

Journalism Breakthroughs Project:

Understanding and Implementing Innovation in News Media and Journalism



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**CENTER FOR MEDIA,
DATA AND SOCIETY**

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ABOUT CMDS

The Center for Media, Data and Society (CMDS) is a research center for the study of media, communication, and information policy and its impact on society and practice.

Founded in 2004 as the Center for Media and Communication Studies, CMDS is part of Central European University's Democracy Institute and serves as a focal point for an international network of acclaimed scholars, research institutions and activists.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Journalism Breakthroughs project aims at methodically collecting data and information about innovation in journalism and improving the ways (formats, channels and frequency) in which it packages and disseminates this content for broader consumption.

This project is strategically important for CMDS as knowledge sharing is one of the center's three main lines of work (research and policy analysis being the other two). By knowledge sharing we mean a complex set of activities all aimed at making knowledge generated by research available to interested parties as well as the general public.

The project is funded by the Open Society Foundations (OSF).

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report began as a three-part series on Medium exploring innovation practices in media.

A key goal for the series was to discuss innovation – what it is, the barriers to its implementation and examples of innovation in practice. The three articles are collated here, in one place, for the first time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is based on a series of in-depth email interviews with ten leading media practitioners, researchers and scholars around the world.

It would not have been possible without the thoughtful and insightful contributions provided by Federica Cherubini, Professor Lucy Kueng, Joon-Nie Lau, Nic Newman, Rishad Patel, Professor Devadas Rajaram, Thomas Seymat, Professor Jane Singer, Patricia Torres-Burd and Dr. Gillian Youngs.

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Damian continues to be an active journalist, writing monthly columns for ZDNet (Red Ventures) and the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute (RJI) at the University of Missouri. He also writes regular features for the International Journalists' Network (IJNet), What's New in Publishing, journalism.co.uk and other outlets. His work has been republished by publishers such as AP, Fast Company, MSN, Salon, Scroll.in and Yahoo!.

Other bylines and research work can be found in publications such as the BBC College of Journalism / Academy (35 bylines), The Conversation (10 bylines), Digital Content Next (6 bylines), Huffington Post (12 bylines), IJNet (20 bylines) journalism.co.uk (23 bylines), and the Thomson Reuters Foundation. Prior to their closure he also wrote for PBS MediaShift (14 bylines) TheMediaBriefing (35 bylines) and Your Middle East (13 bylines). His work can also be read in Columbia Journalism Review (CJR), Harvard's Nieman Lab, and Poynter.



Damian's research, teaching and public scholarship focus on digital trends, social media, technology, the business of media, and the evolution - and practice - of journalism.

He has spoken about these topics at events hosted by a diverse range of organizations including the BBC, Broadcasting Board of Governors, Facebook, Foreign Press Association, FIPP, IBC, LION Publishers, numerous state press associations, the National Governors Association, World Association of Newspapers (WAN-IFRA) and the United Nations.

Alongside this, he has been interviewed by outlets such as AFP, Arab News, Editor & Publisher, ESPN, Index on Censorship, Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN), NPR and Wired, and been quoted by the likes of the American Press Institute, BBC News, CJR, Forbes, The Idea (Atlantic Media), MediaPost, Monocle, The National (UAE), Poynter, Times of Oman, the World Bank and others.

Find out more: www.damianradcliffe.com and follow him on Twitter [@damianradcliffe](https://twitter.com/damianradcliffe).

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Chapter 1: What do we mean by innovation? (And why is so hard for news organizations to implement?)



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It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a media company in possession of a good fortune (an audience, brand recognition and decent revenues), must (still) be in want of innovation.

The pace of change in our industry means that even the biggest, most successful, companies need to continually innovate, refresh and reinvent *what* they do and *how* they do it. Those who don't risk being left behind, overtaken by digital upstarts, or blown away by more established players with deeper pockets and a longer transformational runway.

I asked 10 experts — leading media practitioners, researchers and scholars around the world — for their insights around what constitutes innovation, the barriers to implementing it, and how to overcome these roadblocks.

Here's what they had to say:

“I know it when I see it.” Spotting innovation - and its characteristics - in the wild.

“It is such a difficult concept,” admits [Nic Newman](#), Senior Research Associate at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ). Newman, like others such as [Joon-Nie Lau](#), Director, Asia, WAN-IFRA (The World Association of News Publishers), highlighted the myriad of areas and activities that can be captured under an innovation umbrella.

This includes innovation in the way journalism is gathered (*routines, methodologies, workflows and processes*), the way it is packaged (*workflow, products and formats*), as well as distributed and monetized (*platforms, services and products once more*).

Principle No 1: The innovation process and mindset

In doing this, “innovation could be a new solution to an old problem or a new approach to a new problem,” explains Federica Cherubini, Head of Leadership Development at RISJ. “It could be about technology of course, but more broadly it’s about process and ways of doing things,” Cherubini suggests.

Dr. Jane Singer, Professor of Journalism Innovation at City University in London, concurs, noting how “in existing news organizations, it [innovation] generally requires a cultural shift, going well beyond the integration of some new technology or tool.”



This is an approach that chimes with Devadas Rajaram, a Professor at the Asian College of Journalism in Chennai, India.

“Innovation in media for me is a mindset — not an architectural thing,” he says.

“It’s a total revamp of [our] approach to doing journalism and redefining it.”

Photo by Alex Knight on Unsplash

For Rajaram, and others, integral to this mindset is the need to be user-centric. That can manifest itself in many ways, from storytelling formats to methods of content delivery, but at its heart, Rajaram argues “should be a complete overhaul of our relationship with the user.”

It’s an end goal that Patricia Torres-Burd, Managing Director, Media Services Advisory Services, MDIF (Media Development Investment Fund) agrees with. “Decades ago, an all-news radio station in the US — had a tag line that I loved then and still believe is relevant. It was ‘KTRH — News You Can Use’. Thinking about your readers needs first and foremost is critical,” Torres-Burd says.

The rationale for being audience-led is simple. As Torres-Burd puts it, “audiences are bombarded with so many choices (not all great) and the competition is fierce.”

Principle No 2: It’s not always sexy

There’s a risk that efforts to innovate focus on big, bold and sometimes seemingly brash changes and alterations. A rash of new products. An eye-catching redesign. An expensive new CMS. New hires whose appointments make a big splash in the trade press, as well as the newsroom.

The reality, however, can (and perhaps even should) be more mundane.

As Jane Singer observes: “Innovation can encompass new ways of doing something that’s already being done, as well as doing something that is itself new.”

Nic Newman stresses the role “of innovation within existing rules.”

That might mean “making existing things a bit better often with the use of data e.g. iterating and improving an email,” or “creating something completely new” that helps to usher in “the next great leap forward.”

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For Newman that magic leap could constitute “a completely new tech framework like responsive design or voice interfaces and the content.”

Building on this, [Thomas Seymat](#), Editorial Projects and Development Manager at Euronews, and an Adjunct Professor of Journalism at Paris’ Centre de Formation des Journalistes and Sciences Po Lyon, posits that “building a new CMS — because of all the technological and operational changes it entails — is perhaps the most innovative and transformative innovation of all.”

Principle No 3: You should start with the end in mind

Either way, it’s important that innovation is “grounded in analyzing a situation (or a problem) and finding the best way to solve it or improve it,” recommends Federica Cherubini.

“We can think of innovative ways of approaching how to engage with your audiences, or how to automate a task that takes too much human time but could be done very well by AI and technology, or how to tell a story in a way that meets your audience’s needs and consumption habits, or how to implement a new business model that is sustainable and in line with the organization’s needs and structure.”

“The news media industry has been through constant evolution, transformation, and adaption for the last decade (or more!),” Cherubini reminds us, “and all of these examples are about... being able to find the right way to produce and deliver journalism in line with those challenges and opportunities.”



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Implementation: Five Key Barriers to Overcome

“Barriers to strategic change are as much about mindsets and established working practices and structures as they are about forms of expertise that need to be introduced into the innovation mix,” says [Dr. Gillian Youngs](#), a strategist, innovation and ecosystem expert, who has worked across the creative, digital and academic sectors.

The aim of innovation-focused work, “is to ensure that areas such as values, accuracy, different forms of interconnected content and audience engagement can be extensively explored in the context of technological possibilities,” she says, “with the appetite for experimentation high on the agenda.”

That said, despite their best intentions, the appetite for experimentation can — sometimes for often understandable reasons — be mixed, or its efforts muted. Similarly, the implementation of initiatives focused on innovation can also be stymied by a combination of structural and cultural considerations.

Understanding why this happens is important, not least so that leaders and organizations can seek to avoid these pitfalls and potentially put strategies into place that might help to mitigate them.

With that in mind, here are five of the most common factors that news and media organizations need to navigate and be cognizant of.

1. Innovation for the sake of it

Media’s obsession with “the next big thing,” or the “Shiny Things Syndrome”, a term [coined](#) by Kim Bui, the Director of Product and Audience Innovation at the Arizona Republic, can be all too real.

Companies need to avoid “quickly jump[ing] on the bandwagon because others are doing it,” cautions Patricia Torres-Burd at MDIF (Media Development Investment Fund). That’s “not a great reason,” for doing something she adds.

2. Organizational preparedness

“Yes you want to be competitive,” Torres-Burd says, but organizations need to ask if specific efforts to innovate fit with your mission, and if your newsrooms — and your audience — are ready for them.

This is a sentiment [Rishad Patel](#), the co-founder of Splice Media in Singapore agrees with.

“I think the biggest obstacle to any sort of strategic change around managing media is our unwillingness to ask our audiences what they need,” he says, advocating that having then listened to their audience, it’s incumbent on outlets to change accordingly.

As it stands, Patel clearly feels that many organizations have a long way to go in this regard.

“Far too many of the processes, tools, workflows, and mindsets we have used in traditional media organizations, from newsgathering, creation, processing, and amplification to distribution, sales, and marketing are calcified and codified in structures and hierarchies from decades ago that were created for advertising and a capital-heavy, gatekeeper-controlled marketplace.”



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3. Risk aversion

Overcoming traditional working practices can be difficult when many organizations are quite conservative and risk-averse; sentiments that may have only have been exacerbated by the uncertainties of the COVID-era.

“Taking chances and committing to changes in a risk-averse, resource-scarce environment — or even a contracting one like journalism today — can be particularly challenging,” says Thomas Seymat at Euronews.

Together with this, Jane Singer reflects, “the contemporary environment of intense public scrutiny and, in many quarters, radical mistrust of the media,” does not help. “Fear of missteps that might explode disastrously can and does inhibit risk-taking.”

At the same time, although these are legitimate barriers to innovation and doing things differently, the economic reality of our industry — and the competition for eyeballs, attention and revenue — makes innovation a necessity. Standing still is a luxury few (if any) can afford.

For some, like Devadas Rajaram, “the biggest barrier is the old-school mindset in management.”

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Rajaram sees “fears and reluctance to change things,” coupled with a “refusal to learn, upskill and encourage new ideas,” as endemic among some industry leaders.

“We can overcome these barriers only by persevering and encouraging student journalists and young journalists to explore new methods and open up their minds to new opportunities that are there,” he adds.

4. Resource challenges

Nevertheless, even those with a will — and desire — to change, can still struggle.

“Keeping up with global industry media trends and your local / regional / national competitive market takes time and money,” notes MDIF’s Patricia Torres-Burd, adding how for many outlets “scale is critical for survival,” an economic reality that may influence what your new product offers will be.

At the same time, “when you are struggling to keep the ‘wheels on the bus’ and the bills paid as a leader, finding time to come up with strategic plans is hard to do,” Torres-Burd says.

“An additional challenge for media outlets, of course, is that any change has to happen alongside constant attention to the existing product(s),” Jane Singer reminds us. And, lest we forget, the news industry is “a notoriously voracious and crisis-prone beast that demands full-on time and energy from all involved.”

5. Thinking innovation is all about the tech

A further consideration for organizations is their own definition of innovation and the technological lens through which is all too often viewed.

“Technology isn’t always the big disruptor we think it is,” suggests Rishad Patel, co-founder, Splice Media. “It certainly helps, but the disruption we need for media doesn’t come from a very sexy place at all; it comes from asking people — our users, audiences, and customers — what they need, and translating those needs into actual solutions.”

“Perhaps it’s time we realized that media, or journalism, is a service industry,” Patel advocates.

“If our practice or content is not solving a problem for a community, or at least addressing a real need, it’s probably time to do something else.”



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Chapter 2: Making it Happen: 12 ways to overcome common innovation roadblocks



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“The bad news is that there’s a pretty low bar for innovation in journalism and media,” says [Rishad Patel](#), co-founder of Splice Media in Singapore. “The good news is that there’s a pretty low bar for innovation in journalism and media.”

Nevertheless, despite this perceived low bar, addressing issues of innovation — and its implementation — is not easy.

“These are important questions... [and] very hard to give a brief answer to,” says [Dr. Lucy Kueng](#) who as Professor of Media Innovation (University of Oslo) and the Google Digital News Senior Fellow at Reuters Institute, Oxford, has [written extensively](#) on strategy, innovation and leadership with particular emphasis on managing technology shifts.

“I think the industry has a systematic problem with innovation — too much with too little focus,” Keung told me in email correspondence. “Innovation needs to be embedded in a smart and strategic process, and then setting up the process to match the outcomes needed,” she says.

With that in mind, here are twelve strategic considerations which need to be factored into the processes — and outcomes — that companies looking to innovate need to consider.

1. Define what problem — or problems — you're trying to resolve

“Innovation per se does not lead to growth,” Lucy Kueng reminds us, “and more innovation is not necessarily better, especially if it’s not wrapped in a strategy.”

“Innovation can ironically lead to fragmented attention, resource stretch, complexity and lack of focus. The answer is clarifying at the start what kind of innovation is needed, and why,” she adds.

2. Reframe your mindset to be more audience-led

For Rishad Patel, one major driver that he doesn’t see often enough are efforts that are externally focused, with media outlets innovating with the goal of seeking to solve the problems faced by audiences.

“We don’t see enough of that in the way we run our media organizations,” he adds. “True innovation in media comes from that value exchange: by serving our audiences with anything at our disposal that allows them to make better decisions and live better lives.”

“All of that takes a lot of conversation — actual conversations with the actual people we produce our content and media and journalism for, and an ability to listen with real empathy,” he advises.



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3. Measure the right things

Once you’ve identified the problems you wish to solve, and put steps in place to address them, then “a great metrics framework to help show whether innovations are working or not,” is essential says [Nic Newman](#), Senior Research Associate at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ).



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One potential challenge to address here, Newman observes, is to ensure that everyone is speaking the same language, especially where innovations involve a mix of tech, editorial and commercial staff.

Given that these diverse roles may express themselves — and understand their roles and what success looks like — very differently, it’s essential that they are all on the same page.

4. Provide effective and clear leadership

Setting this framework, and communicating the vision and focus behind innovation efforts, are cornerstones of the work that those in leadership roles must deliver on.

It’s essential that senior management “set [a] clear vision and mission and ensure all staff are in alignment,” says [Joon-Nie Lau](#), Director, Asia, WAN-IFRA (World Association of News Publishers).

To help do this, that means being clear about “who is in charge” Nic Newman recommends. This is especially important given the myriad of stakeholders (e.g. editorial, tech, marketing, commercial) who may be involved in these efforts.

It also requires industry leaders to possess a broader range of skills than perhaps they have in the past too. As [Federica Cherubini](#), Head of Leadership Development at RISJ, explains:

The task requested of newsroom managers is much more complex now.

The skills needed have widened to include empathy, listening and understanding. It’s about adding on top of the old jobs the ability of taking care and truly leading a team.

We need to rethink what leadership means and who we consider a leader. We need to think about how that strategic change is reflected into having more diverse and inclusive newsrooms.

5. Look beyond the C-Suite

Putting these ideas into practice is key, for those like Devadas Rajaram, a Professor at the Asian College of Journalism in Chennai, India, who see “the biggest barrier [to innovation] is the traditional mindsets of the people running newsrooms.” “Media management should be open to new ideas and young people should be given a place at the table.”

It’s a view that resonates with Thomas Seymat, Editorial Projects and Development Manager at Euronews. “I would strongly recommend setting up structures or pathways internally for people with innovative ideas where they can find the support of people who “have done it before”, he advises.

Seymat recognizes that this may be difficult in resource-scarce environments, but that a failure to broaden the conversation reduces the pool of people given opportunities to lead change or have their ideas heard. Overcoming this is essential, not just to drive innovation, but also to promote fresh ideas, inclusivity and overlooked perspectives.

Encapsulating these frustrations (and strategic needs), Seymat highlights the Twitter thread from Catt Small, a product designer for Asana who went viral, earlier this summer, after reminding us that:

Allied to this, Joon-Nie Lau, Director, Asia, WAN-IFRA advocates teams “look outside the company and media industry for inspiration and answers,” given that the challenges being faced by the media industry are not unique to it.

6. Commit for the long-term

In implementing new ideas, “your first version probably won’t be right,” instructs Nic Newman, a former BBC News veteran who oversaw the launch of many of the Corporation’s early digital news products, “so you need to iterate and change.”

Recognizing — and committing to this reality — can be challenging, especially when “the newsroom’s understaffed and the higher ups’ focus is solely on quick wins or the bottom line,” acknowledges Euronews’ Thomas Seymat.

As a result, too often, it would seem, organizations risk being “fair weather innovators,” committed to the idea of change, but not necessarily sticking with it. This can be one reason why, implementation can be such a challenge. Lucy Kueng’s recent work on strategy and culture, for example, revealed that “only a fraction of strategies are ever implemented.”

“This is due to the complexity of strategy implementation,” Kueng wrote. “It involves shifting from a rational, deeply thought-out plan to the messy realities of human action, organizational inertia, and small ‘p’ internal politics and personal intractability.”



Photo by Erik Mclean on Unsplash

7. Trust — and invest in — the process

“We might have a good strategy on paper but its implementation brings lots of uncertainties. And this is because change is not just about process, but people,” says Federica Cherubini.

The process needs to match the outcomes that an organization is looking to deliver, advises Lucy Kueng. “Is this open-ended experimentation to test an idea, and learning is just as valuable as it working, or are we dealing with a fundamental pivot that has to deliver?”

“Each of these categories needs an entirely different processes, and teams people working on it,” Kueng observes.

“So underlying this, the big point is the process is as important as the innovation. Those doing well tend to have nailed the process — a central piece of which is simply unpicking the learnings that emerge.”

8. Acknowledge fear, risk and uncertainty

A consistent theme among contributors to this article was what Joon-Nie Lau categorizes as “FUD.” *Fear, uncertainty and doubt.*

“Fear of change, of upsetting whatever’s left of the status quo, fear of the unknown... fear of taking risks and investing in technology or new ventures which may not pay off.

Uncertainty in the political and economic outlook... uncertainty over what audiences want (or don’t) despite the existence of tools and techniques to determine and measure such preferences.

Doubt over whether any changes or new ventures will actually work, doubt and insecurity over being left behind.”

The sum of all these fears is understandable. After all, as Federica Cherubini, reminds us, “change is hard. The result of change is often (always?) unknown.”

Industry leaders need to lean into this, setting clear objectives and expectations.

“We are all afraid of change and what it implies,” confesses [Patricia Torres-Burd](#), Managing Director, Media Services Advisory Services, MDIF (Media Development Investment Fund). “[But] I will say that fear of this need for continued relevance brings out the insecurity in the best of us!”

“Similarly, and the reverse is true,” argues Thomas Seymat. “It’s easy to imagine that change management in news organizations bloodied by cuts, buyouts and layoffs cannot be fully effective, or even well-received by the staff.”

9. Bring people with you

“Buy-in from a critical mass of people at all levels of an organization is necessary but is exceptionally difficult to obtain,” [Dr. Jane Singer](#), Professor of Journalism Innovation at City University in London, divulges.

“Changing habits of both practice (how things are done) and thought (what things we believe ought to be done, and how we believe we ought to do them) is not only hard but also tends to happen unevenly: Some people will be enthusiastic, some will be less keen but receptive, and some will be resistant.”

“The size of each group will vary, but all will include senior managers, middle managers and junior staffers — and not just on the editorial side but right across the organization.”



Photo by [Annie Spratt](#) on [Unsplash](#)

10. Empower managers, cut the detractors loose

Everyone knows that culture change is hard. To help drive it, “remove detractors and naysayers,” counsels Joon-Nie Lau. “They are toxic!”

“Make it easy for them to leave if they do not agree with the new direction,” she recommends. At the same time, you need to “build trust [and] empower staff,” Lau says, which means showing your trust in your teams and working hard to “identify talent gaps, train, promote from within or hire from outside.”

Stressing some of the same lessons as those espoused by Jane Singer, Federica Cherubini points out that “strategic change has implications at all levels of an organization.”

Because of this “it needs to be embraced, pursued and championed by the top leadership, understood and implemented by the middle management — who often are confronted with the most real implications on the people aspect of this — and it needs to make sense and work for everyone who is executing that strategic change, working on it every day, throughout the organization.”

“I think a way to overcome these challenges goes through investing on and empowering managers,” she says.

11. Let go of the past

Having put these principles into practice, outlets may find themselves looking — and feeling — very different from when (and where) they started.

“These solutions, or products, may not look very much like the journalism business we grew up with, but that’s a good thing, because it probably means that we’re meeting those audiences where they are, rather than asking them to come to us, as we’ve done for so many decades,” proposes Rishad Patel.

Nevertheless, “it is complicated to change the ethos of a newsroom that has for decades been the leader in the market... but in print,” says Patricia Torres-Burd, sharing a sentiment applicable to players across multiple mediums. “Switching to digital is an enormous shift on so many levels! Managing this need internally and externally is hard work that takes vision, time, and strategic expertise.”



Photo by [Hadija Saidi](#) on [Unsplash](#)

12. Understand that change is the only constant

That said, few organizations can rest on their digital laurels, so however uncomfortable and uncertain this ride is, it remains a necessary one.

“We’re on a journey and there is no playbook or silver bullet to solve it all,” Federica Cherubini says.

“It’s about learning and iterating,” we need to “keep evaluating [because] what works now might not work in the future,” Cherubini argues. “This has been true probably for a very long time, but the pace of the evolution has increased dramatically.”

“The ecosystem is constantly evolving and embracing change means embracing the fact that we’re not simply trying to figure out how to get from A to B, but that that finish line keeps moving forward,” Cherubini cautions. Subsequently, “transformation is the default,” she adds.

Chapter 3: Innovation in Practice – five core ideas seen at successful media companies around the world



The impact of COVID-19 has accentuated and accelerated underlying structural issues, catapulting the industry into a new and uncertain future much quicker than anticipated.

To survive, never mind flourish, in this environment, strategic innovation — rather than innovation for the sake of it — is more important than ever.

If we accept that principle, what lessons can be learned from other news and media organizations around the world?

In this report, I've shared thoughts from leading media scholars, researchers and practitioners for their top tips for successfully implementing innovation as well the principles and likely barriers organizations need to consider. For this final chapter, based on their expert insights, I've identified nine principles of content innovation, and examples of them in action.

Theme 1: Business Model Innovation

Principle 1: The Value of Niche

"There was a point where the mainstream media industry believed scale was taking marginally valuable audiences and trying to make them bigger. We've done the opposite," Sean Griffey, CEO and co-founder of Industry Dive, told Axios recently.

“This is a company that has taken a ridiculously simple idea — that ‘the real value in business media is in niche, highly targeted audiences’ — and then replicated it profitably multiple times,” observes Rishad Patel, the co-founder of Splice Media in Singapore.

Patel highlighted how **Industry Dive** had identified a successful approach and replicated it (e.g. Retail Dive, Utility Dive, Food Dive, Supply Chain Dive, Payments Dive). As a result, profits are expected to grow to 30% this year.

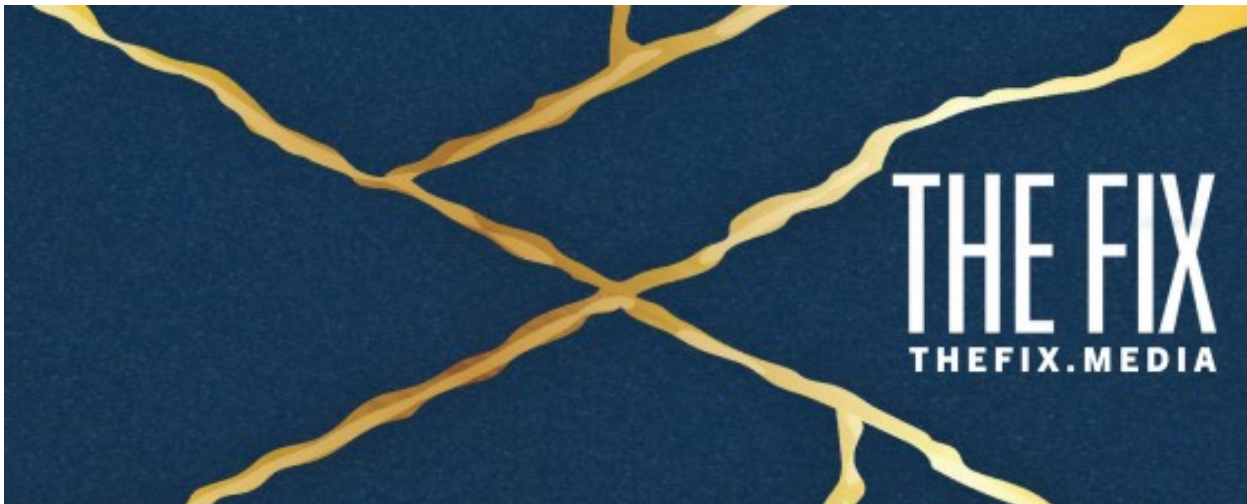
As Griffey himself puts it:

*“Basically, the true secret to scale for a media business is to do something *valuable* multiple times.”*

Thomas Seymat, Editorial Projects and Development Manager at Euronews, and an Adjunct Professor of Journalism at Paris’ Centre de Formation des Journalistes and Sciences Po Lyon, also cited the work of a niche publisher, **The Fix**.

An online trade publication for media professionals with a strong focus on Central and Eastern Europe, the site has innovated, Seymat says, “by occupying a (to my knowledge) unused space — topic and geography-wise, and in English.”

“They write a lot about media revenue experiments and I hope they too will find the right balance of revenue streams to be sustainable in the long term,” he adds.



Banner image for *The Fix*, [via](#) their website.

Principle 2: Going Against the Grain

Both Patel and Seymat cited further examples of publishers and content creators who have bucked obvious trends.

“Our friends at **The Ken** in Bangalore realized that their strength lay not in throwing multiple stories at an audience to see which one would stick,” Patel recounted, “but in publishing one well-researched, deeply reported story a day.”

“If you’ll allow me to be corporate, I think my employer’s (**Euronews**) strategy to launch and grow an affiliates network in Southeast Europe and the Caucasus region is strategically innovative,” Seymat says.

“Finding local partners and investors to start whole new media organizations — facing a pandemic and other challenges — is a great example of innovation that makes sense for the business development side, for the brand, and for the audience too.”

“These affiliates bring a new independent voice in their region,” he adds, “and they contribute to Euronews’ main news coverage, along with the rest of our language services.” “I know it’s a ton of work for everyone involved, so I have to give kudos to my colleagues.”



Launching new services in the midst of a pandemic was a bold idea reiterated by Patricia Torres-Burd, Managing Director, Media Services Advisory Services, MDIF (Media Development Investment Fund).

Torres-Burd noted efforts led by Styli Charalambous of the **Daily Maverick** in South Africa, “a CEO focused on product and innovation.”

“He is not afraid to make changes,” Torres-Burd says, “and during the pandemic — this digital news portal — are you ready for it? ... Launched a weekly print section. It is entirely counter-intuitive but in line with their goal to reach and inform as many people as possible in their country.”

Front cover of the weekly Daily Maverick newspaper (Issue No 168)



Theme 2: Cultural Innovation

Principle 3: Investing in — and Creating — Community

“Although news organizations, in general, remain reluctant to relinquish their role in deciding what constitutes news and how best to convey it, there are some creative experiments,” notes Dr. Jane Singer, Professor of Journalism Innovation at City University in London.

Focusing on what Singer refers to as “audience-driven news,” one such organization that has caught Singer’s eye, is **Tortoise Media** in the UK.

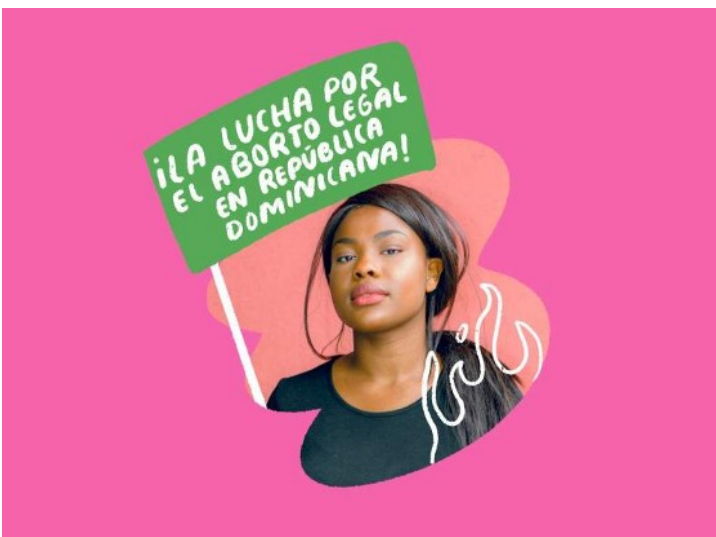
“Although the name stems from its ‘slow news’ approach, I think one of the more innovative things about Tortoise is the way it makes audiences integral to the news process, from deciding what to explore to engaging directly with newsmakers,” she says.

Singer also mentions **The Ferret**, an award-winning investigative journalism co-operative, based in Scotland. As they explain in their online FAQ, “when you subscribe to The Ferret you become more than just a passive supporter — people become part-owners of the project and can influence how it will develop.”

This community-centric model also resonates with Patricia Torres-Burd, who points to case studies from the **Membership Puzzle** which showcase innovative forms of content creation, distribution and engagement.

“I absolutely love and devoured these,” Torres-Burd says, “but the stand outs are **KPCC** and their community-driven efforts during the pandemic, and **Black Ballad** out of the UK and how they built a safe space online for Black women.

“This effort not only created a community, engaged and active participants but has now turned it into so much more with opportunities for revenue and brand alignment that fits their mission.”



Torres-Burd also highlights the Mexican media platform “**Malvestida**, which “is focusing on women’s issues beyond fashion and beauty ... amplifying the voices and experiences of a new generation who can define their needs and identity on their own terms.”

“Most of what they have to say and discuss is region agnostic,” she adds, recommending people check out their Instagram page, and reminding us how in the digital age communities are no longer bound by geography.

Image for the story: “I die where you vacation”: the fight for legal abortion in the Dominican Republic — via <https://malvestida.com/2021/10/aborto-republica-dominicana/>

Principle 4: Collaboration

Community building principles are not just embodied in the relationship organizations have with their audience, but increasingly with each other.

“As I write, the Pandora Papers has just dropped,” Jane Singer commented in an email. “They are the latest manifestation in a growing trend of journalists from different news organizations working together, rather than competing, to tell different parts of a major story.”

Other efforts shared by Singer include how “**BureauLocal**, (part of **The Bureau of Investigative Journalism** in the UK) has “brought local journalists from around the country together to collectively explore a national data set and develop local stories from it, ” and the **#CoronaVirusFacts Alliance** database (created by the International Fact-Checking Network), “a compilation of debunks of coronavirus hoaxes by fact-checkers all around the world.”

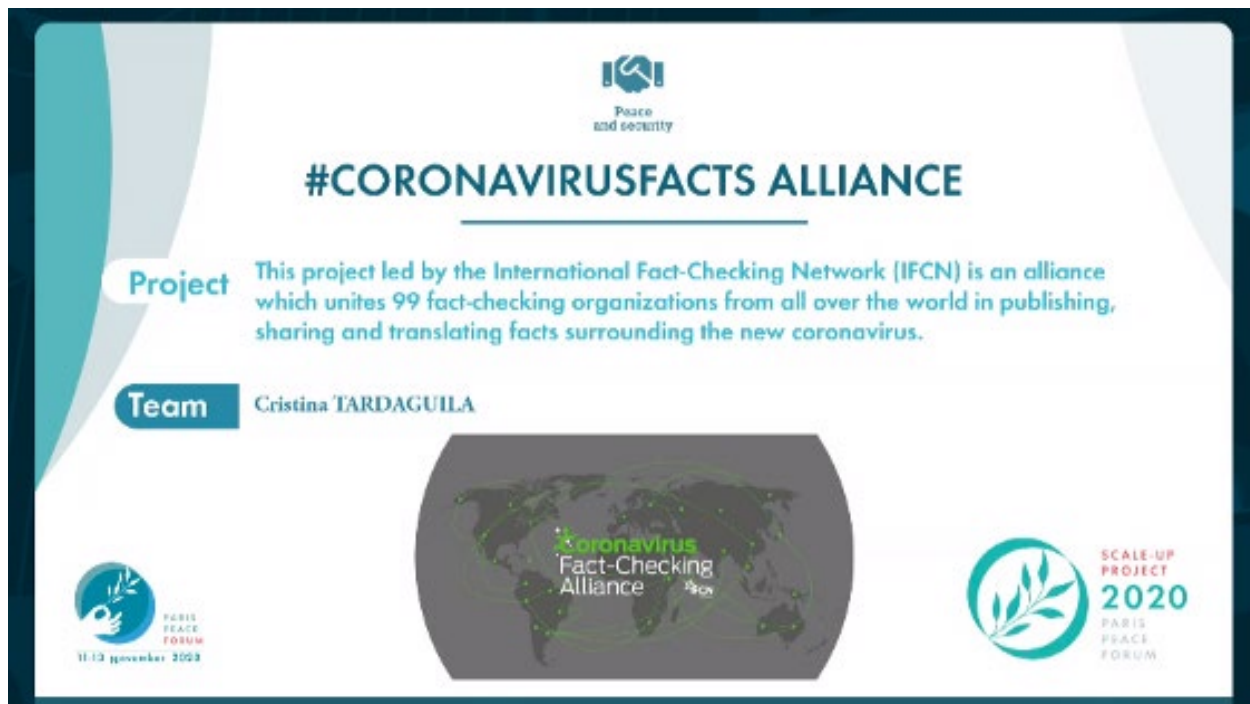


Image: [#CoronaVirusFacts Alliance](#)

“Innovation is not easy,” Patricia Torres-Burd reminds us. “It can be internally disruptive and expensive. Collaboration can provide an excellent opportunity to test and find the best ways to reach audiences with relevant content.”

By way of an example, she cites the work of **Hashtag Our Stories** (and their collaborations with Snapshot and NBC LX, a local news network targeted at younger cord-cutters), and two examples from India: **Josh Talks** and **Sheroes** a social network for women. “While they are not traditional media outlets — both are utilizing social and content platforms to connect with and improve communities,” she says.

Principle 5: Transparency and an Open Innovation Culture

“I’ve spent a couple of intense years leading Euronews’ immersive journalism efforts,” says Thomas Seymat, Editorial Projects and Development Manager at Euronews, “so VR, AR, etc. are mediums I keep a (nostalgic) eye on.”

“However, the field evolves constantly and it’s easy to fall behind if you’re not paying close attention.” Because of this, Seymat says he was “happy to see that the **New York Times**’ R&D department published a guide teaching how journalists can create stories through photogrammetry using only their mobile devices.”

This was “cutting-edge stuff made available to the greater public,” he notes.

“It’s one thing to lead innovative projects with cutting-edge technologies with the financial support of tech companies, it’s a whole different thing to do it openly (as Seymat’s company has previously done) so it benefits the rest of the industry.”

It’s a model others have also adopted, with Jane Singer underscoring how “growing numbers of large news orgs also now have dedicated ‘spaces’ for exploring new ideas.”

Found on Medium and elsewhere, efforts like **BBC News Labs** can help spark discussion and “explicitly seek to foster and encourage creativity.”



Image: BBC News Labs

Theme 3: Audience-first Innovation

Principle 6: Products Designed to Meet user Needs

“A lot can be learnt from looking at other traditional industries,” argues Joon-Nie Lau, Director, Asia, WAN-IFRA (World Association of News Publishers). “Entire books have been written about how these industries have transformed digitally.”

“What they [and the media] have in common is that they make their money by serving consumers and addressing customers’ needs, constantly tweaking their products and services to ensure that consumers will want to pay for them.”

For Splice Media’s Rishad Patel, one example of a company embodying these ideals is **The Information**. “[It] has such a richness of products for its users that all speak to its mission — to cover the technology business like nobody else — and that it does this in so many formats that meet their audiences where they are (or want to be),” he says.

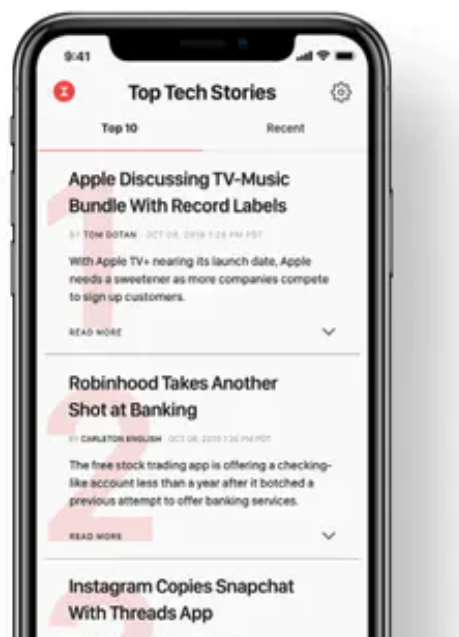


Image promoting the launch of their new app, the Tech Top 10 by The Information, December 2019

“They understand that the text-based article isn’t the only way we consume information, so their ‘stories’ take the form of paid products like conference calls, Slack channels, events, workshops, commenting on their website (because they get that being a part of the conversation is something their members were willing to pay for) and... org charts.”

“I think [the org charts] is a genius product in that The Information understands the needs of that segment of their tech insider users who work in finance or journalism that would pay for this sort of intelligence because of its utility in the work that they do.”

Theme 4: Content and Tech-led Innovation

Principle 7: Embracing New Formats and Products

“I love what **The Guardian, The New York Times, Washington Post and NPR** are doing — particularly in the areas of data storytelling, immersive podcasts, VR and AR storytelling on Instagram,” says Devadas Rajaram, a Professor at the Asian College of Journalism in Chennai, India.

“They are very engaging and user-centric,” he adds, reflecting on the fact “it’s ironic that they’re all legacy media organizations.” Of digital-born entrants, Rajaram adds **BuzzFeed News** and **Hashtag Our Stories** into the mix.

Nic Newman, Senior Research Associate at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ), stressed how content-led innovation can be found across a number of different areas, from the types of open-source investigations produced by outlets such as **Bellingcat** and the **BBC Africa Eye** team, through to product format innovation like **Quartz Obsessions**, **The New York Times’** podcast **The Daily**, and live events hosted by **Tortoise**.

The next leap forward, he believes, will be in “flash briefings,” as well as “personalized” and “atomized audio.”



Promotional image highlighting Flash Briefings provided by Crosscut, a Seattle-based independent, nonprofit news site in the northwest of the United States.

Principle 8: New Tech

Although there's a deluge of new tech that companies can — and are — using, [Dr. Gillian Youngs](#), a strategist, innovation and ecosystem expert, who has worked across the creative, digital and academic sectors, stressed the role of AI as a major focal point for innovation in media and journalism.

Youngs pointed to the role of this technology in tackling areas such as misinformation, (through initiatives like the **EU-funded [Fandango project](#)**).

“Even if automatic detection of Fake News and disinformation is not possible for the moment..., Machine Learning technologies and Big Data analysis can strongly support journalists and media professionals to detect disinformation in their day-by-day working activity,” she says.



More widely, “curating audience preferences and interests, social media, and links across different forms of content can be part of this picture in far more complex ways than is happening at present,” Youngs argues.

Embodying principles that can go way beyond managing misinformation, Youngs notes how “innovation in these areas requires a lot more thinking outside of traditional mass media boxes, and new interdisciplinary strategies.”

Photo by [airfocus](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Theme 5: Changing Editorial Culture

Principle 9: Leadership Matters

Underpinning much of this is the ability of leaders to change editorial culture and a company's mindset.

With this in mind, Jane Singer admits this “reflects my own reader biases,” but, she cites The New York Times and The Guardian as two examples of where this can be seen.

“Not incidentally, both also have strengthened their financial situation as a result of these changes, including by adding significant numbers of new readers.”

Innovations can resonate beyond institutional boundaries, priming the entire industry.

Nic Newman points to efforts such as engagement metrics like RFV (which measures the Recency, Frequency and Volume of reading the FT digitally) a move from the **Financial Times** which “galvanized the industry on loyalty.”

Meanwhile, Joon-Nie Lau, Director, Asia, WAN-IFRA (World Association of News Publishers) highlights innovation strategies at outlets such as **Stuff NZ** (New Zealand), **Mediahuis** (Belgium) and the **South China Morning Post** as outlets others can learn from.

Led by new CEO Gary Liu, the South China Morning Post has “transformed a local English paper of record into a global news publication helping readers understand China.” Liu “started with 250 staff producing print, 40 on digital, and transformed headcount to 250 on digital and 40 in print.”



Chart showing audience growth at the South China Morning Post, via INMA (\$)

Final Thoughts

“To create the space for innovation and the opportunity for growth, companies at every scale and every stage from start-up to storied legacy media must decide not only what to do,” the journalist and communications consultant Kevin Anderson argued for the Reuters Institute back in 2017, “but also what they will stop doing.”

The reason for this, Anderson suggested is “so that they can focus on editorial and commercial innovation — not simply for the sake of doing something new but to achieve their journalistic mission and their editorial ambitions in a constantly changing media environment.”

That’s an argument that remains as true today as it did four years ago.

After all, as Federica Cherubini, Head of Leadership Development, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ) reminds us, we all want to be “inspired by those who are really embracing the change, not for the sake of changing or just doing something new, but for their ability — and commitment — to find the best way to serve their audiences, build a sustainable business, and nurture their newsrooms.”



METHODOLOGY AND LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

This report is based on a series of email interviews with ten leading media practitioners, researchers and scholars from around the world. Their contributions were analyzed to identify patterns and key ideas, which then informed the contents and shape of this report, as well as its conclusions.

Participants were selected because of their extensive experience delivering, researching, promoting and implementing innovation projects in newsrooms and classrooms.

Respondents were also identified – and approached – due to their geographic location (for both their current and previous roles, alongside the geographic regions they cover in their work), their different areas of primary expertise, as well as the media platforms and skillsets they specialize in.

List of Interviewees	
<i>Primary positions held at the time of the interviews (September – October 2021)</i>	
Federica Cherubini	Head of Leadership Development, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford University, UK
Professor Lucy Kueng	Google Digital News Senior Fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford University, UK
Joon-Nie Lau	Director, Asia, WAN-IFRA (World Association of News Publishers), Singapore
Nic Newman	Senior Research Associate, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford University, UK; Digital media and product consultant
Rishad Patel	Co-Founder, Splice Media, Singapore
Professor Devadas Rajaram	Asian College of Journalism, Chennai, India
Thomas Seymat	Editorial Projects and Development Manager at Euronews, France
Professor Jane Singer	Professor of Journalism Innovation, City University of London, UK
Patricia Torres-Burd	Managing Director, Media Services Advisory Services, MDIF (Media Development Investment Fund), Europe
Dr. Gillian Youngs	Visiting Professor of Design and Digital Strategy, University of Greenwich, London, UK; Independent strategist, innovation and ecosystem expert



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