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Journalism Innovation in a Time of Survival

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, innovation has become a buzzword across industries, and journalism is no exception. Much of the innovation in journalism has taken place against discourses of economic crisis, owing to the atomization of print advertising, newspaper closures, and job losses. This context includes the disruptive force of online advertising, a growth in global startups and non-human journalism actors, competition from big technology platforms, and multiple participatory and highly sought-after publics (Westlund and Lewis, 2014). In parallel, innovation has tended to be associated with successful and not-so-successful technological developments, from the digital transformation of print journalism to the Web, social media, live video, artificial intelligence (AI), and virtual reality (VR). After more than 20 years of digital journalism, it is time to take stock of what innovation has wrought in journalism.

First, as a number of scholars have already identified, a central challenge within the journalism industry and scholarly literature on journalism is the lack of definition or shared definition of what is journalism innovation. This gap has allowed scholars and practitioners to make vague assumptions about the roles of technological innovation and journalism, with both considered to be progressive forces, and innovation specifically seen as a goal without specific values, and the only option for disruptive unstable times. It has also allowed important concerns to be ignored, such as journalism's role in social ordering, racism, Settler Colonialism, and harm to misrepresented communities, with questions such as who is not being served by journalism (Callison and Young, 2020). This chapter draws on journalism research from Canada, which, similar to other countries with a liberal, largely commercial media system, is showing signs of market failure (Public Policy Forum Report, 2018). Arguably, innovation as a technology-led solution has failed to save this country's legacy journalism. While it has obviously contributed to journalism change and development, it has not led to economic sustainability and growth for the majority of commercial journalism organizations, while others are facing criticism about racism and harm to long misrepresented and underserved audiences.

The antidote for the financial crisis in journalism in Canada has been historic levels of state support—more than \$600M over five years—with governments treating

journalism organizations similar to creative industries. We suggest that without clear definitions of what is innovation, what is journalism, and what kinds of industries and/or organizations are being discussed—commercial or not for profit—we run the risk of continuing to stay focused on bright, shiny things (Küng, 2017; Posetti, 2018) and not system-wide repair and transformation sensitive to and in sync with shared understandings of how it could and should be funded. This lack of clarity limits specificity about the kinds of journalism infrastructures being supported and created, and national expectations about their values and contributions to communication, understanding, and connection in relation to local, national, and global concerns and the worlds we want to live in.

This chapter seeks to reposition media innovation beyond a narrow economic or technological frame (Callison and Young, 2020), where initiatives are the product of a defensive strategy by newsrooms, driven by an imperative to survive in the face of novel challenges and actors. Rather, it suggests taking a wider approach to understanding what is innovation that prioritizes multiple journalisms, relationships with audiences, the generally precarious nature of the creative industries, and the infrastructures required to support twenty-first century journalism.

A Definitional Challenge

Journalism is considered vital to the function of a healthy democracy, with the information generated and circulated through media considered a public good because journalism is supposed to support an informed citizenry and perform a watchdog function. As such, threats to the integrity or existence of journalism are considered as threats to democracy itself. In recent years, journalism has frequently been characterized as “in crisis,” threatened by everything from the rise of so-called fake news to the demise of the local newspaper. The challenges to journalism, in particular to the print newspaper industry, pre-date the Internet, starting with the rise of competition from radio and television. Advertising revenues, the mainstay of mass circulation newspapers in high-income democracies, have been on the decline for decades (Cagé, 2016).

Digitalization, bringing with it increased competition from new digital entrants such as Google and Facebook, fragmentation of audiences and novel technologies such as social media, have heightened the sense of multiple and ongoing crises, which also include prior crises such as racist coverage and its ongoing harms (Anderson and Robertson, 2011; Küng, 2015; Carlson and Usher, 2016; Newman, 2016; Nielsen, 2016; Callison and Young, 2020). Indeed, the notion of crisis has become so pervasive that even the industry itself has adopted the idea of its own demise (Siles and Boczkowski, 2012), especially in the context of legacy news outlets in Western liberal democracies.

Against a background of crisis, innovation in journalism has emerged as the antidote to its struggles. According to Posetti (2018, p. 9) “The concept of ‘innovation’—in its technological, economic, structural, creative and social manifestations—sits at the intersection of these factors and it is critical to journalism’s survival.” She goes on to quote Pavlik (2013), who referenced innovation as “the key to the viability of news media in the digital age” (quoted in Posetti, 2018, p. 9).

Yet the characterization of innovation has often been in the eye of the beholder because of a range of definitional challenges, and the fact that the term crisis tends to be teleological in its deployment (Roitman, 2013; Zelizer, 2015; Callison and Young, 2020). That is, whoever identifies the crisis tends to have a solution aligned with their own identification of the problem and its solutions. In addition, as Whyte argues with respect to epistemologies of crisis in colonialism, crisis in a colonial context has tended to be constructed as “urgent” and “unprecedented,” such that underlying ideologies of power remain masked (Whyte, 2021, p. 4). As a result, pinning down how innovation in journalism is understood, implemented, and practiced is far from straightforward. For Beyan et al., one of the challenges of defining innovation is that “different players have different views on what innovation actually is” (Bleyen et al., 2014, p. 29).

Posetti cites a number of definitions from within journalism studies and beyond. These include Cornia, Sehl, and Nielsen (2017) who identify innovation as “‘the introduction of new ideas, methods, and technologies’ that are pursued to enhance the reputation of an organisation, ‘to let journalists experiment with new forms of storytelling, and as part of wider attempts at driving organisational and cultural change.’” She also references Schumpeter, who defines innovation from an economic perspective as “the creation of new outputs, or improved goods; new organisational structures; new markets or new producers” (Schumpeter, 1934; Posetti, 2018, p. 12).

Other scholars within journalism studies have focused more narrowly on innovation as largely a technological development. For example, Usher and Kammer (2019) define innovation as the development and adoption of new technologies, actors, or practices that are different or improve upon what already exists. In their review of the literature on innovation in journalism, Belair-Gagnon and Steinke (2020) identified 10 ways in which news organizations implement technological change. After more than 20 years of digital journalism, then, it is time to take stock of what innovation has wrought in journalism.

The “Never-Ending Pivot”

The first two decades of the twenty-first century offer a suitable period to consider how innovation has played out in newsrooms, with the year 2000 marking the start of a research focus on digitization, multimedia reporting, and newsroom convergence (Belair-Gagnon and Steinke, 2020). The early pioneering study of Boczkowski into the processes in legacy organizations found how newsrooms “appropriated new technologies with a somewhat conservative mindset, thus acting more slowly and less creatively than competitors less tied to traditional media” (Boczkowski, 2005, p. 52). Subsequent studies confirmed the encumbrance of established norms, practices, and orientations toward the adoption of new ways of doing journalism (Domingo, 2008; Singer et al., 2011). That is not to say that innovation did not take place. Rather, the way innovation played out indicates how newsrooms sought to evolve and adapt to the changes wrought by the digitization of media from analog to digital, and digitalization of media practices and infrastructures (Brennen and Kreiss, 2016).

The past 20 years of research into innovation of journalism highlight contested currents of change and continuity. Scholars have charted waves of technological

innovations becoming part of the media. These include everything from the general digitalization of analog media to blogs (Singer, 2005; Hermida, 2009), user-generated content and audience participation (Singer et al., 2011; Williams, Wardle, and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011), data and computational journalism (Gynnild, 2014; Anderson, 2018; Hermida and Young, 2019), social media (Belair-Gagnon, 2015), and web analytics and metrics (Belair-Gagnon and Holton, 2018; Nelson and Tandoc, 2019).

At the same time, there has been a resistance to change in many newsrooms. New initiatives have been driven by a need to remain competitive, thus replicating rather than advancing what others were already doing (Boczkowski, 2010; Lowrey, 2012). The interest in participatory journalism in the first decade of the 2000s offers a good illustration of the motives for innovating in the newsroom. Participatory journalism, sometimes called citizen journalism and user-generated content, refers to "the act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information" (Bowman and Willis, 2003, p. 7). For some, the ability of audiences to take a more active part in the news increased the potential for more open and collaborative journalism (Bowman and Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004; Bruns, 2005).

However, studies on participatory journalism practices, from soliciting audience photos to comments on stories, suggest such initiatives were often powered by an impulse to jump on the bandwagon. For example, online editors of UK national newspapers talked about participatory journalism as a "phenomenon you can't ignore," and as "an area that newspapers had to get into, otherwise they'd get left behind" (quoted in Hermida and Thurman, 2008, p. 347). The comprehensive analysis by Singer et al. (2011) of participatory practices in about two dozen leading national newspapers in 10 Western democracies demonstrates the imperative to remain competitive against a backdrop of technological and societal change. Such innovation was seen as necessary to survive, with one newspaper editor summing it up as "everyone is doing it ... We need to join the competition" (quoted in Singer et al., 2011, p. 148).

Survival was not the only incentive behind participatory journalism. Singer et al. found that some journalists were driven by the "potential of participatory journalism to democratize the media conversation" (Singer et al., 2011, p. 187). But of far more concern were the potential economic benefits of participatory journalism to build brand loyalty, boost website visits, and be competitive online. As Singer et al. concluded, "ensuring the survival of the newspaper" was an "urgent preoccupation among the editors we interviewed" (Singer et al., 2011, p. 187).

Innovation through the lens of participatory journalism illustrates how concerns about competition and survival against a prevailing discourse of crisis have played a significant role in novel newsroom initiatives and projects. Keeping an eye on the competition, trying to stay current, and avoid being left behind have often resulted in innovation as mimicry in the industry (Boczkowski, 2010; Lowrey, 2012). Participatory journalism is part of a series of "pivots" in journalism in reaction to broader societal and technological changes in news production, distribution, and consumption. There is no question that newsrooms should be evolving and adapting to a shifting media ecosystem by innovating in what they do and how they do it. The issue is how these decisions are made and implemented.

The trend to “pivot to video” in US newsrooms in 2015–2017 serves as a cautionary tale of journalism innovation fueled by the fear of being left behind. It followed Facebook’s decision to prioritize video (Simo, 2014; Cathcart, 2015). In response, many newsrooms shifted resources from written journalism to video, lured by the promise of video advertising dollars (Benes, 2017). By late 2017, the lucrative ad dollars had failed to materialize and publishers began to pivot away from video and back to text (Newman, 2018). As the *Columbia Journalism Review* noted at the time, “too many publishers are resorting to video as a flashy distraction from deeper underlying problems: falling digital advertising, the expense of creating good journalism, and the existential threat to journalism’s business model itself,” concluding that “the biggest problem with pivot to video is that it’s not well-considered strategy. Instead, it’s been born of desperation” (Moore, 2017).

Journalism innovation practice is littered with such examples of pivots, which are not rooted in research and development aligned with long-term strategic priorities of a news organization or clarity about the definition of innovation underpinning these moves. As Küng has noted, “the ongoing and fast-paced evolution in technology platforms, products, and services has meant that, for many, long-term strategy has been hijacked by short-term innovation projects” (Küng, 2017, p. 7). Belair-Gagnon and Steinke talk about the “‘hypes’ about new technologies in newsrooms rather than a consistent and well-established organizational strategy about innovation” (Belair-Gagnon and Steinke, 2020, p. 3). Such “hypes” include the use of drones in journalism (Holton, Lawson, and Love, 2015) and virtual reality journalism (De la Peña et al., 2010). Such an approach to innovation results in “the never-ending pivot” (Eltham, 2019) as newsrooms chase technologies to solve an economic crisis, rather than acknowledging and addressing the deep-rooted crises in journalism due to its long-standing representational harms (Callison and Young, 2020).

Canada’s Twenty-First-Century Media Policy

Canadian media is no exception to the never-ending pivot in the search for the killer innovation that will save the news industry. One of the most prominent examples was the pivot to tablet by the country’s best-selling print newspaper, the *Toronto Star*. The tablet product launched to much fanfare in September 2015, backed by an investment of CAD\$25 million in its first year and a staff of 70 people (Bradshaw, 2016). At the time, the paper’s public editor, Kathy English, described it as “revolutionary,” “dazzling,” and “cool” (English, 2015, np). *The Star* was hoping to replicate the success of Montreal’s French-language *La Presse+*, which transitioned to a primarily tablet edition in 2015.

Two years later, after an investment of CAD\$40 million, and two rounds of layoffs, the “revolutionary” product was shuttered (Rendell, 2017). The product had proved a dud with readers, peaking at 80,000 monthly readers, compared to the *Star*’s online monthly audience of 550,000 in the Toronto area alone (Rendell, 2017). It was an expensive lesson that, among other things, failed to consider the differences in the media markets in French-speaking Quebec and the English-speaking provinces of Canada. Let alone the wisdom of placing all bets on one digital

innovation that had already been tried and abandoned by others, such as Rupert Murdoch's *The Daily* (Benton, 2012).

Against a backdrop of a “dismal” history of innovation in legacy outlets (Toughill, 2016), Canadian economic policy for journalism organizations is in an experimental phase in response to what is being considered a national crisis in the business of journalism and its implications for democracy. In early 2018, the government announced CAD\$50M for local journalism. Later in that year, it announced its commitment to almost CAD\$600M in support for journalism organizations over five years. This funding was announced after a House of Commons committee review of the state of local news in 2016, and a 2017 government-funded report on the state of the media. Both the review and study identified market failure as a key concern that could and should be rectified through policy intervention and government funding.

That quality journalism should be publicly funded is increasingly being raised in public discourse and placed on the policy agenda in Western liberal democracies. The eventual funding package in Canada includes a Local Journalism Initiative that supports hiring journalists on specific underserved subject areas or communities, plus a tax subsidy or bailout, depending on your perspective of the political economy of journalism in Canada. The latter is the larger funding package. It involves three key financial components: labor tax credits for “qualified Canadian journalism organizations” (QCJO), to tax credits for citizens who can claim their “qualified journalism” for a small rebate, and the creation of a new governance model for journalism organizations to qualify as philanthropic organizations for tax purposes.

In order to determine who and what is a qualified journalism organization, the government assembled a panel of eight experts to provide advice on implementation of the allocation of the \$500M. The panel involved representatives from the main English and French journalism associations and the country's largest journalism union. Unsurprisingly, the nature of the arbiters received immediate critique and pushback from critics and digital-born organizations, since these associations originated from legacy organizations, and reflected to a large extent lobbyists and forces that supported the way the funding package evolved. The panel produced a report in 2019 taking a stance on the urgent nature of the crisis in the journalism industry, locating its main genesis as a result of technological and economic competition against big foreign-owned platform companies such as Facebook and Google (Government of Canada, 2019).

In addition to this panel, the government assembled an advisory board of five people (two journalists and three journalism/communications academics) to adjudicate the new Canada Revenue Agency criteria for QCJO (Canada Revenue Agency, 2020). As of publication, the page listing the qualified journalism organizations on the government website is a blank chart. There is also a third panel adjudicating the Local Journalism Initiative, which includes six people—all journalists or former journalists from commercial journalism organizations but one—also through News Media Canada.

There are three glaring omissions in the government and industry response. Most of the panel members providing advice and funding decisions are white, and have worked in the past at legacy journalism organizations or continue to do so. In addition, there is no attention paid to concerns relating to larger questions about the role of journalism in the twenty-first century in Canada, who decides what good journalism

is, as well as what is a long-term research and development strategy for the domain. What is quality journalism at a time of racial reckoning with historic harms, and what are the needs for a national journalism infrastructure in a changing technological, global, and political terrain beyond journalism are some of the questions that remain unaddressed. Also absent is consideration of the number of comparative models globally that could serve as examples for journalism funding and infrastructures that get to the wider and more profound roots of journalism's multiple and often longer-standing crises.

Reframing Innovation in Journalism

Addressing what innovation is and for whom has become ever more acute given the devastating global coronavirus pandemic of 2020. COVID-19 was the latest shock to a journalism industry still in the midst of the turbulence of digitalization. In Canada alone, more than 50 news outlets were temporarily or permanently closed and more than 2000 editorial and noneditorial workers were permanently or temporarily laid off in the first six months of the pandemic (Lindgren, Wechsler, and Wong, 2020). Across the border in the United States, some 36,000 workers in the news industry were laid off, furloughed, or suffered pay cuts by April 2020 (Tracy, 2020). The far-reaching fallout from the coronavirus is a challenge for media globally, not simply in more mature media markets, but also from India to Nigeria where advertising revenues have declined precipitously (Dutta, 2020; Krippahl, 2020).

Against the turmoil caused by COVID-19, a clearly defined understanding of what is innovation and its potential role in Canadian and global journalism would seem ever more essential. Indeed, there are examples of innovative, collaborative projects in response to COVID-19, such as the Big Local News COVID-19 Global Case Mapper, produced by Stanford University's Journalism and Democracy Initiative in partnership with the Google News Initiative and Pitch Interactive. It provides news outlets with a free embeddable and customizable map of cases and deaths. Such projects are a valuable response to an immediate need for detailed and accurate information about the spread of COVID-19. But in and of themselves, they are unlikely to bolster the long-term viability of a news outlet.

The past two decades have highlighted the contributions and limitations of innovation as a technology-led path to economic sustainability and prosperity for the many commercial journalism organizations. In times of survival, few can afford to be trapped in the cycle of never-ending pivots to the latest shiny new technology. As Paulussen notes in discussing innovation in the newsroom, "one of the largest challenges for legacy media organizations has been to develop a digital strategy" (Paulussen, 2016, p. 194). The lure of the new has instead drained resources, diverted attention, and undermined editorial strategies (Küng, 2017). The news industry would be better served by reframing innovation as research and development in support of well-defined and long-term editorial and business strategic priorities. In 2018, Posetti was already sounding the alarm, writing that "there is evidence of an increasingly urgent requirement for the cultivation of sustainable innovation frameworks and clear, longer-term strategies within news organisations" (Posetti, 2018, p. 8).

The focus on the here and now of technology also stems from a lack of deep knowledge, expertise, and understanding in legacy newsrooms about the impact of digitalization (Brock, 2013). Who gets to decide what innovation is, how it is implemented, and how it is evaluated is critical. As we noted in an earlier work (Hermida and Young, 2019), having a mix of journalists with different but complementary backgrounds and experiences improves the likelihood of success. The need for people with digital know-how to lead innovation was a notable theme in Küng's interviews in a wide range of media organizations, with one noting, "I don't think you can really change the organisation until the leadership and most of the talent are different" (quoted in Küng, 2017, p. 34). It is hardly surprising then that Canada's new media policy is skewed toward supporting legacy newsrooms, given that it was largely shaped by incumbent media interests, rather than creating infrastructures and opportunities for novel ventures.

Scholars have a role to play here. Research in innovation in journalism would benefit from more of a global perspective that moves beyond the European or American bias of research that Belair-Gagnon and Steinke (2020) identify in their review of the literature on innovation in journalism. It is worth noting, though, that their study only addressed research published in English, to the exclusion of studies in other languages. And there are examples of research into innovation in other contexts. These include studies on innovation in Central and Latin America (Harlow, 2018; Salaverría et al., 2019) and in South Africa (Sefara, 2018). There are also more industry-focused reports, such as Sen and Nielsen on start-ups in India (Sen and Nielsen, 2016), and SembraMedia's study of digital media entrepreneurs in Latin America (SembraMedia, 2017). Similarly, there is scope to move beyond studies of innovation in elite media, such as *The New York Times* and the BBC, or at scrappy start-ups. Valuable as this work is, it does not address how innovation is playing out at mid-range, regional, or local newsrooms, which have borne the brunt of the decline in journalism (see, for example, Lindgren et al., 2019).

In many respects, Canada is a cautionary tale of the impact of the never-ending pivot, a technological lens on innovation without sufficient attention to infrastructures and longer-term strategy, given the ongoing sustained losses in Canadian commercial journalism organizations. We propose drawing from the definitions of innovation that consider it at its widest possible remit. That would mean incorporating definitions from both journalism studies and economists such as Schumpeter (1934). It would mean recognizing that framing innovation in response to crisis has its own narrowing effect as it neglects longer-term social and cultural concerns about the role of journalism and its histories, and conversations about the infrastructures that need to be generated in the present.

A wider remit by its nature prioritizes longer-term strategic thinking about systems beyond the short-term and technological options. It also destabilizes systemic tendencies to support incumbents and protectionist interests. It can be applied to not-for-profit media, as well as the wider technological changes that see video and other forms of communication taking on more powerful journalism roles over text than in the previous era. In order to move beyond a narrow band of the possibilities in a public good such as journalism, creative destruction or reconstruction, as the Introduction to this book proposes, requires clarity about what needs to be repaired, reformed, or transformed in the process, not just a never-ending pivot to something new.

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