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.

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

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Cover photo: Shutterstock
Based on a series of 24 interviews with media experts, journalists and media managers, the present report discusses the latest trends in innovation in journalism, with a focus on how knowledge and training can help journalists to innovate. The report also touches on how journalists use and consume academic knowledge and how they interact with media experts, as well as on the role played by funders in influencing how journalists think about innovation.

A list of knowledge and training needs, sources of information and potential areas where academics and media researchers can support journalists have been collected as part of this research.

The report concludes with four recommendations to boost innovation in journalism that are focused on:

a). creating specific resources (knowledge and expertise) specifically targeted to journalists with less (or no) access to tools, networks and learning opportunities

b). carrying out more systematic research on failures in journalism as a method to increase the rate of journalism enterprise success

c). creating audience-centric research tools to identify innovation in journalism better suited to the current stage of technological development

d). funding locally sourced innovation projects.
PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

Recent research has shown that an obsessive pursuit of technology-led innovation is detrimental to journalism and journalists, and that a more sustainable, technology-empowered and audience-driven approach to innovation should be nurtured instead. In this report, we argue, based on expertise gathered from two dozen experts from all over the world, that, besides technology-based innovation, changes in journalistic practices only have impact if they are anchored in the needs of the audience and take into account the local context.

The research used in this report was meant to inform the Journalism Breakthroughs project led by the Center for Media, Data and Society (CMDS) whose purpose is to collect data and information about innovation in journalism and disseminate this expertise among professionals who need such knowledge in their work. To ensure that we cover topics and experiences that are relevant for the journalism field, we set out to map the needs of our target audience, primarily journalists and media practitioners, but also researchers and policymakers, particularly from countries underserved by research and information on innovation.

We interviewed a total of 24 journalists, editors, media experts, and media managers internationally to find out what their interests concerning innovation in the media industry and journalism are. Our specific focus in these interviews was innovation in a). funding; b). operations; c). content; and d). journalistic tools. Our questions focused on how media practitioners have been innovating thus far and how they imagine doing it in the future.

The working definition of innovation we used is the following: the process of change centered around adopting new tools, financing or operational models aimed at improving the overall performance of a media organization. The focus is not solely on novelty, but also on improvement, which allows us to survey a range of tactics, tools and ideas, some new, some tried and tested. Innovation, in this understanding, also includes new forms of organization and cooperation. In the face of hardships brought by the pandemic, innovation also meant finding new ways to survive as a profession within an ecosystem.

Our interviewees come from all over the world, including countries from Asia, Africa, the Americas, Europe and the Middle East. They work for small and medium-size media organizations (of between five and 40 employees), universities, media centers and international journalism networks. Interviews were conducted over the course of three months, from December 2020 to February 2021, at a time of an extreme crisis triggered by the devastating Covid-19 pandemic. The interviews were structured around questions related to what innovation means; the needs that should be better served in journalism in terms of training and knowledge; what sources of knowledge media practitioners use to inform themselves about their profession; and how research centers such as ours can better serve them (See Annex 1 for the study methodology).
Asking questions about innovation in journalism during a global health crisis will inevitably bring to the forefront the hardships faced by the profession. In June 2020, just three months after the start of the pandemic, CMDS Fellow Kate Coyer said:

"I think one thing that is important to remember is that the crisis in journalism predates this pandemic. All the endemic problems like concentrated media ownership, the pressure on profits, declining newsrooms, declining teams of investigative reporters, the impact of social media, the bifurcated way in which we are receiving information, all that predates this."

Almost one year after the start of the global crisis, the journalists interviewed for this study have all mentioned the difficult conditions under which they are working now. However, most of them have stressed that prior to the crisis they had been facing financial and government pressures, threats of censorship and violence, exile, discrimination and lack of resources, among many other problems.

Innovation in these circumstances has become a necessity. To survive, many media organizations have been pushed into rapid change. The long-term implications of these changes, such as an internalized interest and awareness for innovation, can be positive. One example is the case of a news organization that was forced into exile after conditions at home deteriorated to the point that it became dangerous to continue practicing their profession. Once settled abroad, the organization created a position of Chief Innovator Officer whose job is to follow the latest developments in technology, journalistic tools, content and storytelling, and to assess how useful they would be for their team to embrace, a development that helped the outlet.

A problematic aspect related to pursuing innovation is the lack of innovation-focused strategies in media organizations, which can be the result of lack of human resources and expertise in implementing innovative changes, but also of the dominance of Western funding among independent media outlets globally as this dominance brings with it a western-centric understanding of “innovation” that is not always suitable in some countries. Often, journalists working in non-Western regions are forced to apply for funding originating in Western organizations because financing for independent journalism tends to be located there.

The tech companies Google and Facebook are now among the largest funders of journalism in the world, according to the Colombia Journalism Review. Data from the Media Impact Funders, an NGO collecting information about journalism funders, shows a high concentration of private foundations in Western Europe and the US.
The role of these foundations in shaping the independent journalism field is relevant as many young, innovative media organizations rely, for at least part of their budget, on grants awarded by such donors. In 2020 alone, US$ 1bn was spent by large donors on media organizations from around the world.

When they fund journalism, both tech giants and some of the private foundations tend to define innovation as a process of change that is based on technological advancement or that has at least one technology-related component. In other words, in their eyes, innovation without top-notch tech is hardly imaginable. Moreover, in many cases, these groups of funders tend to apply experiences in innovation that were successful in the west, which does not always work in some regions.

An editor working with journalists from the Middle East said:

> Sometimes I feel that we are overwhelming them with these great innovative projects that happen in the West, and in the US, or in Europe, and Western Europe. And this is unapproachable in my region, for many reasons: technical reasons, the skills [we don’t have the skills to do anything]. The key is to be very selective. When I want to share anything with them [the journalists], I try to share something that they know they can copy, they can do, they can at least collaborate with other international partners that can offer them this technology.[1]

Although for many independent or alternative media organization foreign funding is a lifeline, the Western perspective on innovation that these funders bring has been signaled as an issue by respondents working in the Middle East, Africa and South-East Asia as well as two media experts based in the United States.

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1 Quotes in this report have been edited for clarity and length.
A PRICE TAG ON INNOVATION

Innovation models that are imported from regions where financial, technical and human resources are easier to access can be prohibitive in less affluent parts of the world. One contentious issue related to innovation in journalism highlighted by various experts is precisely the cost of innovation in low-income countries.

Some media managers and media experts interviewed for this study have expressed reservations towards high-cost innovations that do not produce revenue. Others see constant change in content, formats and tools as the only way to survive in a hyper-competitive media market. Journalists relying on grants to support part of their work pointed out that the role of funders in setting the agenda for innovation can be unsuitable for the local conditions. There is a tension between the need for independence, which is a must in good journalism, and the tendency to set the agenda existent among funders, even if interference in editorial decisions is far from donors’ intention.

One journalist from Zimbabwe argues that the gap in resources makes importing innovation models from the West difficult:

Innovation requires new skills, tools, techniques and training but due to limited resources it is a challenge. However, they [the journalists] are interested in civic engagement through community partnership and citizen reporting.

Chasing grants risks becoming the logic behind organizational strategies, as one editor pointed out:

Some funders, they’re very impressed with innovative work. And they [the journalists] are just being obsessed with that because they want to get money out of innovation. So, they design a program based on what funders want, and what funders need, not based on what journalists need in the field. So, you end up having copy-paste projects, or even if not copy-paste, projects with the same topic.

In such countries, implementing innovative models requires substantial resources, which would make journalism expensive and financially unsustainable. Niche journalism initiatives and projects using recent technologies, new storytelling techniques and formats are often given as role models by experts from the West, however in societies with insufficient resources it is difficult to sustain such endeavors.

Some media experts argue that high-quality journalism is costly, and an advertising-based business model is not appropriate to foster it. Thus, innovation in content is welcomed as long as the appropriate audience built around a specific funding model is able to sustain it financially. Here in the words of a media scholar and then a media manager, both based in Asia:
Advertisers want volume, and they want volume that doesn’t mind being interrupted.

We are offered training all the time, but we often have to turn it down, because we cannot sacrifice [the time off] a person [from our staff]. Like, oh, we want to do journalism on climate change. But journalism on climate change doesn’t drive subscriptions, that doesn’t drive revenue.

Audiences who are willing to engage with dense content do not want to be interrupted by ads, their consumption practices are exclusive, being more appropriate for media funded through membership and subscription models, which, however, can be prohibitive in low-income countries.

Failing to consider the social and economic environment in which media operate and the context in which innovation happens evacuates the term of any possible meaning. For this reason, it is essential to highlight these aspects of innovation before we continue with drawing the knowledge and training needs our respondents lined up during our interviews.
TRAINING AND KNOWLEDGE: WHAT IS REALLY NEEDED?

Although change and improvement require resources that are often difficult to mobilize, there is high interest in learning and developing, according to most of the interviewees.

The type of training and knowledge needs discussed in the interviews differed by geography, resources and goals of each interviewee. The position in the organization also influences the interviewees’ answers. For example, media managers tend to underline the need for a division of labor in media organizations between journalists and managers, which implicitly means that journalists who become managers need specific skills.

A media expert predicted that a side effect of the pandemic will be the increase in the number of journalists who, because they lost their jobs due to the crisis, might want to start their own organizations:

More journalists will want to start their own micro-organizations, and that’s an interesting trend to pay attention to. This year and next year we’ll see more start-ups and micro-organizations. You’ll see many journalists disillusioned with the advertisement-based approach to media funding, and [who will] probably come up with a different idea on how to do it better.

Overall, there was a consensus among media experts that training focused on funding models, policy and human rights is needed. Fewer journalists agreed with that.

Another common interest among the respondents in our research was around “big issues’ related to journalism such as trust in the media, fostering collaboration within the profession, journalistic ethics, issues related to safety during the pandemic.

Audience engagement is a very popular topic among many journalists, which is to some extent expected given that most journalists interviewed for this project work for small and mid-size organizations. Journalistic tools, including the use of new technologies are popular training topics that were brought up by all the journalists in the group.

An interest in media ecosystems, research on journalism and the state of the profession, including university and vocational training, were mentioned especially by senior editors, managers and media experts.
# Table 1: Respondents’ Knowledge and Training Needs

**Source:** CMDS Research

Methodological note: mentions of the training and knowledge in the interviews were only recorded once, and the table does not weigh the frequency with which the suggestions were made. For example: basic training skills like factual reporting and ethics were mentioned by several interviewees but were only noted once in this table. Hence, this table should be read as a menu rather than a ranking of the most sought-after training needs.
KNOWLEDGE-SHARING AND THE ROLE OF ACADEMIA

A variety of sources of knowledge are used by journalists and media practitioners to inform themselves about the latest trends in their field. Newsletters, conferences, trainings, industry reports are often mentioned along with social media, especially Twitter and LinkedIn. All the journalists in our sample mentioned learning from their peers by working, learning and socializing together. Conferences, summer schools, trainings are an important source of knowledge as much as following examples and practices in other media organizations.

International journalism networks like Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), Gloval Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN) or International Journalists’ Network (IJNet) are often followed by media practitioners. Research outfits such as the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ), the Nieman Lab and the Poynter Institute are also popular. There is a major overrepresentation of American and Western European knowledge centers in our sample of sources, which is not surprising as US and European universities tend to be better funded and staffed, and thus able to publish regularly and without state interference.

The relationship between journalists and these Western sources can be complicated as journalists from less developed countries feel that Western sources do not “speak” to them: they discuss cases or examples of innovation that are not applicable in their region or study media industry trends that are not relevant for them or their region. Journalists from Myanmar, Hungary, Jordan, Zimbabwe and Malaysia said that there is a need for “Reuters-type” or “Nieman-type” centers in their regions: they must be set up locally and staffed with local experts.

*It frustrates me that we don’t have a study saying: here are the transferable lessons we have from Scandinavia. How can we innovate in mobile? Let’s look at how we can innovate in India or Myanmar! Those conversations I just don’t see happening here [in the US]. And I feel like those are huge gaps. The flipside to that is when you do get to meet people. I want to hear about what they are doing, and they want to hear about what’s happening particularly in the US and the UK. And I don’t know how culturally appropriate or applicable that is.*

While all the media practitioners in our group mentioned that they are following local sources as well, few of them could name one. Regional and local expertise was often mentioned in our interviews as a significant need.
Academia can be a valuable resource for journalists. Collaboration with researchers and academics has proven to be a fruitful experience for journalists. CMDS has been experimenting with such a model in the past, when pairing anthropologists and investigative journalists to study environmental damage led to the publication of multimodal pieces, or when research on misinformation was further developed and published by journalists in Romania, Moldova and Hungary. But the differences in methods, timelines, writing styles and sometimes ethical implications make such collaborations difficult and resource consuming.

When it comes to collaboration with academia, journalists tend to be very appreciative of the academic knowledge as expert sources, but out of the 24 people interviewed for this project just one agreed that academics and journalists could work together in more meaningful ways on long-term.

What we are looking at sometimes is how they [researchers] could provide inputs as external contributors or analytical writers, which we publish, from time to time, and on certain thematic issues. Once we have this collaboration in terms of information sharing, our team members are also engaging with them. And this engagement is sometimes one-on-one, in terms of interviews, asking them critical insights on different issues [...] Sometimes, we are using webinars for wider outreach. Then, we have webinars for our own in-house workshops, in which these key-resource people give insights into particular issues to our team members.
Areas of knowledge and training needs where research and policy centers could serve.

Academia is thus a source of good quality research and training, but rarely seen as a "collaboration" partner. There are knowledge needs identified by this study that could be easily covered by academic and research centers such as the need of journalists to specialize in difficult topics (mining, HIV research, policy etc.) or build regional and local knowledge in less served areas, human rights and media policy being just a few examples.

Source: CMDS Research
When the public shows interest in learning about journalistic practices and the media in general, media players tend to innovate more as they want to respond to this interest. Journalists and media managers in our interview sample, whose outlets target younger and more niche publics, said that they regularly publish content on the state of the media, freedom of the press and independent journalism, but also innovation. They include an investigative journalism outlet from Nigeria, a digitally born news site in India, a satire magazine covering the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and a solutions journalism-focused organization from Central Europe.

All other respondents said that, as their public lacks interest in the media as a topic, journalism-related issues are not a priority in their coverage simply because lacking audience, these topics don’t generate revenue. Two interviewees said that a degradation of the status of journalists in society is sometimes responsible for the dearth of interest in the profession. If journalism is perceived in society as a “dirty” profession (where journalists are trying to get information through unethical means or use information to manipulate people), the future generations of journalists are also affected as interest in journalism will decline among university students.

If you want to write about the media and want people to care about it, you have to make journalists central characters. We almost need to create journalistic heroes. We need to think about how we portray journalists in society; politicians attack them as being dishonest, “hired guns”, so they have a low social status in society.

One editor from Central and Eastern Europe and one media expert from Zimbabwe pointed out that journalists rarely write about themselves, but also that they seem not to talk about their profession in exciting ways. To more effectively engage the audience in reading about and getting interested in journalism, media outlets must apply to media-related topics the same techniques, for example storytelling, that they use in covering other “newsworthy” topics.

My argument is always: people are not interested in the topic because we haven’t done it better. We need to improve. We need to write about the media in more interesting ways, and then, they will be interested in it.

But one of the things that we have noticed is that media don’t write about themselves. They don’t advocate for their own issues.

In conclusion, our respondents decry the lack of interest in media topics amongst their readership and are lukewarm to covering media-related topics out of fear of losing revenue. However, they generally agree that there is a need for more attractive media literacy efforts that use, for example, storytelling techniques to inform the public about the role of journalism in society, but that also to make the profession more attractive for future journalists.
The requirements to start a media organization now are considerably lower than they used to be. As one media manager explained, the resources needed to start a media organization are not as restrictive as in the past. As a result, the proliferation of small media organizations leads to a fragmentation of the field:

Before, you needed to have millions of dollars to start a radio or a TV station. Now you can get together three people to start a media company. So, the barriers went down a lot and that has allowed too many people to have a start-up [organization]. And then, you apply for a grant, and you go on for one-two years, and then you have too many companies, too many failures, rather than forcing people to work together and make something larger, to really get proper investment, and have a five-year plan.

The question then is how we can learn from past mistakes and facilitate change that is healthy for media organizations.

Four priority areas have come out of this study:

1). Facilitating knowledge sharing and training opportunities for less served professionals.

Although there is a vast amount of information about innovation available online and offline, only media professionals who have the time, support and language skills to engage in learning have access to it. In contrast, journalists from small towns, lacking foreign language skills or not part of international professional networks have a harder time to access knowledge and training sources. Moreover, their networks usually lack the expertise that is normally readily accessible to journalists from larger urban centers, be that technical expertise or specialists in fields such as international affairs, climate change, foreign trade and others. Political and economic pressures also add to lack of opportunity and of motivation.

Universities, research and advocacy centers, and media NGOs should help fill this gap by creating resources specifically for the groups of journalists less served by information and expertise. That could be achieved in practice through the creation of a network of experts readily available to engage in teaching and learning for their professional community.

2). Create a global media failures map.

Promoting open discussions about failures is a valuable learning experience for journalists looking to start their own media organizations. This is not to argue that promoting success stories is not relevant, but it might create unrealistic expectations if they are the dominant narrative in this professional field. Especially for small and vulnerable newly emerged organizations, learning how others managed failure might better protect them from making mistakes that threaten the survival of their own project.
Hence, donor organizations should engage practice-oriented academic centers and NGOs to systematically map failure in journalism and build a continuously updated body of knowledge and a live database of journalism crashes that can be used by journalists and media managers to avoid mistakes and manage expectations when they create journalism enterprises.

3). Fund locally sourced innovative practices.

A recommendation addressed largely to funders is to focus their financing on locally relevant innovation as a key priority. Engaging journalists, media experts and researchers in proposing directions for funding for specific regions is essential in unearthing innovative ideas and projects in parts of the world and from media outlets that are totally left out of the global journalism networks funded and maintained by philanthropies.

There is a major knowledge gap about this fresh source of journalism that can be filled through a series of newly designed, locally targeted scoping studies that can be built from the bottom up, involving local journalists and media experts as the main source of the funding strategy.

4). Build a new, audience-centric, media ecology mapping tool.

The media sector has undergone massive changes in the past two decades, becoming increasingly fragmented and specialized as audiences are consuming media in totally different ways and from totally different formats than in the era of mass media. But funders are yet to adjust to the new logic, especially when they support innovation.

Many of them finance technologically savvy media outlets or journalism initiatives that achieve significant impact (such as investigative journalism networks). However, an ecology-mapping tool, able to more accurately map and follow the audience needs, would allow funders to better identify the needs for information in a specific media environment, most definitely boosting the impact of their financial support. Such a tool will be particularly useful in the new phase of communication development (ongoing and likely to stretch to mid-2020s) that is characterized by new forms of content prioritization online, a result of the numerous state policy changes and tech companies’ practices during the past two years.

The media system of a country or a region should serve the needs of a variety of groups with different ages and genders, class as well as ethnic and racial background, professional interests, or community values. If, for example, media dedicated to farmers or retired miners is missing from a media system, making efforts to support media that would address them is likelier to bring innovation to the media ecology of that environment. If innovation is change for the purpose of improvement, a more diverse typology of media organizations should be formed to serve as a guide for investment in innovative practices.

The last two recommendations should not be interpreted as discouraging exchange of ideas and practices between regions and countries. Innovation models originating in Western countries are valuable examples and should not be excluded from the community of ideas dedicated to change. What the recommendations suggest is to reconsider the power imbalance between these ideas and practices to make this exchange more equitable and more relevant for non-Western countries.
ANNEX 1: METHODOLOGY

For this study, a total of 24 journalists, editors, media experts and media managers from 22 organizations were interviewed.

The geographical distribution of the organizations represented is:

- Americas (5): USA, Venezuela, El Salvador
- Asia (6): Malaysia, Myanmar, Hong Kong, Singapore, India
- Africa (4): Zimbabwe and Nigeria
- Europe (4): Germany, Hungary, Czechia, Russian Federation
- Middle East (3): Jordan, Egypt

The type of organizations represented are:

- Universities
- Journalistic networks (national and regional)
- Online media outlets (digitally born and press that transitioned to digital)
- Research and centers

Out of the interviewees 8 were women and 16 were men.

The interviewees were selected from the CMDS network and a familiarity with the Center’s work was expected in almost all the cases.