

1 Innovations in journalism in democratic societies

Theoretical concepts, definitions, and preconditions

Klaus Meier and Michael Graßl

Innovations in journalism: concepts and definitions

Technological development has historically been journalism's constant companion. However, it is not only technology that causes transformation and change in journalism: political, economic, and social development lead to changes in media markets, audience behavior, and editorial strategies, which, in turn, impact journalism. Numerous studies have identified innovative approaches across areas of media. Over the last two decades, transformations have brought, for example, new distribution channels for journalistic content, analytical tools for more precise insights into the audience, intermediary structures to integrate external platforms (Hermida and Mellado 2020), and new forms of newsroom organization (García-Avilés et al. 2018; Lischka 2018). Some studies have evidenced that complex interplays facilitated the implementation of innovative news media products, services, and processes that meet user demands and needs (Storsul and Krumsvik 2013). Journalists and technical experts interact and collaborate more closely through open-source engagement, which fosters values such as transparency, tinkering, iteration, and participation (Lewis and Usher 2013).

New formats and coverage patterns have been introduced and established in the face of new challenges in a post-truth age and in an increasingly complex and confusing world, such as fact-checking (Graves and Cherubini 2016), “constructive journalism” (Meier 2018a) or “slow journalism” (Le Masurier 2015). Journalism's development has most recently been influenced by digital products and digitized processes, such as social media acting as new publication channels (Schützeneder et al. 2022), mobile journalism (Bui and Moran 2020), new organizational forms of content creation (Buschow and Suhr 2022), and artificial intelligence and automated content production (Dörr 2016; Graßl et al. 2022; Porlezza and Ferri 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has been an additional driver in many areas of innovation (García-Avilés et al. 2022), for example, in the field of data journalism (Bisiani et al. 2023) and remote working (Reyna 2023).

This multifaceted process of disruption is accompanied by an inflationary use of terms like “innovation,” “change,” and “transformation,” which, on

the one hand, are often used as synonyms, but on the other hand each has a distinct meaning and frame. Furthermore, there is the misconception that something “new” is innovative because newness is not the same as innovation; indeed, as Van Kranenburg (2017, 5) asserts, the term is often confused with invention. For this reason, critical understanding and differentiation of the terms innovation, change, and transformation are necessary and useful in the context of innovations in journalism and were, therefore, the starting points of our research project.

Innovation has been a buzzword in public communication for decades (Meier et al. 2022). On the one hand, the term is general and used to advertise brands and products. On the other, innovation is differentiated analytically (Schützeneder 2022): regarding products, processes, marketing, and distribution. The notion of “innovation” implies the capability to adapt to change and to meet and overcome challenges. Innovation achieves this by combining existing knowledge and using creativity, and can thus solve a problem or cover a specific need by finding an original solution and by implementing it successfully, sometimes in a rather disruptive way. Journalism innovation as a concept not only focuses on media products but also on organizational structures and processes (Meier 2007). Moreover, there is often an overlap between product and process innovation (Dogruel 2014) and innovation-enhanced services that add value to customers and to the media organization (O’Sullivan and Dooley 2008). Whereas the process of disruptive media innovation has diminished the privileged position of traditional journalism and brought with it new organizations that often label themselves as start-ups (García-Avilés et al. 2018), the legacy media have shifted resources to digital publication formats. This shift has created the multifaceted possibilities of innovative organizational media models described today as “newsroom convergence” (García-Avilés et al. 2014, 2017) or have established their own in-house innovation labs (Hogh-Janovsky and Meier 2021; Cools et al. 2023).

Media enterprises that want to implement innovative strategies to develop multi-platform products and to simultaneously improve news quality must meet a lot of requirements, such as effective communication from management, as well as a general upgrade of production processes (Westlund and Krumsvik 2014); a “change of culture” (Küng 2013); and quality management (Wyss 2023). Studies on media innovation, therefore, have focused their attention primarily on internal processes within the media organizations and on the overall newsgathering processes (García-Avilés 2012).

Research on media innovation explores change and transformation in several aspects of the news media landscape, from the development of new media platforms to ways of producing and distributing media content. Francis and Bessant (2005) identify four ways of targeting innovation: product, process, position, and paradigmatic. These four approaches are not tight categories, as they have rather fuzzy boundaries, nor are they alternatives. Companies can pursue all four at the same time. Storsul and Krumsvik (2013)

list ten key factors that influence media innovation: (1) technology, (2) market opportunities and user behavior, (3) behavior of competitors, (4) regulation, (5) industry norms, (6) company strategy, (7) leadership and vision, (8) organizational structure, (9) capacity and resources, and (10) culture and creativity.

Following all these considerations and a critical review of the scientific literature, especially the definitions by O'Sullivan and Dooley (2008, 5) and García-Avilés et al. (2018, 27), enabled us to formulate a precise as possible definition. Journalism innovation is the performance of reactions to changes or transformations of news products, processes, and services irrespective of size, radicality, and incrementality through the use of creative skills that allow a problem or need to be identified. Once the problem has been recognized, journalism innovation solves it through a solution that results in the introduction of a new aspect that adds value to either or both the audience and the news organization. The innovation helps to cope better with change or to drive transformation.

Henceforth, the terms “change” and “transformation” used in this definition are differentiated more precisely, as either the corpus of literature does not clearly define them (Hitham et al. 2023) or authors often use them synonymously. When developing a theoretical framework for our research project, we became aware that these terms need more conceptual rigor to clearly express and analyze the topic of journalism innovation. The nature of the process is the decisive factor:

External influences mark and trigger “change.” Change drives humans, who merely react. By contrast, transformation is a strategic process that humans actively initiate and manage, and often model on (industrial) changing processes, such as the shift from mechanical and analogue technologies to digitalization. In this context, the starting point and the aims of the process are usually known and preformulated at the organizational level; transformation is thus a systematic, longer-term process of learning, searching, and changing, often extending over several decades (Hölscher et al. 2018). While change can be characterized as a reaction to external environmental influences, transformation concerns observing the environment and using those observations to modify basic beliefs and long-term behaviors. In other words, transformation is the strategic response to change. Innovations, in turn, can be driven by change or can be an element of a strategic transformation. They focus on a specific problem that is being solved or a new need under address. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic as an externally triggered change process spawned innovative formats in science journalism, while digitalization as a long-term transformation process of media organizations led to the introduction of paywalls (Meier et al. 2022).

As the definition mentions, two degrees of innovation impact have been observed: radical and incremental (Christensen 1997). Radical innovations include novelties with far-reaching consequences on the economy and the market through creative destruction (Schumpeter 1943). Incremental

innovations refer to gradual improvements in which specific components and processes of the organization are modified – for example, in products and services or automation processes. Storsul and Krumsvik (2013, 18) note that most innovations in journalism are incremental because they “do not challenge the economics or logic of the media market.”

Missing pieces in research on innovation in journalism

Both scholars and practitioners observe a growing relevance of media innovation research. Though a connection between media innovations and social transformation in general seems obvious (Storsul and Krumsvik 2013; Bruns 2014; Dogruel 2014), there is still a lack of theoretical frameworks and empirical findings on questions such as: How do we approach and evaluate the impact of journalism innovations on the quality of news and, in a broader sense, their influence on a democratic society at large? Media innovation, thus, seems to be insufficiently defined and poorly covered by purely quantitative methods based only on scarce statistical data (Bleyen et al. 2014). Most research in this field relies on a technology-driven innovation concept and on its practical implications in the products and new narratives implemented by journalists and developers in digital media (e.g., Meier 2018b). However, Buschow (2018) argues there is a focus on the question of whether entrepreneurial journalism and journalistic start-ups are economically more successful models.

At least theoretically, some factors such as financial resources, corporate culture, or role perceptions are identified as drivers of innovation in journalism (Steensen 2009; Picard 2016; Deuze and Witschge 2017; Kramp and Loosen 2018; Hendrickx and Picone 2020), but often, they are only roughly differentiated at the macro level of media organization and the micro of individuals (Waschková Císařová 2023). There is still a lack of a broad empirical basis for framework conditions that support or impede innovations in journalism. Furthermore, scholars have not yet examined the extent to which the processes and outcomes of media innovation vary across international markets and the implications for media organizations, and a research gap exists in comparative studies about journalism innovations in international systems and markets. As Livingstone (2012, 421) argues, “[I]t 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.”

Innovation, journalistic quality, and democratic societies

To analyze these complex interdependencies and research gaps, the field of innovations in journalism requires a combination of normative media theories (Christians et al. 2009) and “theoretical and empirical approaches from economic and social innovation theory as well as media-specific frameworks” (Dogruel 2014, 62). The hypothesis that news media, with their innovations, are only viable in the long term if the latter contribute to the quality of

journalism (Pavlik 2013) has yet to be sufficiently and empirically examined and validated. According to our perception, studies on innovations in journalism should no longer focus on product and technology-related aspects alone but also on news quality, as well as on societal impact and public welfare contributions. We follow Mumford (2002, 253), who contends social innovations cover “the generation and implementation of new ideas about how people should organize interpersonal activities, or social interactions, to meet one or more common goals.” In short, social innovations are new ideas that enhance society’s capability to act (Loader and Mercea 2011). Thus, besides their economic value, media innovations impact communication capacities at the societal level, the organizational, as well as the individual.

Against this background, we based Journalism Innovations in Democratic Societies (JoIn-DemoS) on a normative theory of journalism that has proven to be a reliable, tried and tested common ground for the definition and evaluation of journalism, journalistic quality, and media performance in contemporary divergent, pluralistic, and democratic societies (McQuail 1992; Christians et al. 2009; Meier 2019). Even though it is more difficult to define journalism in the digital era because of its blurring boundaries (Carlson and Lewis 2015; Malik and Shapiro 2017, Meier et al. 2022), the central role of journalism in pluralistic, open societies is oriented toward a spatially and functionally differentiated society. Since societal subsystems, such as politics and economics, tend to drift apart, journalism is a vital binding force to interrelate, realign, and synchronize these subsystems and to provide them with a common repertoire of social topics and issues (Arnold 2009; Urban and Schweiger 2014; Meier 2018c). Therefore, it is an abstract but essential mission of journalism to actively generate a common public sphere (Habermas 2006) and thus contribute to ensuring that the basic values of democratic societies (freedom, justice, equality, order, and solidarity) are realized (McQuail 1992). In more concrete terms, this journalism role brings about three core tasks (Christians et al. 2009; Meier 2018c, 15ff.): (i) providing information, (ii) critical evaluation and monitoring (watchdog role), and (iii) citizens’ participation. Three fundamental values emerge from these tasks, on which quality is based and which can be used as indicators for properly assessing quality (Neuberger 1996; Scheuer 2008, 44–49; Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014): Truth/Facticity, Relevance/Context, and Independence. These values are mutually interlinked in the current discourse framing the umbrella term “objectivity.” McNair (2017, 1331) argues objectivity “has never been more important to the health of liberal democracy” but must be accompanied in a post-factual era by the norms of transparency of journalistic products and processes (Meier and Reimer 2011) and appropriate tools that strengthen the accountability of journalists and newsrooms (Fengler et al. 2013; Porlezza 2018).

In principle, these core values and the resulting norms, as “standards of journalistic excellence” (Gladney 1996), have been analyzed by journalism research for decades (Deuze 2005). However, in the face of increasing

information overloads in the digital media world (with communication from governments, political parties, businesses, and organizations of all kinds), autonomy as one core value seems to be particularly crucial, which

is the central feature for the distinction of descriptions of reality that are either journalistic or alien to journalism, in the sense of independence from individual communication interests, as they tend to be expressed in campaigns, public relations, content marketing, or advertising.

(Wyss and Keel 2016, 3)

Even though this consensus regarding the goals and duties of journalism mainly expresses a socially desirable and rather idealized set of practices, it can be used to distinguish between journalism and non-journalistic communication. The label of journalism today is often applied to media content that does not refer to journalism at all, and this trend is set to continue, as the Swiss Media Commission, in addressing the issues of subsidizing media and journalism from a practical perspective, explains, “Already today and especially in the future, however, there are a variety of alternative forms of content generation and dissemination that are similar to and compete with professionally run journalism” (Emek 2017, 13). These other formats of public communication are driven by new means, such as public engagement and activism, native advertising, corporate publishing, content marketing, and entertainment. These activities increasingly want to participate in the overall reputation of journalism by simulating its storytelling practices but without adhering to its methods, goals, and quality standards. For this reason, if we consider its normative role in a democratic society, this cannot be called journalism but, as McNair (2017, 1318) defines it, “quasi-journalism.” The importance of this clear differentiation increases regarding the challenges for open and transparent democratic societies in the contemporary era of “disrupted public spheres” (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018).

Drawing on the literature (Malik and Shapiro 2017; Meier 2018c; Kaltenbrunner et al. 2019), our project defines journalism as the regular process of researching, producing, and distributing information for the purpose of providing orientation for the general public and transparency for society at large. The actor conducting this process is an organization that commits itself to sustaining democracy and to principles such as independence, non-partisanship, monitoring and scrutinizing politics, business practices, topicality, relevance, correctness, and general comprehensibility in order to guarantee this claim.

Media system and journalistic culture as framing preconditions of innovation

Both the understanding and the role of journalism depend on the structures of society, politics, and media organizations in which it is embedded (Giddens

1984; Altmeppen 2006). Above all, the following parameters must be analyzed for media innovations in general: media systems, media policies, media/newsroom organizations, and journalistic cultures. Hallin and Mancini (2004) contribute significantly to the classification and systematization of media systems and categorize the Western (democratic) pluralist countries into three types: (i) the democratic corporatist model, (ii) the liberal model, and (iii) the polarized pluralist model. Just one decade later, Roger Blum (2014) similarly classifies the Western media systems into three models: (a) public service, (b) liberal, and (c) free clientelist. However, research can barely keep pace with the rapid changes and transformations journalism and the news media now undergo. Nielsen et al. (2013, 83), thus, call for “further institutionally and system-oriented mixed-methods of comparative research to advance our understanding of how current changes are impacting journalism, the news media, and ultimately politics in different settings.”

Established models for distinguishing and classifying media and journalism cultures (especially those by Hallin and Mancini 2004) describe several typical parameters for assessment and historical derivation. Further framework conditions, such as more recent media guidelines and political regulations or national economic specifics and types of technology rollout, play a major role in innovation processes in journalism. In contrast to the “democratic corporatist model” of the three Central European countries of Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, the North Atlantic “liberal model” (e.g., the United Kingdom) and the Mediterranean “bipolarized pluralist model” (e.g., Spain) have a different innovation experience (Meier et al. 2022). Innovation in journalism in those two regions began quite earlier, both in traditional media houses and later in new entrepreneurial projects, complete with in-depth discussions on the future of journalism (Franklin 2014).

In the United Kingdom, for example, developments such as digitization in print-media houses and the integration of multiple channels in a common newsroom (e.g., *The Daily Telegraph* as of 2007, *The Guardian* as of 2009) were pushed and driven forward several years earlier than the newspapers of most Central European countries (Kaltenbrunner and Luef 2017). In Southern Europe, the effects of the deep economic crisis of 2007–2009 forced many journalists to join forces and seek new opportunities within and beyond the unprofitable and shrinking traditional media market. García-Avilés et al. (2018, 25) clearly indicate that “journalism innovation occurs at the margins of the traditional news industry and, for the most part, innovation is expanding among digital native media outlets, niche initiatives and start-ups.” Thus, in contemporary Spain, almost 3,500 “cybermedia” are active as digital information service providers (Salaverria Aliaga et al. 2018) composed of small, start-up entrepreneurial journalistic projects as well as growing general interest web portals with dozens of employees. Only about one-third of these “cybermedia” are digitally native. By comparison, Buschow (2018, 207), in a broad 2015 survey of Germany’s new, publisher-independent journalistic initiatives, identifies just 74 start-ups.

Conclusions and outlook

In summary, the research area “Innovations in Journalism” contains quite a few challenges and has a lot of theoretical groundwork, but still leaves questions unanswered, and the complexity of concepts, conditions, and impacts is often not holistically thought through. In our three-year international research project JoIn-DemoS, we wanted to address these challenges and contribute not only to answering open questions but also to analyzing the complex interplays. In this chapter, we have set the theoretical foundations. While the literature provides clear evidence for an unambiguous definition of innovation in journalism, we had to make our own distinction between the terms “change” and “transformation,” which underpin the concept of innovations. “Change” is triggered by external influences, whereas transformation is a strategic process that humans actively initiate and manage. Innovations can be driven or even enforced by change or can be an active element of a strategic transformation. Moreover, we have explained that, as well as why not only the gained value for the industry or the media organization itself but also for the normative function of journalism in a democratic society is a crucial yardstick for the evaluation of innovations. In this context, we also emphasized the importance of a cross-national, comparative dimension that has received scant research to this point and which JoIn-DemoS in five selected countries will address. Chapter 2 explains the phases and methodology of the project, which build on these theoretical foundations.

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