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Introduction

Journalism is undergoing profound transformations, and innovations in journalism play a key role in this process. The increasing use of data and artificial intelligence, the search for new business models, alternative audience-engagement strategies, and the impact of social media are all shaping the current news ecosystem, forcing journalism to continuously adapt to new phenomena. Thus, innovation becomes a crucial element for journalism to adjust and to (re-)invent itself in the light of ongoing changes.

But what exactly are the most significant innovations that have characterized and marked journalism throughout the last decade? How can we describe the nature of these innovations, and what kind of impact do they have on the function of journalism in democratic societies? To answer these questions, a total of 24 communication scientists from five countries (Austria, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom) have worked together in a three-year project called “Journalism Innovations in Democratic Societies: Index, Influence and Prerequisites in International Comparison” – *JoIn-DemoS*. The project’s goal was to identify the most important innovations in journalism in the last ten years in all participating countries and what factors promoted or deterred the introduction of innovations in media companies. In addition, the researchers sought to answer the questions of whether and to what extent the media system affects the implementation of innovations. We grounded the project on normative democratic theories of journalism, according to which journalism is an existential condition for democratic societies. In our understanding, journalism is responsible for informing people, holding the powerful to account, and empowering individuals to participate in society. Overall, the aim of the project was not only to generate empirical findings and to advance theory in the field of journalism innovation, but we also wanted to create empirically guided practical recommendations for journalists, media managers, and policymakers so they can improve the quality, as well as the democratic function, of journalism.

But what do we mean by journalistic innovation? The concept is somewhat diffuse in both academic and professional literature. Few authors offer a precise definition of innovation and often identify it with newness, invention, change, or creativity, but all these are separate concepts. Innovation combines the discovery

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of a problem or need – the development of an idea to provide a solution with a practical application to obtain successful results. Moreover, innovations are not limited to new products or technologies but can also be based on an original combination of existing ideas, processes, or resources. This book explores, therefore, the transformation of the media landscape by looking at innovations regarding the production, organization, distribution, and commercialization of news content. For the exact definition we have applied, see Chapter 1.

The aspect that needs to be considered is that innovation does not automatically guarantee either quality or sustainability, but it does provide a differentiated value to the company. However, journalistic innovations not only have repercussions for the organizations that apply them, but they can also generate trends or provoke shifts in the industry, and some might even exert a social impact due to the magnitude of the value provided.

Nevertheless, innovations are not independent of the context in which they emerge. In other words, any innovation is simultaneously a child of its time and subject to the economic and socio-political framework of a specific country. They are also closely linked to technological developments. For instance, market penetration of the internet put pressure on the traditional revenue models of the news media at various speeds in the countries studied. While the United Kingdom adopted a digital transformation strategy early on, the German-speaking countries in the sample (Austria, Germany, and Switzerland) had more time for innovation development due to favorable macroeconomic data and relatively stable markets with increasingly concentrated ownership. In Spain, the news media industry and journalism suffered from the economic crisis in 2008. This led to several media collapsing and massive job losses in journalism, but at the same time, it was the starting point for an experimental start-up phase. Around 3,000 new journalistic digital media, both at the national and local levels and often based on new financing models supported by diverse communities, emerged in the 2010s. For us to obtain a thorough impression of why journalistic innovations emerge in any country, several factors need to be considered, such as macroeconomic conditions, socio-political changes, and state interventions.

What can we learn from the findings? We argue for a structured approach to innovation and advocate an open-minded management that encourages tinkering and experimentation, and implements innovation based on quality management systems. One challenge with journalistic innovations is that senior management sometimes overlooks the complexity of implementing innovations in newsrooms. Prerequisites for success are strategic planning, resource allocation, interdisciplinary teams, and, above all, flexibility and adaptability. The principle of recursion is pivotal in driving innovation success by continuously redefining and refining rules, combined with allocating resources within a structured quality management framework. Ultimately, the book also serves as a strategic guide for media managers navigating the complex innovation landscape, highlighting the need for a systematic and deliberate approach for sustained success in the ever-evolving media arena.

In the context of the structure of the book, there are six parts. The first lays the groundwork for the empirical analysis and presents the theoretical framework on which the actual research is based. The book offers not only a definition of innovation but also seeks to answer questions such as “why innovation in journalism is useful not only for the media industry itself but also for society as a whole.”

Part II presents the methodological approach that we used in the project. The study is mainly based on qualitative methods such as interviews and text analysis. For instance, to identify the most relevant journalism innovations of the past decade, we conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with experts in each of the five countries. We then used textual analysis to code and analyze the interviews, clustering the results into the main forms of innovations that can be compared across countries. We also adopted a multiple case study design in which we analyzed specific innovations across countries. In addition, we also applied quantitative methods such as an online survey among those people working for the companies in the case studies.

In Part III, we describe the framework conditions for innovation in journalism of each country. In other words, we analyzed the socioeconomic context in which journalistic innovation emerges. Our main focus is the period 2010–2020, but in our analysis, we also needed to go back in time to consider long-term developments (e.g., the shift of advertising to social media platforms) or pivotal events such as economic crises. This is done for each of the five countries to allow for a better understanding of the emergence, development, and use of some of the journalistic innovations.

Part IV focuses on the main empirical results, which are the most relevant innovations in journalism. We discuss every journalistic innovation individually – for example, artificial intelligence, data journalism, or new digital storytelling – but also from a comparative perspective. For each innovation, we look at the following aspects: the aim of the innovation, supportive and obstructive conditions, and societal impact. For each innovation, there are also country-specific case studies.

Part V consists of a comparison of the assorted media systems in the sample in terms of emerging innovations. This part brings together both the individual innovations and the framework conditions and offers an in-depth analysis of what kind of innovations specific socioeconomic conditions favor or impede.

In Part VI, we discuss our empirically driven conclusions concerning the most relevant innovations and offer practical recommendations for journalists, media managers, and policymakers. Finally, we also outline the theoretical knowledge gained from the project.