

# The Logic of Journalism Innovation: The case of the Knight News Challenge

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[Slide 1]

In academic research, it's not often that you get a chance to present your work to an audience that includes some of the people you studied as part of your research. So, I suppose that means that if I've made any big errors, I'll certainly hear about during the Q&A portion of the panel!

As the title suggests, this is a study of the Knight News Challenge, which needs little introduction. Started four years ago, it has become the most prominent innovation contest in the future-of-news space. The KNC and Knight generally are the focus of my ongoing dissertation research this spring. Today I'd like to present a portion of that research that focuses on the perceptions and practices of "news innovators" — that is, about a dozen select winners of the News Challenge who intended to use their grant to start something resembling a news organization or news platform. (I should say up front that there are *lots* of news innovators who never won the News Challenge; I'm just using that as a label.)

[Slide 2]

The overarching question of this research is: Like the journalism profession as a whole, how do news innovators — people actively working to create new models for news — negotiate this central tension between professional control and open participation? This question is pretty familiar to everyone in this room, but it needs a little more context.

[Slide 3]

In my dissertation, I describe these conflicting impulses as the professional logic and participatory logic. By "logic," I'm referring to something of a taken-for-granted sensibility for how things ought to be. And, while it's oversimplifying to some extent, we can think of this central tension as a key struggle in journalism today. On the one hand is the professional interest in retaining gatekeeping control over content, not

because journalists are control-mongers, but rather because *that's the nature of professions*: they seek to safeguard a body of knowledge, practices and standards, and they do it with a public service imperative, for the good of society. This professional logic can be connected with the idea of “occupational ideology” described by Mark Deuze (2005) — in essence, that journalism-as-a-profession has developed an ideology of determining what people see, hear, and read about the world. On the other hand, you have a participatory logic that reflects the “convergence culture” of Henry Jenkins (2006) — this development where digital technology and digital culture have enabled and even encouraged distributed forms of control over content creation, filtering, and sharing.

OK, we're all pretty familiar with this tension. It's the question of how news gets assembled, or put together—to what degree is it institutionally driven or participatory in orientation? ... But, I would argue that all of this gets more interesting when the nature of news assembly gets mapped along the dimension of news subsidy.

[Slide 4]

For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, institutional journalism was conducted in Quadrant 1: it was done in a gatekeeping fashion of professional control, and it was subsidized by for-profit advertising models. What's been so striking about the past even just 5 years has been the proliferation of news models popping up in the other quadrants. I'm especially interested in Quadrant 4 — that most opposite the model we're generally familiar with. What happens when news is put together in a more participatory fashion, and underwritten in alternative ways? This led me to think about the Knight Foundation's News Challenge contest, which has funded a number of initiatives that, on the whole, vary from the industry norm in terms of their modes of assembly and subsidy.

[Slide 5]

So, in effect, the question for this research was to assess how news innovators, funded by the Knight News Challenge, negotiate the tension between professional and participatory logics of media work? I conducted depth interviews with more than a dozen winners representing each the three years (2007, 2008, and 2009) of the contest. While they differed in geography and professional background, all had proposed projects that arguably involved setting up a news organization or platform of some kind, and therefore would have to wrestle with questions of how news would get organized and assembled in that context.

[Slide 6]

As I analyzed the transcripts from these interviews, the first major finding to emerge was that news innovators render unproblematic this tension precisely because they see journalism less as a proprietary profession to be protected and

more as an open-source practice to be shared. In short, they demystified the “priesthood” and occupational control associated with the professional logic.

[Slide 7]

There were 3 parts to this process—how, in their own minds, they rendered unproblematic this tension:

### **Practice**

Journalism-as-practice implies that the process of creating, filtering, and sharing news and information should be an activity in which *many* take part, without the ideological burden of worrying about occupational boundaries demarcating “who counts” as a journalist. Moreover, the focus on practice implies that good journalism simply occurs *with* practice, or repetition, and that this is the better distinction to be made between professionals and amateurs. One grantee put it this way: “We are, I think, a little too ready to use this phrase ‘being a journalist’ as if journalism is a state of being. We should try to get into the habit of talking about *doing* journalism. *Journalism is an activity.*”

### **Open**

When journalism is seen as a practice, the logical next step, articulated by virtually all news innovators, becomes one of, OK, how do we do this? If we conceptualize journalism as a shared practice, rather than as an exclusive profession, then why not open it up and share it with everyone? Why not make it easier, technologically and normatively, for everyone to participate in the news-and-information process?

Let me give you an example. One of the more interesting stories to emerge from my interviews is the case of VillageSoup in Maine. Richard Anderson there has developed quite a successful model that involves allowing business and citizens rather wide latitude in posting their own content to his site — in fact, outsiders see the same CMS publishing interface as the VillageSoup journalists themselves! Anderson’s grant was to build an open-source version of VillageSoup’s CMS that could be used in other communities. At first, Anderson resisted the open-source requirement of the News Challenge, because he worried about competitors invading his turf with his model, but then realized he had little to fear because large newspaper companies had invested too much capital and too much pride in their proprietary legacy systems. More importantly, there is a barrier of professional culture of control. As Anderson said: “With a system like VillageSoup’s, “you get *open access* to businesses, and to citizen journalists, and to be able to share content from one site to the other site. These are all things that [*large newspapers*] *legacy systems were never designed to do.*”

A logic of professional control precludes news organizations from imagining that publishing systems could be anything *other* than platforms for producing read-only news content. In this view, VillageSoup’s read-write system of content management is truly radical, not only because it’s open-source rather than proprietary in nature,

but primarily because its technology assumes, as a starting point, that *everyone should have equal access to the press tools of publication*, co-existent on the same platform of production.

## **Tools**

What's striking about the News Challenge is the emphasis on tools and platforms intended to help ordinary people take part in the open practice of journalism. In this sense, *tools* are de-ideological. By definition, they can be used by virtually anyone, indiscriminant of whether those handling the tool "count" as a professional journalist. As one grantee described his project: "We're teaching people how to communicate with tools." As David Cohn put it:

A few years ago, this idea that you would have been creating tools that would have somehow *enabled people to do journalism*, that might have been kind of a silly idea. But right now it makes perfect sense.

[Slide 8]

By rendering unproblematic the professional-participatory tension, news innovators can "pull apart" journalism to preserve its best principles while discarding outmoded practices. For instance, in referring to principles like fairness, accuracy and right-of-reply, Harry Dugmore said, "Some of these conventions are critical, and we can't do away with them." At the same time, though, news innovators identified several problematic practices—things they felt should be dropped as we rethink journalism. Like the emphasis on speed and "scooping" the competition, or the notion of two-sides-to-every-story kind of binary objectivity, which they argued should be replaced by an emphasis on transparency.

[Slide 9]

In effect, news innovators are attempting to "ferry the values," as one winner put it ... "important values that we want to save from the old world of journalism and make sure that they make it into the new world that is being born now"

[Slide 10]

In addition to preserving certain practices, news innovators identify *participation* as a new normative ethic—this idea that journalism should be participatory. Again, it's true that a number of news organizations have opened space for participation, but research—even the most current work—shows that professionals generally don't want that participation to influence the core process of journalism, but rather play at the margins of comment forums and the like. What news innovators are suggesting, then, is really kind of a radical rethink whereby one of journalism's key ethics and best practices involves bringing people more fully into the *process*.

[Slide 11]

I heard this kind of participatory ethic articulated in the way that news innovators spoke of their faith in the public, their confidence in the collective. In this, I found a subtle shift from individual to collective ... from the individual expertise of the trained professional, to the sense that aggregate wisdom lies in the crowd ... from the notion of narrow professional gatekeeping, to a more holistic function of “community management,” a common theme that referred to the curation of the best from the community ... and finally a shift from “content”—as in, we produce content for audiences—to a growing interest in *connectivity*, in bringing people together as opposed to merely talking to them. (Like the “content to relationships” shift described by Matt Thompson this morning.)

[Slide 12]

As you might imagine, the sustainability question looms large. How will these projects survive their Knight grants? How does their model scale? Etc.

The basic finding here was that the actual practice of enacting their participatory aims was difficult, both for internal and external reasons. Perhaps the biggest concern was one of attention: In a rapidly fragmenting mediascape, it's attention that has become the critical thing, and increasingly it's being split across so many things that many projects such as these get too little of it to sustain themselves, at least in the long run. That's the external challenge: competing in an attention economy. More internally, several grantees spoke of some frustration about the lack of ongoing support from Knight in the form of helping them link up with other funders and otherwise find additional sources of stability and permanence beyond the life of the Knight News Challenge grant. As one put it, Knight used to fund institutions that produced ideas, but now increasingly is funding “ideas” that need to become “institutions”—and yet that process of institutionalizing, of becoming settled in a shifting world, is proving very difficult.

[Slide 13]

In sum, the “logic” of news innovation is one that is de-ideological and de-professionalized, and thus overcomes the professional-participatory tension. It bridges old and new values, and promises greater participation as a normative good, but appears to need help in institutionalizing and “scaling up” these ideas.