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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Creech, B. (2024). Venture Philanthropy, Local News, and the Murky Promise of Innovation. *Media and Communication*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.7496>

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# Venture Philanthropy, Local News, and the Murky Promise of Innovation

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**Submitted:** 31 July 2023 **Accepted:** 23 October 2023 **Published:** 29 February 2024

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “Unpacking Innovation: Media and the Locus of Change” edited by Scott A. Eldridge II (University of Groningen), Frank Harbers (University of Groningen), and Sandra Banjac (University of Groningen), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i397>

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## Abstract

As local news has grown as a research and policy concern, venture philanthropy organizations, like the Google News Initiative, Meta Journalism Project, and American Journalism Project, have forwarded a capacious vision of innovation as offering a broad set of revenue-based solutions to local news’ crises. This article analyzes materials produced by these organizations as a form of metajournalistic discourse to understand how venture philanthropists’ focus on local news and innovation buttresses their authority to intervene in journalistic cultures and articulate visions for the future. Venture philanthropy organizations have claimed a broad and granular authority to define the directions of local journalism’s future, recursively justifying their role as stewards of tech industry largesse by declaring which problems, practices, and innovations are worthy of investment and attention.

## Keywords

American Journalism Project; Facebook journalism; Google News Initiative; local news; Meta Journalism Project; metajournalistic discourse; venture philanthropy

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## 1. Introduction

In the middle of the summer of 2023, as news industry leaders, university instructors, and media commentators debated the cultural and economic consequences of artificial intelligence, the American Journalism Project, the venture philanthropy organization focused on building financially sustainable news organizations by encouraging business, technological, and cultural innovation, announced that it would be working in partnership with OpenAI, the company behind generative AI products like ChatGPT, to deliver

funding that would encourage innovative, and hopefully profitable, uses of AI tools in local newsrooms (Fischer, 2023).

Though OpenAI's total gift of \$10 million was much smaller than other recent high-profile donations from Meta and Google (Creech & Parks, 2022), it typifies a moment where an ascendant American technology company stands poised to disrupt the news industry, but also attempts to alleviate this disruption with philanthropy that brings its technologies closer into newsroom culture. The words of American Journalism Project CEO Sarabeth Berman distill the context in which such gifts exist:

In these early days of generative AI, we have the opportunity to ensure that local news organizations, and their communities, are involved in shaping its implications. With this partnership, we aim to promote ways for AI to enhance—rather than imperil—journalism. (Ropek, 2023, para. 3)

Berman's words nod to trends of technological change and financial decimation of local news, but also draw attention to the way that venture philanthropists have been positioning themselves as brokering solutions that bring tech industry-driven innovation to local news organizations.

Berman not only cedes that a future driven by AI is perhaps inevitable, she also implicitly centers the American Journalism Project as a responsible steward of journalism in that future. The declining state of local news has been an urgent issue of policy and research concern for many years, and given this context, Berman and the American Journalism Project are an example of a larger ecology of venture philanthropy organizations, often supported by tech industry largesse, that have coalesced around the crises of local news. From the Google News Initiative and Meta Journalism Project (previously Facebook Journalism Project) to more overtly journalism-focused foundations like the Knight Foundation, American Journalism Project, and the Lenfest Institute for Journalism, venture philanthropy organizations wield a rapidly growing influence over journalism and its professional cultures.

As these organizations construct crises in local news as an opportunity for publicly-centered innovation, they often forward projects to revitalize local journalism as a market good, revealing themselves, in part, as actors seeding entrepreneurial ideologies across the journalism field (Creech & Parks, 2022). This article interrogates the discursive aspects of venture philanthropists' influence, specifically how recent focus on local news has abetted an expansive and flexible notion of innovation that has created a broad space for venture philanthropy organizations within the journalism field. Aside from making grants, these organizations also produce significant discourse about journalism, laden with assumptions about what the future of news should be. By leveraging financial and discursive capital around the crisis in local news, these organizations promote their own role as arbiters of change in the industry.

## 2. Literature and Theory

### 2.1. *Venture Philanthropists in the Journalism Field*

As the Berman quote in Section 1 demonstrates, venture philanthropy organizations exercise their influence partially via discourse, much like other institutions seeking to influence the field of journalism (Carlson & Lewis, 2015; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017; Ryfe, 2016). Debates about changes in journalism are often driven by

access to resources, prestige, and influence, areas that are particularly amenable to venture philanthropy's influence (Carlson, 2016). As technology companies have become imbricated in journalism's culture via philanthropy, venture philanthropy projects are often accompanied by discursive framings that conflate challenges to journalism's market value and public value (Creech & Nadler, 2018; Creech & Parks, 2022; Russell & Vos, 2022).

Though there is a robust history of public media relying on philanthropy, philanthropic funders have played an increasing role in shifting norms and practices in journalism over the past decade (Konieczna, 2018), but their role as discursive actors and change agents has remained murky (Konieczna, 2022). To understand the cultural and ideological impact of venture philanthropy, it is important to understand how venture philanthropy operates as a specific kind of giving, often with large sums of money overtly deployed to incentivize news organizations to better respond to market imperatives, usually under the guise of economic sustainability (Creech & Parks, 2022). As in other areas of civic and public life, venture philanthropy in journalism is often pursued with an overt ideological mission to bend public goods to market logics (Moody, 2008). Critics of venture philanthropy see it as a way of asserting the social power of the financial elite to orient civil society toward their own visions (J. Scott, 2009; Williamson, 2018). In the case of journalism, the growth of venture philanthropy also marks the expansion of the tech industry's influence over journalism and public life, largely through acts of beneficence and largesse (Russell & Vos, 2022).

As news organizations have faced myriad crises, the collection of institutions seeking to influence the field of journalism and chart its future has also grown, with philanthropic funding acting as one means of influence available to external actors (Lewis, 2012; Reese, 2020). As others have noted, this influence often circulates through funding networks, where a cohesive vision may emanate from one organization, but begin to cohere into common sense as they are taken up by related organizations (Lowrey, Deavours, & Singleton, 2023). This dynamic is especially visible among the philanthropy-funded projects aimed at supporting local journalism, where funders and regional-scale organizations play an important role in articulating industry-wide shifts to local actors (Lowrey, Macklin, & Usery, 2023). Accounting for the role these organizations play as change agents and financial actors is important, especially when ideals obscure newsroom realities (Ferrucci & Nelson, 2019; M. Scott et al., 2019).

Venture philanthropists exist in the tension between innovation as an ideal and the realities that make the uptake of certain innovations impractical or unrealistic. As critics of innovation note, a focus on technological and market-centric innovations overlooks both cultural change and journalism's role within society at large (Bossio & Nelson, 2021). As the following analysis shows, though, venture philanthropy organizations often deploy an expansive notion of innovation to bolster their authority to describe and dictate how others might respond to change, often echoing an entrepreneurial ideology that has proliferated in the field (Cohen, 2015; Luengo, 2014). Furthermore, philanthropic funding usually reflects prevailing ideological trends and changing understandings about the role of private enterprise and American society (Arnove & Pinede, 2007), and journalism is no exception (Browne, 2010).

## **2.2. Venture Philanthropy in Innovation Discourse**

Much of the discourse around venture philanthropy leverages an ongoing focus on—and ambivalence about—innovation in journalism. Whereas innovation and change at one point connoted economic

possibility through technological development, the language around innovation has become more measured over time but has also continued to firmly diagnose a need for change in journalism's professional cultures (Quandt, 2023). Innovation often acts as a framework for evaluating interventions in organizational structure and professional practice, justifying the presence of a range of new actors in the field (García-Avilés, 2021). As a concept and discursive category, innovation is rhetorically potent in part because of its ambiguity, placing normative value around the need for the journalism industry to intuit economic change as a driving value (Belair-Gagnon & Steinke, 2020).

In practice, innovation is often not as determinative as proponents and critics might suggest. As Singer and Broersma (2020) show, even as news workers and journalism students accept change, the urge to innovate is often synthesized within the bounds of established practice. Innovation discourse is laced through with expectations for how change might be achieved, but because of the documented difficulties in changing journalistic cultures, that change is often tightly focused on the uptake of new technologies, partly because the practical integration of new technologies into news' routines is easier to achieve than cultural change within journalism (Broersma & Singer, 2021). However, the costs of innovation are clear to those who work in the field, as journalists intuit that the kinds of innovations celebrated in the field "would need a new workforce" to take root, "which would come at the expense of the historical knowledge and long-earned professional culture that is fundamental to the industry today" (Ferrucci & Perreault, 2021, p. 1443).

Such is the context venture philanthropy has emerged within, offering interventions into journalism's professional culture in response to a somewhat different set of crises. As Carlson and Lewis (2019, p. 648) note, much of the discourse around change in journalism creates explicit space for new actors in the field, at times shielding them from critique or deeper inquiry. A superficial focus on change may push researchers and commentators alike to "unknowingly mirror the cycles of optimism and future-orientation" found among innovation's most ardent advocates. Still, change, especially in response to crisis, possesses a normative urgency upstart actors like venture philanthropists might use to justify their growing place in the field.

### **2.3. Crises in Local News**

In recent years, academic and foundation-funded researchers have dedicated ample resources to producing knowledge about the state of local news and its potential futures, concluding that large swaths of the US are now news deserts left underserved by contraction in the news industry (Abernathy, 2023). The notion that many communities lack robust local coverage is a powerful one, animating much research into the consequences of local news' decline and setting an agenda for a better understanding of the practices and funding that might fill the void (Finneman et al., 2022; Mathews, 2022). As this research clarifies the problems facing local news, it offers a substantive point of intervention for organizations outside of journalism to engage with (Forman, 2021; Hendrickson, 2019).

At the same time, the local news crisis also provides a locus for normative discourses about journalism and its role in community life to circulate, discourses that often do not fully acknowledge an implicit idealism in much of the writing and thinking about local news (Usher, 2023). As Pickard (2019) argues, various crises of local news are symptomatic of a broader market failure, and while focused interventions are welcome and useful in a variety of contexts, they do not have the capacity to address significant, systemic problems. And yet, such is the nature of the crisis in the field of journalism—it crystallizes attention by framing a complex

array of interrelated problems as embodied in a particular flashpoint that lends ideological credence to actors proposing solutions (Zelizer, 2015).

This is not to say that the well-substantiated problems facing local news are not as severe as others have documented. However, the urgency, reality, and complexity of these crises invite various actors to define how news leaders and outside organizations alike should respond. The act of defining problems in the field is ultimately an embodiment of discursive power, especially as ideas about the local news crisis and its potential solutions mobilize human, technical, and financial resources (Carlson, 2016). Looking at how venture philanthropy organizations define and respond to crises in local news offers a means for understanding how they wield their nascent influence in the field.

### 3. Methodology

To understand the values and ideology that circulate via venture philanthropic framings of crises in local news, this project traced the metajournalistic discourse (Carlson, 2016) evident in texts produced by venture philanthropy organizations themselves. Projects overtly connected to Silicon Valley companies, like the Google News Initiative and the Meta Journalism Project, often act alongside intermediaries like the Knight Foundation and American Journalism Project to produce discursive material that coheres into a field of knowledge about local news and serves as analog for institutions' power to shape ideas around a field (Schmidt, 2008). This article uses the tools of critical discourse analysis to understand how venture philanthropists justify their space in the journalism field by identifying where and how they might direct outside capital to intervene in journalism's myriad crises. This material evidences a strain of metajournalistic discourse that emanates from actors outside the field and offers a lens into their strategic uses of discourse (Buozis, 2023), revealing the logics and values that grant external institutions legitimacy (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017).

This specific analysis is based on a corpus of 112 documents gathered from the Meta Journalism Project and Google News Initiative, as well as recipients of their local journalism-focused funding, mainly the American Journalism Project, the Knight Foundation, and The Lenfest Institute for Journalism. Each of these organizations was selected as a site of analysis because they have explicitly identified themselves as either venture philanthropy organizations or sympathetic to the goals of venture philanthropy. Organization websites and communication materials were searched using the keywords "local news," "philanthropy," "local journalism," "local journalist," and "local publisher." The collection focused on materials produced between 2018 and 2022 but also incorporated relevant materials from outside this time frame. Organization websites were also searched for reference to other communication and marketing outlets operated by these organizations, such as blogs hosted on Medium.com, which were also searched. Recent archives of press releases and marketing materials were then examined in order to find local journalism and philanthropy-focused texts that may have escaped the search terms. Texts were saved as time and date-stamped PDF files once they were encountered in order to mitigate changing and updated websites.

The materials gathered included research reports, press releases and marketing materials, case studies, recaps of events, and workshops hosted by venture philanthropy organizations, as well as practical advice codified in how-to and instructional guides. Shorter materials of less than 400 words were discarded. These materials were then supplemented with interviews with key staff and executives from these organizations published in

venues like the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, *The New York Times*, and *The Columbia Journalism Review*. Materials were read in-depth and multiple times, in accordance with Stuart Hall's (1975) long preliminary soak, which, as Steiner (2016) has noted, may connote a listless engagement, but requires the researcher to systematically come to know a corpus "in order to decipher the patterns of ideological thinking" evident in the materials (Hall, 2016, p. 131).

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1. Venture Philanthropy as the Solution to a Local News Crisis

Venture philanthropists' ability to define local news as a problem that capital can intervene in is foundational to a discursive strategy intended to claim space for these actors in the journalistic field. For instance, after the American Journalism Project's founding in 2019, cofounder and Texas Tribune CEO John Thornton starkly articulated why local news organizations would not find the financial success of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* had found by pursuing a national audience: "The market has failed at the local-level....And market failure just is a fancy way of saying that the market won't produce as much as we need as a society" (Waller & Folkenflick, 2020, para. 3).

Market failure offers an interesting framing in this case because it defines a role for venture philanthropy to play as solicitors and distributors of capital that otherwise would not be interested in local news. Thornton makes such an impetus explicit when analogizing venture philanthropy and venture capital:

If you think about a venture capital firm that every two or three years goes out and raises a new fund to invest in promising new startups, it's not unlike what we're attempting to do here. We have raised \$46 million in commitments from foundations and a couple very generous and wealthy individuals. And the idea is that will take that \$46 million and invest it in 20 or so...mission-driven organizations. (as quoted in Waller & Folkenflick, 2020, para 5)

This framing, setting up a demand for a market-friendly actor who is also cognizant of local news' mission and culture, carries through much of the discourse, forwarding venture philanthropy organizations as unique in their ability to match financial resources with deserving organizations because they can translate market value to journalism's public value. Venture philanthropy's increasing prominence in the field is justified not only by access to capital but also by the ability to direct that capital with a judgment informed by journalism's public mission and awareness of its crises.

Garnering significant attention in 2019 for securing large gifts from the Meta Journalism Project and the Knight Foundation (Daniels, 2019), the American Journalism Project claims this scale of investment allows it to credibly engage in the work of "reimagining [journalism's] future by building a model to finance and sustain the local news our democracy requires" (American Journalism Project, 2022, p. 1). Though the language is vague on its surface, its logic is evident in the syntax, explicitly connecting "finance" to "the local news our democracy requires," foregrounding an awareness of the economic conditions that underpin journalism's public mission. Such logic is most apparent when the organization focuses directly on revenue strategy, espousing a mix of national donor outreach, subscriptions, and local philanthropy as necessary to meet the ideals of growth and sustainability. The American Journalism Project (2022, p. 7) *Impact Report* articulates economic growth as a

criterion of success: “American Journalism Project grantees grow by an average of 67 percent in the first year of their grant, and are on the path to double their revenue by the third year.” In this framing, revenue growth acts as *prima facie* evidence of venture philanthropy’s success, specifically an ability to build revenue where market failure had been otherwise assumed, though, as Usher (2021) has observed, much of this funding tends to come from and support already affluent communities. Still, the framing is telling because concepts like growth and sustainability are invoked as self-evidently good as if the ability to generate revenue is a necessary condition for resolving local journalism’s crisis.

Much of the ambiguous foregrounding of financial success as both a goal in its own right and a marker of mission service partially extends from the role organizations play as knowledge producers, foregrounding their own market research in order to bolster their credibility as stewards of philanthropic capital. Again, consider the following passage from the American Journalism Project’s (2022, p. 11) *Impact Report*:

We have studied the local information ecosystem with our partners in four regions to understand the health and trajectory of existing information sources and the extent to which they are collectively serving residents’ needs. We examine local information gaps and news needs from the ground up, pairing quantitative analysis of the existing landscape with a community listening program. We hire and train community ambassadors to conduct interviews and host focus groups, and leverage multilingual surveys and SMS outreach to reach a broad range of communities—especially those historically underrepresented in the news media.

This methodology bridges sophisticated data analysis and knowledge gleaned from interviewing underserved communities, a methodology that situates the American Journalism Project as a knowledge source, granting the “we” in the previous passage the weight of epistemic authority.

It is a claim to authority that is often implicit in other projects. Take, for instance, the words from the Knight Foundation’s Jennifer Preston, speaking about the potential impact a \$4.8 million gift from Meta stewarded by the Knight Foundation might have: “Bringing together major news organizations and experts in technology, journalism and other areas, [the gift] recognizes the importance of a concerted, strategic effort to address the challenges that local news organizations are facing in the digital age” (Knight Foundation, n.d., para. 4). Acting as a convener, in this case, lends Preston the credibility to speculate on what the impact of the money might be: “This next phase will help to create a model for the digital transformation of news organizations that can be shared across the country, helping local journalists better connect with their audiences and develop new innovations in storytelling” (Knight Foundation, 2017, para. 4).

Venture philanthropy leaders also produce knowledge and arguments about the state of the broader field that justify their place in it. Writing in the pages of the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* in the wake of an October 2022 announcement that Gannett would implement new cost-cutting measures impacting staff salaries and retirement benefits, Berman (2022, para. 2) presents non-profit and philanthropy-funded journalism as a viable alternative for journalism’s future:

The signs of peril for local news have become so frequent that they are barely, well, newsworthy. But the demise of local news is by no means inevitable....Powered by foundations and individual donors, promising examples of nonprofit news organizations across the country are showing how to turn the tide on what was widely viewed as a dying business.

Detailing the success of projects connected to venture philanthropy funds, Berman (2022) offers an argument for how future donors might rely on organizations like the American Journalism Project as an alternative to hedge funds and private ownership, and in so doing, argues for venture philanthropy as a model for journalism's future that continues to intuit the whims of the market, but also offers a means for guarding against its excesses.

By justifying venture philanthropy as a way of navigating market forces, these examples also demonstrate a common discursive tactic that defines local journalism's main obstacles in terms of resources while highlighting venture philanthropy organizations' unique expertise in marshaling those resources, usually under the ambiguous concept of financial sustainability. The ambiguity here is key because it presents sustainability as a normative goal that invites a range of strategies across the discourse: encouraging digital innovation, better understanding and meeting community information needs, or cultivating relationships with local donors that traditionally have not invested in the news. Venture philanthropy presents itself as a path to sustainability by foregrounding the knowledge certain organization leaders claim to have gained through experience. Consider the words of American Journalism Project cofounder and Chalkbeat CEO Elizabeth Green (2019, para. 7):

I know from my own experience building Chalkbeat—now one of the fastest-growing local news organizations in the country, with a team of more than 50—that what is most needed is not one-year grants to support individual reporting projects...what is most needed is investment in organizations' capacity to sustain themselves, and to grow.

Sustainability, then, is not only a financial goal, but a cultural value that connotes an orientation toward the market as implicit in the kinds of decisions successful organizations make. As venture philanthropists frame local news as worthy of donor attention, they point to their own success as stewards of philanthropic resources to argue that they possess the market savvy to achieve sustainability and thus justify their ability to help other organizations compromise with the realities of the market in order to meet their public mission. This echoes a longstanding tension in American journalism—the reliance on the market to deliver journalism's public value—with venture philanthropists overtly invoking their success in generating revenue as justifying their role in helping other organizations resolve this tension (Baker, 1994).

#### **4.2. *Gathering and Sharing Practical Knowledge***

Venture philanthropists' credibility as savvy market actors is partly sustained by the role they play in disseminating practical knowledge to the field. Largely, this knowledge centers on integrating new technical capabilities into the practices and operations of local news organizations. As Simon (2022) argues, journalism organizations have become increasingly beholden to platform companies as digital tools have become more deeply imbricated in journalistic practice, and tech industry-affiliated venture philanthropy builds upon this dependency (Usher, 2020). A significant number of materials in the corpus offer training and mastery over technologies designed or owned by Google and Meta, and several documents promise techniques that help improve news products in ways that entice new readers and offer insights into better navigating digital ad networks and potential subscribers using Google and Meta -owned properties (Galfi, 2020; Meta Journalism Project, 2020a, 2020b). Much of the material reflects findings from grant recipients, whose experience is framed as emblematic of the kinds of innovative change local news organizations

should pursue. Consider a case study from South Carolina's *Post and Courier*, a 2020 and 2021 Google News Initiative grantee that used Google Analytics to better understand the market potential of paid newsletters focused on sports and dining. *Post and Courier* newsletter Editor Sam Hunter recounted his experience in a tone accessible to other regional and local editors:

We've been able to create robust revenue growth without a huge amount of lift. It was helpful to have data tracking from the start and to test different things. As a newspaper, the question was, "Would we have the audience for paid newsletter subscriptions?" And it certainly appears like we do. (Google News Initiative, n.d., para. 8)

The tools here are consumer-grade, but their uptake is typical of the kind of innovation around business thinking encouraged among grantees. For example, when New Orleans' Jambalaya News Initiative launched a Spanish-language news service, they relied on the Google Voice phone service to distribute Spanish-language news alerts via SMS to an audience reliant on cell phones. A video highlighting the project focuses on many of the low-tech strategies the staff used to build an audience: tabling in community spaces and sharing word of the service in face-to-face interactions (Google News Initiative, 2021). It's an example of shifting practices around the capacities of easy-to-use tools, in the process making Google's presence in the news product imperceptible. By offering practical advice for integrating technical innovations into editorial and business operations, venture philanthropy organizations act as mediators of emerging knowledge in the field. Best practice guides, YouTube video tutorials, case studies, and archived presentations from donor-funded conferences all act as ongoing resources that demonstrate the simplicity of adopting strategies developed by grantees and the diversity of approaches that exist in nearly every aspect of a news organization.

While it is tempting to see tech companies as further entrenching themselves in the news industry through practical knowledge that tells news organizations how to best utilize their tools, the provision of practical knowledge has a much broader consequence. For instance, The Lenfest Institute offers a collection of resources focused on non-profit newsroom management, membership development, and digital subscription strategy alongside guides on technology and innovation (The Lenfest Institute for Journalism, n.d.-a). The quality and currency of these materials notwithstanding, they demonstrate the role venture philanthropy organizations play in aggregating and gatekeeping emergent practical and business knowledge, granting structure to what might become the field's common sense. Unlike the Google News Initiative or Meta Journalism Project, this is not a case of an organization offering advice on how to use technologies owned by the main benefactor. Instead, the provision of practical knowledge, usually offered as insightful business advice, buttresses the prominence of organizations like Lenfest as sources others should turn to for expertise. Expertise, presented in this way, operates as a discursive value that deepens organizations' authority precisely because it demonstrates the value of the knowledge these organizations possess in an almost self-evident way, echoing much of what Silicon Valley leaders have said about journalism more generally (Russell, 2019).

Venture philanthropy organizations organize workshops, produce best practice guides, highlight specific initiatives at grantee organizations, and circulate insights through a variety of industry-facing venues, from the Online News Association to *The Columbia Journalism Review*, to various future of journalism conferences (Friedlich, 2023; Knight Foundation, 2023; Renner, 2017). Taken together, these materials represent the

agenda-setting power of venture philanthropy organizations, specifically their ability to draw attention to which trends and tools provide the most potential value to news organizations, as well as which grantees would benefit from future donations and philanthropic investments. Though at times mundane and somewhat insular, the provision of this knowledge as innovative and practical, often sourced from a broad community of philanthropist-affiliated news practitioners and distributed within that community cement venture philanthropy organizations' role as both knowledge and resource distributors within the ecology of non-profit news organizations, making clear the venture philanthropists' assertion that their core value comes from their ability to know how donor money might be most effectively spent.

### **4.3. *Between Public Value and Market Value***

Perhaps what is most striking in the corpus is the way publicly-oriented visions of journalism's future are often explicitly connected to the pursuit of revenue. This dynamic is most obvious in a statement Thornton and Green (n.d., para. 2) made upon the American Journalism Project's launch in 2019:

We founded [American Journalism Project] based on three interlocking beliefs: Democracy and journalism are interdependent. Local journalism is a public good that market forces won't adequately supply. This market failure is a problem that we the people—not our government, and not our commerce—must solve.

This invocation of market failure articulates a specific space within the journalistic field for venture philanthropy to occupy, and allows these organizations to move with discursive ambiguity between more overtly market-oriented framings and the language of public mission. This discursive ambiguity is key to venture philanthropy's role in bringing non-profit journalism in line with a broader entrepreneurial ideology in the field (Cohen, 2015). Often, by invoking a nascent, underserved need that can be potentially filled by local journalism's most innovative organizations and individuals, venture philanthropists evidence their own value by showing where philanthropic dollars might have the most impact:

Local news coverage on topics of civic interest is a public good: vital to informed decision-making in a democracy, but no longer supported by the private market. Plenty of journalists are ready to take on this challenge by developing creative new business models in the public interest. What's been missing is the philanthropic capital to truly support them. (American Journalism Project, 2019, para. 6)

Articulations that bridge profitability and public mission have long been a part of American journalism (Baldasty, 1992; Benson, 2018), but when applied to the philanthropic sphere, it expands the scope of what might fall under the rubric of innovation, linking business innovation and technological change to public mission.

The productive ambiguity here is most explicit when discussing the ideal personnel and organizational cultures that venture philanthropy firms would seek to support. Take, for instance, Green's (2019, para. 6) description of personnel needs within local journalism:

We need expert teams whose sole focus is raising diverse revenue for news. We need product and technology talent to keep our work as high-impact as possible. We need strategic leadership and

operational capacity to turn newsrooms with modest footprints into scaled institutions. And we need the real dollars required to build truly diverse teams of journalists, serving diverse readers, with diverse leadership, founding teams, and governing bodies.

Though aimed at non-profit newsrooms seeking to make themselves most attractive to funders, the passage reads in many ways like a clarion call for refining business and organizational operations toward market efficiency. Furthermore, the overt invocation of diversity and equity is a welcome development, and not always typical in discussions about the future of journalism, but in linking diversity to both business development and technological development, the passage subsumes a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion to developing and capitalizing upon audience demand. Implicit in this appeal is the need to make an organization attractive to a wide range of philanthropic dollars by preserving certain markers of successful business culture as indicative of the kinds of organizations donors should want to invest in.

Within this discourse, notions of market value are capacious enough to subsume other public values. This logic became explicit in the wake of 2020's George Floyd protests and broader scrutiny of racial inequity across American journalism. Though funders supported and promoted diversity and equity efforts prior to Floyd's murder, the corpus shows a marked increase in materials highlighting organizations that found ways to make issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion appealing as an audience and product development strategy. Take, for instance, a Meta Journalism Project press release highlighting the ways the organization Anti-Racism Daily used Instagram to garner 100,000 subscribers throughout 2020. Editor-in-chief Nicole Cardoza highlighted Instagram's functionality in building her readership, noting that "Instagram is where we start the conversation," but also useful in driving audiences to a newsletter focused on ways "to enact real change," demonstrating that "Instagram is where the back-and-forth happens" (Meta Journalism Project, 2020c, para. 8). Because Instagram's functionality can "enable people to respond, share their own stories, offer additional resources, share how the work plays out in their own community," it is a tool folded into Anti-Racist Daily's editorial work, highlighting the utility of a Meta-owned property in meeting the organization's mission (Meta Journalism Project, 2020c, para. 6).

Much of this work demonstrates a facility in synthesizing a legitimate critique of journalism into an audience strategy driven by both mission and market opportunity. Materials produced by venture philanthropy organizations offered an important platform for publications focused on underserved audiences to critique longstanding journalistic practices, as is the case of Memphis-based MLK50 publisher Wendi Thomas, speaking on a panel supported by the Meta Journalism Project:

I think some of the pushback that people in legacy newsrooms may get is "we're not choosing sides, we want be objective," which...means hetero cis white male perspective. But when you have five people at a Grizzlies game...and you have one person in all of the community covering K-12 education, you are saying what matters. (Meta Journalism Project, 2021, para. 3)

And yet, this perspective is granted a platform precisely because broad-scale reckonings around race and journalism evidenced an unmet audience demand.

Foregrounding equity and diversity, as well as progressive change in journalistic cultures is a laudable and urgent goal, but in defining it as a mission and business goal, venture philanthropy organizations further

bolster their authority to guide the direction of journalism's financial future by intervening in its culture in a way that is responsive to critics. Consider the following from The Lenfest Institute for Journalism (n.d.-b): "As publishers think about reaching younger and more diverse audiences, their internal cultures, editorial output, and fundraising messaging need to truly reflect their communities" (para. 3). The link between revenue and mission is explicit: "In order to successfully create diverse and equitable fundraising strategies, news organizations must first build diverse and equitable teams and cultures" (para. 4). What is reflected in these examples, and worth considering in the conclusion, are venture philanthropy organizations' broad authority to frame changes in journalism and direct how resources flow in response to those changes. As attention among funders has shifted, critics like Meredith Clark in the following quote from *Nieman Lab*, have reconsidered the flurry of philanthropic attention diversity, equity, and inclusion work has received in recent years, drawing attention to a common dynamic around philanthropic funding in the field:

Really well-meaning people with access to social structures and access to capital are jumping in and wanting to get involved, but they're not addressing some of the root causes that got us here in the first place....Instead, they're building out infrastructures that allow the money to move from one place to another—but as it goes through that movement, it gets siphoned off. (Tameez, 2023, para. 7)

The critique reveals an aspect of venture philanthropy rhetoric that often goes unacknowledged, namely, that many of the normative assertions about what practices, organizations, and values might bring non-profit journalism toward a financially viable future obscure attention to how these projects are actually working, and whether or not venture philanthropists are acting as fair arbiters of resources.

Still, the ambiguous blending of financial concerns and public mission remains a powerful discursive framing precisely because it establishes business innovation as a flexible criterion for evaluating journalism's future. Consider the following statement on how to best support local news from The Lenfest Institute for Journalism CEO Jim Friedlich (n.d., paras. 4–7):

We need to marshal both commercial and philanthropic forces if we are to have any prayer of rebuilding local news at scale. Non-profit news media is, at least at the moment, far too small to adequately solve the problems of local news. It is a promising toddler, maybe this year a gangly teenager. It needs to grow meaningfully in both revenue and business sophistication....Conversely, in order to survive and to thrive, for-profit news media must do a much better job reinventing itself—its products, its customer value, and its community values. In a way, non-profit news needs to become much more commercial, and for-profit news much more audience-centric and mission-based.

This passage typifies a logic at the core of venture philanthropy, that blending commercial and non-profit cultures is the path to meeting journalism's future. Still, how to blend these cultures remains varied and elusive, but the hope that it can be done contributes to a discourse where advice for "healing polarized communities" persists alongside "creating generative relationships with major donors" (The Lenfest Institute for Journalism, 2023; Zamora, n.d.). These framings bolster venture philanthropy's authority to set the terms for understanding just which future for journalism is worth directing resources to at any given moment in time.

## 5. Conclusion

As illustrated in Section 1, much of the focus of venture philanthropy starts from the assumption that inevitable technological change will disrupt local journalism in financially ruinous ways unless organizations innovate and adapt. It is important, though, to note that organizational innovation focused on financial sustainability is not the only possible response to market failure. On the one hand, arguments for increased public and government support of local journalism abound, relying on market failure as an impetus for public policy to intervene (Pickard, 2020). Venture philanthropists offer a discursively powerful alternative to public funding by arguing that a broad range of non-commercial revenue sources exist and that news organizations can develop a revenue strategy that makes them more appealing to market-minded funders. Given that an increasingly large share of philanthropic capital flows through venture philanthropy organizations, much of the discourse works to bolster the credibility with which they manage and build a funding infrastructure around journalism.

Venture philanthropy organizations' focus on innovation is subtle and capacious, capturing an orientation between market and mission that can account for changing conditions and critiques of journalism, subsuming response to those critiques as one of the privileges their control over capital affords. Over time, as venture philanthropy's funding infrastructures around journalism become more implicit, its ideological commitments and interventions in journalistic cultures have become increasingly nuanced and flexible. While these organizations rarely argue for complete public funding even as they invoke market failure, they do forward a reinvention of journalistic culture as necessary for generating revenue because it comports with donors' expectations of what a sustainable news organization should be in an increasingly precarious news economy. Thus, venture philanthropy organizations recursively justify their own presence in the field as stewards of tech industry largesse, declaring which problems, innovative practices, and changing values are worthy of the capital and attention these organizations muster.

## Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Perry Parks at Michigan State University and Andrea Lorenz at Kent State University for their input on this direction of research, as well as the reviewers and editors of the thematic issue for their insightful comments on prior drafts of this article.

## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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