

BOOK REVIEW

Klaus Meier, Jose A. García-Avilés, Andy Kaltenbrunner, Colin Porlezza, Vinzenz Wyss, Renée Lugschitz & Korbinian Klinghardt. Innovations in journalism. Comparative research in five European countries. London and New York: transcript, 2024, pp. 327. ISBN 978-1-032-63041-0

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Innovations in Journalism. Comparative Research in Five European Countries is an edited book authored and edited by Klaus Meier, Jose A. García-Avilés, Andy Kaltenbrunner, Colin Porlezza, Vinzenz Wyss, Renée Lugschitz, and Korbinian Klinghardt. Given the ongoing and recurring ‘storms in a teacup,’ fixations on the new by ignoring the old, hysterias, hasty actions, or (too) late decisions in the context of profound changes and transformations of journalism, it is encouraging to find a book that offers a composed and analytical view of significant innovations in journalism. Indeed, journalism needs to deal with changes and transformations in one way or another since “innovation becomes a crucial element for journalism to adjust and to (re-)invent itself in the light of ongoing changes” (p.1). However, for news organizations, journalists, journalism scholars, and policymakers alike, it is not always easy to decide what to focus on, what aspects to consider, and how to evaluate the importance of alleged or actual innovations in journalism. The authors provide helpful anchor points for discussions on such questions, presented throughout their compelling, intelligible, and well-written book.

The book is structured in six parts, which act as lenses on what innovation is, what innovations in journalism are, how innovation can be explored, what innovations in journalism mean in different country contexts, and what possible factors might influence innovation in journalism. The book’s core is a sort-out discussion of 18 innovations in journalism that have been crystallized as the most relevant in the comparative study. Next to prominent examples of innovations, several themes have given shorter shrift in previous studies.

The first part offers a theoretical framework of innovation and related concepts. The authors explain that “innovation helps to cope better with change or to drive transformation” and “journalism innovation is the performance of reactions to changes or transformations of news products, processes, and services irrespective of size, radicality, and incrementality through the use of creative skills that allow a problem or need to be identified” (p.9). The authors further claim that innovation is often confused with ‘invention’ and ‘newness’. Next to (or in) the discussion about change and transformation, it would have been interesting to learn more about the relationship between the different terms that are linked to the concept of innovation. Furthermore, references to the “change of culture” or the “culture and creativity” (p.8) part of innovations could have also been more explicitly discussed in the rest of the book. Cross-references throughout the book would have been helpful, especially if the relationships between the claims, concepts, and chapters had been made more explicit and evident. It is commendable that the research gaps and open questions presented in part one are again revisited later in the book’s final part and last chapter, thus offering a substantial foundation of theoretical and conceptual work.

The second part of the volume is dedicated to the project’s methodological approach, which combines qualitative and quantitative techniques in a triangulation. Although peppered with interesting contextual facts and references to Hallin and Mancini’s framework of media systems, the selection of the five country cases remains seemingly arbitrary. It’s hard to



shake the feeling that the choice of countries is primarily influenced by the appealing notion of the authors' gathering under palm trees as the project's initial inspiration, as mentioned in the book's preface. We might wonder how the findings would differ when including, for example, eastern European countries, countries outside Europe, or non-democratic, restrictive contexts. This could have been addressed, at least, as a limitation towards the end of the book. However, to keep an optimistic lens, the selection of the country cases is a solid foundation for this book and further research within other country contexts.

Part three of the book presents an in-depth analysis of the analyzed countries' national framework conditions for innovation in journalism. These country reports on innovations are commendable and eagerly anticipated in our field of research. May this inspire many more efforts and pave the way for various similar country reports worldwide.

Part four is the book's most interesting part for many readers as it presents the 18 most important areas of innovation in journalism that have been crystallized in the project. These areas of innovation were examined in greater detail through the case studies, which are structured into separate chapters. Each chapter follows the same compelling logic: A short introduction on the innovation followed by links to the case studies, the aims of the innovation, supportive conditions, obstructive conditions, societal impact, and a conclusion. I wonder why Chapter 14, "Paywalls and Paid Content," and Chapter 24, "Membership Models," could not be merged into one chapter. Despite their apparent differences, both chapters deal with the exclusivity of media content and the practice of charging users. Maybe a fusion would have made room for another interesting topic or even a summary of some excluded themes that didn't make it into the list of the selected top 18 innovations. Table 2.1 and table 2.2 (p. 26–31) mention further innovations such as constructive journalism, start-ups, discourse quality, personal/digital meetings, news only tv channel, video by print media, entrepreneurial journalism, local journalism, para journalistic actors etc. One rather big surprise is the identification of newsletters as one of the most important innovations. Admittedly, I doubt whether the

prominent placement of a separate chapter in this book is justified. Undoubtedly, newsletters meet the authors' definition of innovation, as they help cope with change and transformation, for example, by offering finite content in times of chronic information overload. They are a clever way to deliver information compactly and convincingly to users. But can this be considered one of the most essential innovations in (European) journalism? After reading the chapter, it's hard to disagree—the authors' arguments are compelling.

Part five discusses essential relationships between the development of innovations in journalism and its historical, social, economic, and media-political contexts and conditions. The chapter provides many exciting and precious details about the complex relationships that drive or hinder innovations in journalism. Due to its richness of information and references, however, the chapter also feels a bit lengthy and a bit too complex in some parts. One notable point in this chapter is that the case studies reveal that conditions for innovation at the macro level are often more obstructive than beneficial, and "new regulations, infrastructural measures, or funding models that might specifically support journalistic innovation with democratic political quality goals are only now being developed and very hesitantly" (p. 263). This conclusion resonates deeply and requires careful consideration. One can only hope that the relevant entities will take notice of the unfortunate situation.

The final part, part six, starts with the lessons learned from the case studies on implementing the most relevant journalistic innovations. Table 27.1 (p. 273) helps summarize the main drivers and obstructions to implementing innovation in news organizations. The part about the social impact of innovations in journalism is also interesting as it briefly discusses the most relevant innovations. One of the core notes in chapter 27 is that not only tools and technologies played a fundamental role in the innovation implementation process "but also management and leadership skills, professional culture, and talent. In short, the 'human factor' was essential" (p. 277). Another lesson learned is that "innovations are audience oriented, rely on a collaborative culture, and are often based on networks of pro-

professionals who share their work and expertise with a concern for news quality and a public service mindset” (p. 278). This is encouraging for scholars who focus on how journalistic actors negotiate change, transformation, and innovation with journalistic norms, ethics, and standards. The chapter concludes with Figure 27.1, which is not as self-explanatory as it could be. Readers need significant creativity and cleverness to understand what is visualized without reading the accompanying text. Next are the opportunities and challenges discussed in Chapter 28 for each most relevant innovation. This is a valuable contribution for scholars and practitioners alike because it allows us to evaluate the impact of innovations on media practice.

Chapter 29 then brings the reader back to the initial theoretical considerations and open questions in part one of the book. The previous assumptions are all justified and further specified. Undoubtedly, it would have been a difficult task; but a few more amendments to the earlier theory and further conceptualizations would have been interesting. The deduction and discussion of the values, norms, and aspects of quality influenced by innovations are beneficial and compelling, as are the two figures that summarize the relevant points. The concluding remarks argue against previous voices who perceive innovation in journalism more as a threat than an opportunity for the quality and normative function of journalism. I largely agree with the authors’ arguments. Still, I am also pretty sure that the cited authors Ferrucci, Perreault, Siegelbaum, and Thomas referred to more harmful disruptions in journalism than “fact-checking” and innovations that “bring depth and variety instead of accelerating the insane speed of news” (p. 305) in their critique in recent developments in journalism. The authors close with the sentence, “the democratic value of innovations in journalism lies in that they occasionally take advantage of the benefits that digital media have brought, but more often, they aim to reduce the threats to democracy posed by the digital media universe” and “innovations primarily strengthen those quality factors that make journalism so special and distinguish it from other multiple forms of public communication.” (p. 306). Although I prefer optimism over pessimism, this conclusion seems a bit

too rosy to me. Once again, the book is refreshing because it counters the perpetual criticism, fear of change, and nostalgia for the so-called golden age of journalism. However, the conclusion could have benefited from more distance, criticism, and debate. Journalism is not all that great despite the many innovations. Finally, it would have been interesting to read about what future projects could consider, the methodological reflections that arise from the project, and any other limitations typically discussed at the end of an academic piece.

The book’s focus was on innovation in journalism. Again, I like the book’s content, writing, and structure. I wonder if the book might have benefited from a split into two books or two more distinct parts: One about innovations in journalism in general and the other specifically on the most relevant innovations found in the case studies, especially about the latter part (most important innovations). This assessment should not distract from the fact that the book is an outstanding work that should be mandatory reading in journalism education, media organizations, and media policy contexts. Kudos to the authors.