 700), and "there is a research gap on comparative studies about journalism innovation in international systems and markets" (Meier et al., 2022, p. 700). Moreover, scholars

have pointed out that what is lacking is dialogue between researchers engaged in different facets of journalism's difficulties, and what is needed is bringing together those concerned about its environmental, social, and economic challenges, whilst also conducting theoretical and empirical studies to "examine the underlying barriers to a journalism that is better 'prepared for the future'" (Berglez et al., 2017, p. xv). As such, the study participants argued that what is required is ongoing discussion and joined-up action, where industry actors, regulators, policymakers, academics, and other interested parties, including the general public, engage with each other in a non-performative and non-combative way to gain a fuller understanding of how journalism innovation is understood and what purpose it might serve, thus enacting what innovation scholars term the quadruple helix of innovation (Carayannis & Campbell, 2010, p. 206).

The study's findings also correspond with similar initiatives utilising the scenarios methodology, which focus on the future of journalism and the future of news in the Netherlands, conducted by the Dutch Journalism Fund and Deloitte and published in 2021 and 2022 respectively. In the Dutch Journalism Fund's study, the critical uncertainties were regulation of big tech and data and trust between citizens (Dutch Journalism Fund, 2021), while Deloitte's critical uncertainties focused on tech platforms' role in the news and the level of trust between citizens and journalists (Deloitte, 2022, p. 13). While the critical uncertainties of the News Futures 2035 study were different to those of the two Dutch studies, with News Futures 2035 participants deciding that technology was not a critical uncertainty, but rather a cross-cutting issue that is certain to have an effect on the industry in the future, many of the findings that emerged from News Futures 2035 find relation in conclusions of the Dutch studies (Deloitte, 2022; Dutch Journalism Fund, 2021).

There were crossover findings around issues such as the plurality of the media landscape, critical thinking and media literacy, the need for diversity and inclusivity within the news media, funding, transparency about sources, as well as the data used to build algorithms. Moreover, both the Dutch studies and News Futures 2035 concluded that there is a need for a multi-stakeholder coalition or forum to continue working on solutions to the challenges on the horizon. While the Deloitte study recommended "an industry-wide coalition of various stakeholders, such as news generating and distributing companies, journalists, scientists, and government" (Deloitte, 2022, p. 25) to "safeguard and increase the value of news, making it truly independent from any other interests, and any single stakeholder's interest" (Deloitte, 2022, p. 25), the Dutch Journalism Fund advocated for "joint strategising" in a permanent place "where journalists, educational institutions and governments can remove themselves from the everyday humdrum and forget conflicting short-term interests in order to set a mutual agenda to influence the future of journalism in the Netherlands" (Dutch Journalism Fund, 2021). In turn, News Futures 2035 participants called for a multi-stakeholder forum that would, like proposals within the Dutch studies, include both news-generating and distributing companies, academia, researchers, and government, but also regulators and civil society actors. Moreover, they suggested that the Forum should go further than the initiatives envisaged by the Dutch studies, by supporting ongoing cycles of participatory action research, which would be neither a space for collusion nor necessarily consensus-building, but rather boundary learning that enables more effective and responsible action in all areas that are needed for the supply of trustworthy public-interest news.

6. Conclusion

The looming threats to public-interest news in the UK underscore the critical need for structured, collaborative efforts to navigate the complex landscape of policies, regulations, and consumer relevance.

The foresight methodology, utilised throughout the participatory action research study, revealed a multitude of drivers of change anticipated to impact its future provision. Among these, two critical factors stood out as both highly influential and challenging to predict. Firstly, the encompassing domain of policies, regulations, and governance can either enable or constrict the future of public-interest news. Secondly, the crux lies in whether the present and forthcoming industry can innovate sufficiently to ensure that public-interest news remains highly relevant to consumers, suppliers, and society at large.

The foresight methodology employed in this participatory action research study highlights the necessity for a united approach among stakeholders to cultivate shared understanding and collective action. The potential for back-channel deliberations, reminiscent of track 2 dialogues in diplomacy, emerges as a valuable strategy in this context. By facilitating informal, yet structured engagements among diverse stakeholders, such approaches can provide a platform for exploring innovative solutions, sharing insights, and fostering mutual understanding beyond conventional policy-making channels. This collaborative framework offers a promising pathway to addressing the multifaceted challenges facing the future supply of public-interest news, ensuring its relevance, sustainability, and impact on society.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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COMMENTARY

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Journalistic "Innovation" Is Hard to Hate, but Actual Change Is Just Hard

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Abstract

Who is opposed to "innovation"? For most newsroom publishers, managers, editors, and reporters, the word connotes progress; it implies a strategy for achieving success—and dodging failure. But innovation inescapably entails change: Doing and thinking about things differently means giving up the old as well as embracing the new. This commentary recaps journalists' response over 30 years of digital news. It suggests that calls for change meet with initial resistance, typically on normative grounds; only over time do practitioners normalise the innovation, incorporating it into their perceptions and routines.

Keywords

change; digital news; innovation; journalism ethics; normalisation

1. Introduction

The word "innovation" is weighted with "the promise and expectation that new technologies, actors and practices might finally be the solution to the problems that have beset contemporary journalism" (Bossio & Nelson, 2021, p. 1377). But the walk is far harder than the talk, and habits are stubbornly resistant to change.

This commentary traces journalists' response to digital innovation over three decades. It is a tale of repeated initial resistance followed by gradual normalisation. The result, changes that have been small and incremental, has contributed to a "winner take most" (Newman et al., 2023) media ecology, with a few high-quality outlets attracting audiences while much larger numbers continue to struggle. Every year, some in the latter group lose the battle for survival, while the winners enjoy the wherewithal to further strengthen their position by

exploring ways to capitalise on the next new tool or trend. Their stamina, resources, and boardroom support combine to propel them through the slow fits-and-starts process of technological evolution.

2. Three Decades of Change and Resistance

Although individual reactions certainly vary, journalists as an occupational group have responded with remarkable consistency at each step along a 30-year-long digital path. They have professed themselves open to successive aspects of innovation, framing it as essential to professional survival at both individual and industry levels. At the same time, they have expressed fear of the unknown and resisted attempts to implement it, typically flourishing a badge of journalistic honour by citing ethical pitfalls and the encroachment on time better spent on more highly valued aspects of story development and production (Singer, 2004). Yet despite the protestations, the innovation eventually becomes part of the newsroom landscape. By the how-did-we-ever-live-without-this stage, the next innovation has arrived, and journalistic heels are freshly dug in.

When web browsers emerged from the lab in the mid-1990s, making "the internet" accessible beyond its small circles of early users, most journalists regarded it with mild curiosity—and a conviction that it would not substantively change their working lives. As a newspaper editor confidently told me in 1995: "The presentation might be different, and that's all" (Singer, 1997, p. 79). Even so, doing "different" work inevitably "drains more energies, personnel, resources from our historical product," said a colleague, while others worried about pressures to update information quickly: "The old adage was, you know, 'Get it first, but first, get it right.' Well, now it's just 'get it first'" (Singer, 1997, p. 82).

But change was indeed gonna come for journalists. The early 2000s brought "multimedia journalism," a term encompassing diverse formats and the ways in which newsrooms were reconfigured to produce as many of them as possible (Deuze, 2004). Print reporters were especially sceptical about "converged" newsrooms, intended to facilitate the production of content suitable for textual, visual, and digital dissemination. TV journalism, said one, is "abhorrent, a sub-species," explaining: "I went to j-school to be a journalist, not to be a multimedia person, not to be a TV person, not to multitask" (Singer, 2004, p. 846) Although some journalists felt convergence enabled them to better serve a public that was increasingly diversifying its news diet, others cited normative concerns about accuracy, potential pressure to create sensationalised content, and uncomfortable encroachment on editorial independence from advertising and marketing interests (Singer, 2006).

Blogs were another innovation of the period, heralding the ability of news consumers not only to produce their own original content but also to publish it alongside—or, often, in counterpoint to—the work of journalists. Unlike "multimedia," this challenge was existential: If bloggers can be reporters, editors, and publishers all in one, who then is a journalist (Knight et al., 2008)? Journalists again evoked normative principles, especially related to independence and verification practices, in defending their turf. Blogs "publish because they hear 'something' from 'someone' who is 'reliable.' Sorry, not good enough," said one *Chicago Tribune* editor (Youngman, 2004, as cited in Carlson, 2007, p. 274).

Blogs were merely the first wave of what soon became a deluge of "user-generated content." Some was in the form of comments appended to stories, which met with considerable newsroom opprobrium. The value

of such input from audience members was described as "disproportionate to the excessive amount of management time which is taken up with trying to ensure it is accurate, balanced, honest, fair and—most importantly—legally safe to publish" (Singer, 2010, p. 134). The greater impact, however, came from the blog's mini-me: micro-blogging platforms. While some journalists quickly embraced these new "social media," moulding their traditional norms to its affordances, others again resisted. Political journalists, for instance, declared Twitter time-consuming, distracting, and liable to create a distorting echo chamber effect (Parmelee, 2013). Sports journalists protested that "journalism is about facts, not quick hits and rumors" and that Twitter made it "impossible to put stories in larger context" (Schultz & Sheffer, 2010, p. 236).

Within a very few years, however, journalists were posting to Twitter routinely, if not always happily. They cited pressure from managers to produce content for social platforms—aka "writing a very superficial story that doesn't provide the right context" (Chadha & Wells, 2016, p. 1026). They also continued to express concerns related to verification, accountability, and editorial decisions driven by speed and assessments of online popularity, "which does not necessarily equate to good journalism" (García-Avilés, 2014, p. 264).

Multiple permutations of social media later, researchers continue to hear a familiar refrain. Photojournalists, for instance, worry about ethical boundaries around the use of editing tools common to social platforms: "It's hard to know where that line exists," one explained, "because Instagram wasn't established as journalism"; another cautioned that "journalists do a disservice to their own profession by sacrificing the truth for the sake of trying to be interesting" (Ferrucci & Taylor, 2019, pp. 2174–2175). Early work on journalists' use of TikTok suggests they connect it to marketing goals, citing its ability to reach and engage young audiences and its utility for individual and institutional brand extension (Negreira-Rey et al., 2022). Social media editors, however, have sought to distinguish between working *with* marketing teams and working *for* them: A good social media manager should be "a professional journalist. Someone who is a journalist at heart," an editor explained. "Our Facebook page is still a journalistic product and not marketing" (Opgenhaffen & Hendrickx, 2023).

3. Which Way to the Future?

None of this is to deny that some journalists have embraced innovation expeditiously and enthusiastically. Many may have felt, not without reason, that economic or management imperatives left them little choice. Nonetheless, had journalists not changed their practices, the road to normalisation would have been longer and more winding.

My point is instead to highlight a pattern. Sizable numbers of practitioners greet novel tools and capabilities with resistance on normative grounds: This new thing is a challenge to what we do and why we do it, rooted in a fiercely defended self-perception as ethical gatekeepers of information. Yet over time, it is incorporated into newsroom routines, eventually becoming integral to newswork. Innovations of the past are embedded in the journalistic work of the present.

Are the repeated protestations along the way merely exasperating, then? The resistance can indeed seem quixotic in hindsight. More broadly, we might hope that for once, journalists would lead change rather than follow it. Embracing innovation earlier rather than later would enable them to shape these emerging technologies rather than, inevitably, be shaped by them.

Yet I think journalistic evocation of normative principles in defence of the status quo actually serves an important purpose: It reminds journalists of what they are fundamentally all about, and why what they do matters to society. Yes, such evocations are largely defensive in nature. But that does not mean they are inherently wrong. Indeed, much of what journalists have said over the years seems, in retrospect, rather prescient about the impact of faster delivery, increased production pressures, the traffic-whoring trivialisation of content, and more. Essentially, what these journalists have been asserting is that what matters most about information is its quality, and that quality does not materialise by technological magic.

As I write, the latest innovation washing over the news industry is artificial intelligence. It is meeting with predictable concerns in journalistic circles, notably about accuracy and the disturbing propensity of generative AI to address gaps in its ability to answer a question by offering plausible but false "hallucinations"—that is, making something up. It is too soon to assess its ultimate impact. But from my vantage point in late 2023, it seems safe to predict that AI will exponentially accelerate the pace of change, as well as the urgency needed to respond to it, in the newsroom and outside it.

And how might journalists best do that? Those relatively successful "winner take most" outlets referenced at the start are pointing the way: By allocating resources to the production (and promotion) of independent, high-quality reporting and writing. By being more concerned with getting it right than with getting it first, verifying information before they publish it, and engaging with audiences in the conversations it fosters. By deploying new tools where they are useful in the service of journalist-led investigations and analyses.

In short, they seem to be betting that securing a future in a world of clever machines depends on being skilful, curious, enterprising humans. I think it is their best strategy. I hope it works.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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