SSOAR
Open Access Repository
www.ssoar.info

# Journalistic "Innovation" Is Hard to Hate, but Actual Change Is Just Hard

Singer, Jane B.

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

**Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:**
Singer, J. B. (2024). Journalistic "Innovation" Is Hard to Hate, but Actual Change Is Just Hard. *Media and Communication*, *12*. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.7459

**Nutzungsbedingungen:**
*Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:*
*https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de*

**Terms of use:**
*This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more Information see:*
*https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0*

gesis
Leibniz-Institut
für Sozialwissenschaften

Mitglied der
Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

**Media and Communication**
2024 • Volume 12 • Commentary 7459
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.7459

cogitatio

COMMENTARY

Open Access Journal

# Journalistic "Innovation" Is Hard to Hate, but Actual Change Is Just Hard

**Jane B. Singer**

Department of Journalism, City, University of London, UK

**Correspondence:** Jane B. Singer (jane.singer.1@city.ac.uk)

**Submitted:** 31 July 2023 **Accepted:** 22 August 2023 **Published:** 29 February 2024

**Issue:** This commentary 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

## Abstract

Who is opposed to "innovation"? For most newsroom publishers, managers, editors, and reporters, the word connotes progress; it implies a strategy for achieving success—and dodging failure. But innovation inescapably entails change: Doing and thinking about things differently means giving up the old as well as embracing the new. This commentary recaps journalists' response over 30 years of digital news. It suggests that calls for change meet with initial resistance, typically on normative grounds; only over time do practitioners normalise the innovation, incorporating it into their perceptions and routines.

## Keywords

change; digital news; innovation; journalism ethics; normalisation

## 1. Introduction

The word "innovation" is weighted with "the promise and expectation that new technologies, actors and practices might finally be the solution to the problems that have beset contemporary journalism" (Bossio & Nelson, 2021, p. 1377). But the walk is far harder than the talk, and habits are stubbornly resistant to change.

This commentary traces journalists' response to digital innovation over three decades. It is a tale of repeated initial resistance followed by gradual normalisation. The result, changes that have been small and incremental, has contributed to a "winner take most" (Newman et al., 2023) media ecology, with a few high-quality outlets attracting audiences while much larger numbers continue to struggle. Every year, some in the latter group lose the battle for survival, while the winners enjoy the wherewithal to further strengthen their position by

© 2024 by the author(s), licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

exploring ways to capitalise on the next new tool or trend. Their stamina, resources, and boardroom support combine to propel them through the slow fits-and-starts process of technological evolution.

## 2. Three Decades of Change and Resistance

Although individual reactions certainly vary, journalists as an occupational group have responded with remarkable consistency at each step along a 30-year-long digital path. They have professed themselves open to successive aspects of innovation, framing it as essential to professional survival at both individual and industry levels. At the same time, they have expressed fear of the unknown and resisted attempts to implement it, typically flourishing a badge of journalistic honour by citing ethical pitfalls and the encroachment on time better spent on more highly valued aspects of story development and production (Singer, 2004). Yet despite the protestations, the innovation eventually becomes part of the newsroom landscape. By the how-did-we-ever-live-without-this stage, the next innovation has arrived, and journalistic heels are freshly dug in.

When web browsers emerged from the lab in the mid-1990s, making "the internet" accessible beyond its small circles of early users, most journalists regarded it with mild curiosity—and a conviction that it would not substantively change their working lives. As a newspaper editor confidently told me in 1995: "The presentation might be different, and that's all" (Singer, 1997, p. 79). Even so, doing "different" work inevitably "drains more energies, personnel, resources from our historical product," said a colleague, while others worried about pressures to update information quickly: "The old adage was, you know, 'Get it first, but first, get it right.' Well, now it's just 'get it first'" (Singer, 1997, p. 82).

But change was indeed gonna come for journalists. The early 2000s brought "multimedia journalism," a term encompassing diverse formats and the ways in which newsrooms were reconfigured to produce as many of them as possible (Deuze, 2004). Print reporters were especially sceptical about "converged" newsrooms, intended to facilitate the production of content suitable for textual, visual, and digital dissemination. TV journalism, said one, is "abhorrent, a sub-species," explaining: "I went to j-school to be a journalist, not to be a multimedia person, not to be a TV person, not to multitask" (Singer, 2004, p. 846) Although some journalists felt convergence enabled them to better serve a public that was increasingly diversifying its news diet, others cited normative concerns about accuracy, potential pressure to create sensationalised content, and uncomfortable encroachment on editorial independence from advertising and marketing interests (Singer, 2006).

Blogs were another innovation of the period, heralding the ability of news consumers not only to produce their own original content but also to publish it alongside—or, often, in counterpoint to—the work of journalists. Unlike "multimedia," this challenge was existential: If bloggers can be reporters, editors, and publishers all in one, who then is a journalist (Knight et al., 2008)? Journalists again evoked normative principles, especially related to independence and verification practices, in defending their turf. Blogs "publish because they hear 'something' from 'someone' who is 'reliable.' Sorry, not good enough," said one *Chicago Tribune* editor (Youngman, 2004, as cited in Carlson, 2007, p. 274).

Blogs were merely the first wave of what soon became a deluge of "user-generated content." Some was in the form of comments appended to stories, which met with considerable newsroom opprobrium. The value

of such input from audience members was described as "disproportionate to the excessive amount of management time which is taken up with trying to ensure it is accurate, balanced, honest, fair and—most importantly—legally safe to publish" (Singer, 2010, p. 134). The greater impact, however, came from the blog's mini-me: micro-blogging platforms. While some journalists quickly embraced these new "social media," moulding their traditional norms to its affordances, others again resisted. Political journalists, for instance, declared Twitter time-consuming, distracting, and liable to create a distorting echo chamber effect (Parmelee, 2013). Sports journalists protested that "journalism is about facts, not quick hits and rumors" and that Twitter made it "impossible to put stories in larger context" (Schultz & Sheffer, 2010, p. 236).

Within a very few years, however, journalists were posting to Twitter routinely, if not always happily. They cited pressure from managers to produce content for social platforms—aka "writing a very superficial story that doesn't provide the right context" (Chadha & Wells, 2016, p. 1026). They also continued to express concerns related to verification, accountability, and editorial decisions driven by speed and assessments of online popularity, "which does not necessarily equate to good journalism" (García-Avilés, 2014, p. 264).

Multiple permutations of social media later, researchers continue to hear a familiar refrain. Photojournalists, for instance, worry about ethical boundaries around the use of editing tools common to social platforms: "It's hard to know where that line exists," one explained, "because Instagram wasn't established as journalism"; another cautioned that "journalists do a disservice to their own profession by sacrificing the truth for the sake of trying to be interesting" (Ferrucci & Taylor, 2019, pp. 2174–2175). Early work on journalists' use of TikTok suggests they connect it to marketing goals, citing its ability to reach and engage young audiences and its utility for individual and institutional brand extension (Negreira-Rey et al., 2022). Social media editors, however, have sought to distinguish between working *with* marketing teams and working *for* them: A good social media manager should be "a professional journalist. Someone who is a journalist at heart," an editor explained. "Our Facebook page is still a journalistic product and not marketing" (Opgenhaffen & Hendrickx, 2023).

## 3. Which Way to the Future?

None of this is to deny that some journalists have embraced innovation expeditiously and enthusiastically. Many may have felt, not without reason, that economic or management imperatives left them little choice. Nonetheless, had journalists not changed their practices, the road to normalisation would have been longer and more winding.

My point is instead to highlight a pattern. Sizable numbers of practitioners greet novel tools and capabilities with resistance on normative grounds: This new thing is a challenge to what we do and why we do it, rooted in a fiercely defended self-perception as ethical gatekeepers of information. Yet over time, it is incorporated into newsroom routines, eventually becoming integral to newswork. Innovations of the past are embedded in the journalistic work of the present.

Are the repeated protestations along the way merely exasperating, then? The resistance can indeed seem quixotic in hindsight. More broadly, we might hope that for once, journalists would lead change rather than follow it. Embracing innovation earlier rather than later would enable them to shape these emerging technologies rather than, inevitably, be shaped by them.

Yet I think journalistic evocation of normative principles in defence of the status quo actually serves an important purpose: It reminds journalists of what they are fundamentally all about, and why what they do matters to society. Yes, such evocations are largely defensive in nature. But that does not mean they are inherently wrong. Indeed, much of what journalists have said over the years seems, in retrospect, rather prescient about the impact of faster delivery, increased production pressures, the traffic-whoring trivialisation of content, and more. Essentially, what these journalists have been asserting is that what matters most about information is its quality, and that quality does not materialise by technological magic.

As I write, the latest innovation washing over the news industry is artificial intelligence. It is meeting with predictable concerns in journalistic circles, notably about accuracy and the disturbing propensity of generative AI to address gaps in its ability to answer a question by offering plausible but false "hallucinations"—that is, making something up. It is too soon to assess its ultimate impact. But from my vantage point in late 2023, it seems safe to predict that AI will exponentially accelerate the pace of change, as well as the urgency needed to respond to it, in the newsroom and outside it.

And how might journalists best do that? Those relatively successful "winner take most" outlets referenced at the start are pointing the way: By allocating resources to the production (and promotion) of independent, high-quality reporting and writing. By being more concerned with getting it right than with getting it first, verifying information before they publish it, and engaging with audiences in the conversations it fosters. By deploying new tools where they are useful in the service of journalist-led investigations and analyses.

In short, they seem to be betting that securing a future in a world of clever machines depends on being skilful, curious, enterprising humans. I think it is their best strategy. I hope it works.

## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

## References

Bossio, D., & Nelson, J. L. (2021). Reconsidering innovation: Situating and evaluating change in journalism. *Journalism Studies*, *22*(11), 1377–1381.

Carlson, M. (2007). Blogs and journalistic authority: The role of blogs in US election day 2004 coverage. *Journalism Studies*, *8*(2), 264–279.

Chadha, K., & Wells, R. (2016). Journalistic responses to technological innovation in newsrooms: An exploratory study of Twitter use. *Digital Journalism*, *4*(8), 1020–1035.

Deuze, M. (2004). What is multimedia journalism? *Journalism Studies*, *5*(2), 139–152.

Ferrucci, P., & Taylor, R. (2019). Blurred boundaries: Toning ethics in news routines. *Journalism Studies*, *20*(15), 2167–2181.

García-Avilés, J. A. (2014). Online newsrooms as communities of practice: Exploring digital journalists' applied ethics. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, *29*(4), 258–272.

Knight, A., Geuze, C., & Gerlis, A. (2008). Debate: Who is a journalist? *Journalism Studies*, *9*(1), 117–131.

Negreira-Rey, M.-C., Vázquez-Herrero, J., & López-García, X. (2022). Blurring boundaries between journalists and TikTokers: Journalistic role performance on TikTok. *Media and Communication*, *10*(1), 146–156.

Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Eddy, K., Robertson, C. T., & Nielsen, R. K. (2023). *Reuters Institute digital news report 2023*. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Digital_News_Report_2023.pdf

Opgenhaffen, M., & Hendrickx, J. (2023). Social media news editors as journalists or marketeers: Who are they and how do they identify themselves? *Journalism*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849231167282

Parmelee, J. H. (2013). Political journalists and Twitter: Influences on norms and practices. *Journal of Media Practice*, *14*(4), 291–305.

Schultz, B., & Sheffer, M. L. (2010). An exploratory study of how Twitter is affecting sports journalism. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, *3*(2), 226–239.

Singer, J. B. (1997). Still guarding the gate? The newspaper journalist's role in an on-line world. *Convergence*, *3*(1), 72–89.

Singer, J. B. (2004). More than ink-stained wretches: The resocialization of print journalists in converged newsrooms. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *81*(4), 838–856.

Singer, J. B. (2006). Partnerships and public service: Normative issues for journalists in converged newsrooms. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, *21*(1), 30–53.

Singer, J. B. (2010). Quality control: Perceived effects of user-generated content on newsroom norms, values and routines. *Journalism Practice*, *4*(2), 127–142.

## About the Author

Jane B. Singer is professor emerita of journalism innovation at City, University of London. She previously held academic staff posts at the University of Iowa and Colorado State University (US) and served as Johnston Press Chair in Digital Journalism at the University of Central Lancashire (UK). A former print and online journalist, her research has traced the evolution of digital journalism since the mid-1990s, with a focus on journalists' changing roles, perceptions, norms, and practices.