

New Models of Journalism in Alberta and British Columbia: Changing the Metajournalistic
Discourse of Community News

by

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Abstract

For decades, the Canadian news media industry has been eroded by a myriad of factors including media conglomeration, the changing digital landscape, and declining advertising revenue—a situation which has only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This research examines six community news organizations across the western provinces of Alberta and British Columbia who are using new journalism practices and revenue models to serve their communities as a response to the ongoing crisis narrative currently surrounding the Canadian media industry. Through an action research appreciative inquiry methodology, this research focuses on what is working well for these organizations to create new regionally based knowledge regarding the keys to their current success, to future sustainability, and to potential replicability. In addition, the data is analyzed through Carlson's metajournalistic discourse framework to uncover in what ways these journalists are challenging or changing the discourse surrounding local news production in their communities and in the wider industry. It concludes there are several foundational blocks other community news publishers can build upon to help create healthy and diverse media ecosystems, and while readers are showing support for these news organizations, the wider industry could be doing more to legitimize their organizations and metajournalistic discourses.

Keywords: journalism, community news, new journalism models, business of journalism, metajournalistic discourse

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Introduction

Across Canada, community news organizations (CNOs) play an essential role in residents' lives, fulfilling important democratic functions, enhancing civic engagement, building community, and providing important everyday information (Nagel, 2008, p. 2; Ali, 2016, p. 129). Unlike niche publications or large national daily newspapers, these organizations are those characterized by a strong connection to a defined geographic area which also acknowledges "the wider social space in which they play a role, both in holding an influential position in certain social flows and movements" (Hess & Waller, 2013, p. 49). As a consequence of concentration of ownership, as well as other influential factors, such as the digital revolution, decreased advertising revenue, and other economic realities, between 2008 and 2018, 53 community news outlets have closed across the B.C. (Skinner, Cross, & Hackett, 2016, p. 78; Lindgren & Corbett, 2018). Today, the majority of B.C. community newspapers are owned by two companies, Glacier Media, with approximately 22 publications (www.glaciermedia.ca) and Black Press, with approximately 81 publications (blackpress.ca). Currently, this decades-old trend has only been exacerbated due to the 2020 global pandemic, leaving communities without the journalism they need to function (Gurleyan & Hackett, 2016) and resulting in an engrained crisis narrative in journalism and media studies (Callison & Young, 2020). This crisis narrative promotes a ceaseless refrain about the collapse of the news industry, and about the demise of community discourse, and is a species of a particular metajournalistic discourse (or journalism about journalism) (Carlson, 2016). This metajournalistic discourse about the constraints on community news is now a common theme within the journalism industry and in the larger Canadian public (Carlson, 2016; Carlson & Usher, 2016; Ferrucci, Nelson, & Davis, 2020). This crisis is grave,

but some are seeing it as an opportunity, and it has some in the industry looking for new revenue models of journalism and related practices to better serve local readerships.

Changes in the media environment and reader consumption habits call for new business models (Villi & Picard, 2019) and there are a growing number of independent publishers and journalism entrepreneurs who are going against the grain to embrace new models of journalism to fill the gaps (Lindgren & Corbett, 2018). These new models and practices are closely related to the concept of “public journalism”, a loosely defined and shifting term developed by Jay Rosen and Davis Merritt in the early 1990s (Rosen, 1995), and one which aims for journalism outlets that can engage with their readers in a more effective way than large, impersonal, or elitist news corporations. Not only do emerging organizations offer much needed journalism for their communities, they are creating a blueprint for new models of sustainable community news and a generative metajournalistic discourse which “confronts trends that cut across individual journalists, news stories, or organizations, such as the ‘crisis’ frame to describe ongoing struggles for legacy media” (Carlson, 2016, p. 358). These independent publishers have the ability to shift both journalism revenue models, as well as practices and beliefs in their provinces, as the two cannot be separated. As I discuss in more detail in the next chapter, current scholarly study and industry experience points to the end of the current model of community news. In the absence of the absence of inspiring, solutions-based research, my thesis research sees an opportunity to shift the focus on what is not working with an inquiry into how, why, and to what effect CNO innovators are seeking to fill that gap in Western Canadian or Albertan and British Columbian contexts.

As a publisher of a small, independent CNO based in British Columbia, this thesis research was born of a desire to contribute to the small but growing body of knowledge

regarding new journalism models and also capture the change that myself and other independent community based news publishers are sensing on the ground. Approximately 70 new organizations have launched in Canada since 2000, utilizing a variety of new revenue models and journalism practices (Young & Hermida, 2020, p. 4). As some scholars point out and as these publishers have realized, “the historical, social, and economic contexts of the changes occurring in journalism indicate we are in a transition not a demise of journalism” (Picard, 2014, p. 495). These scholars argue this transition is a natural process of large industries, including media technology, and adaptation or innovation of these models can be looked as the necessary repair period rather than the end point (Jackson, 2014). Indeed, one person’s crisis is another’s “nascent, vital, decolonizing, growing, and challenging economic space in the history of journalism in Canada” (Callison & Young, 2020, p. 117). To create successful new models, publishers, and journalist entrepreneurs must look beyond the current negative narratives dominating the media landscape and seize the opportunity to not only fund journalism differently; it is equally important to address the entwined problems with Canadian community journalism, despite the resistance from the powerful traditional and status quo players, and while building and creating new discourses around the industry. Hence, the purpose of this study is to ask two related research questions: *What can we learn from innovators in community-based news publishing in Alberta and B.C. who are using new journalism models and practices to create successful, sustainable, and replicable outlets, and how are these publishers creating new metajournalistic discourses in the Canadian journalism industry?*

This research method is situated in the interpretivist paradigm and uses an action research methodology, which uses the strength of action research to produce valuable outcomes in local contexts (Grubenmann, 2016, p. 3). Data were gathered through qualitative, in-depth semi-

structured interviews with six independent publishers or editors of B.C. and Alberta-based CNOs. The data collection was guided by an appreciative inquiry approach to uncover what could be learned about what is working well and what “could be” from a group of independent news organizations who are currently using new models of journalism in their communities. The data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis, first by employing a deductive coding process to uncover persistent themes as to what may be needed for these models to be successful, sustainable, and replicable; and secondly by using a thematic analysis guided by Carlson’s (2016) metajournalistic discourse framework to examine how these organizations are creating new discourses surrounding “the ways in which journalism is understood, executed, and consumed” (Carlson, 2016, p. 359). Metajournalistic discourse, which is defined as “public expressions evaluating news texts, the practices that produce them, or the conditions of their reception” (Carlson & Usher, 2016, p. 567), as an analytical framework focuses on definition making, boundary work, and legitimation (Carlson, 2016, p. 394), which served as a guide for my analysis. This dual approach not only captured important data regarding what is currently being done to create innovative journalism and how it can potentially flourish, it also examined how these practices and publishers are challenging and changing the larger journalism discourse.

An important aspect of action research is researcher reflexivity, particularly when the researcher is a participant in the inquiry (Cunliffe, Gorli, Ivaldi, & Scaratti, 2019. p. 152; Reed, 2007, p. 63). As a community news publisher, I was a participant observer, and there is no one better situated to research the complicated and fast-moving field of news publishing in 2020 than someone who is living it (Young & Hermida, 2020). As appreciative action research works with practitioners, it allowed me to participate not only as a scholar, but also as a publisher who is working to co-create knowledge alongside others within my industry who share similar values

and are also actively working to experiment with new journalism models in their communities (Coghlan, 2019, p. 77; Reed, 2007, p. 63). While I did not include my own organization in the research, my role within my organization and industry allowed me to employ my pre-understanding, or my “knowledge, insights and experience”, to shape this research (Coghlan, 2019, p. 77). In their own ways, by already actively experimenting, reflecting, and sharing their successes with peers, the participant publishers and editors were already organically taking part in a form of action research. This study aimed to assist in analyzing this process and making shared learnings accessible to the wider academic and journalistic world. Through interviews with these publishers and editors, their first-person reflective information and second person organizational changes informed a third-person, generative theorizing for other independent publishers, which are the three levels of action research first identified by Torbert, in 1998 (Coghlan, 2019).

The research produced recommendations that will be published separately for the industry to use together. My aim is to use the findings and recommendations for a future-focused discussion among the participants to form an engaged learning community, followed by sharing of the results of this small learning community for further discussion with other interested publishers and community news readers. It is also my hope that, by taking part in this project, all participants are able to effect change within their own organizations, on their journalism practices, and create a positive impact for their readership. Also, by publishing several recommendations for the industry drawn from the research, and by hosting a virtual participant panel after the research is final, we can share our view of the findings to continue to propel the community forward.

Literature Review

News publishing and the needs of readers and their communities have been changing at an astonishing pace in recent years due to technological and economic factors (Pavlik, 2013), which has become even more turbulent following the recent global and local effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to situate the above research questions in the current and local context, this section examines research on the state of the current news publishing industry in Alberta and B.C. and the relevant discourses surrounding it, including the overriding crisis narrative and the unsustainability of the legacy news model in Canada. In addition, I reviewed scholarship on the concept of public or *engaged journalism* in light of its relevance to current community news practices, realities, and possibilities, with consideration of perspectives from the literature on the failure of legacy news organizations to meet these principles. Finally, I will examine how regional news entrepreneurs and independent publishers are answering the call for innovation through a variety of new journalism models, as a starting place for framing the appreciative action research I conducted. Together, these facets of the research problem and opportunity create a snapshot of challenges currently facing the industry while also shining a light on potential solutions explored further during the research for this thesis.

Current Industry Narratives and Discourses

The stories we tell and the discourses we use to tell those stories are powerful factors in shaping how we view our society and our place in it and the journalism industry is no exception. In what follows, I review the literature on how a limiting crisis narrative has emerged surrounding journalism in Canada, followed by scholarly accounts of how federal government reporting and policy is contributing to this narrative. I then link to studies that show an industry largely stuck in the status quo and lacking the tools required to innovate to meet the current

challenges, concluding with research that argues this narrative has had a detrimental effect on democracy and society and which therefore calls for innovation in the sector.

The economic realities: A crisis narrative emerges. The COVID-19 pandemic was the latest in a series of events and circumstances that made news production an increasingly unprofitable commercial endeavor, despite our society's reliance on this model for the last century or more (J-source.ca). A fairly recent report on news organizations in six different countries (including Canada) argues that a combination of social, economic, and technological factors has made it difficult to continue to cover the high fixed costs of news production (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017). Indeed, recent statistics paint a bleak picture for Canadian CNOs and those who rely on them. The Government of Canada and Public Policy Forum's [PPF] 2017 study, *Shattered Mirror: News, Democracy and Trust in the Digital Age*, found "established news organizations have been left gasping, while native digital alternatives have failed to develop journalistic mass, especially in local news" (p. 3), a situation of stark decline of legacy print news in an era of multi-platform digital media and the attendant siphoning off of advertising revenues by social media giants. From 2006 to 2015, Canadian daily newspapers lost 40 per cent of their revenues at an accelerating rate, and by 2015, Google and Facebook were consuming the vast majority of online advertising revenue with Google's share of the Canadian digital market 60 times that of community newspapers (PPF, 2017, p. 25). As for the challenges facing community newspapers, through a crowd sourced research initiative, the Local News Research Project found over 200 Canadian community newspapers had closed between 2008 and 2018 (Lindgren & Corbett, 2018). To add even more fuel to that bonfire, in the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, an additional 40 community newspapers closed permanently across the country, 49 outlets (including 30 community papers) cancelled some or all of their print

editions, 182 outlets reported layoff and job losses, and 3,011 workers had been laid off (JSource, 2021). Much of the economic malaise affecting the community newspaper is the result of “increasing concentration of ownership, and ensuing demands to maintain or increase the profit levels of these large corporate media organizations,” (Skinner, et al., 2016, p. 77). The effects of this sharp decrease of local news production and availability is that important stories and information were no longer shared through these channels. For example, one study in the US pointed to a decline in civic engagement immediately following the closure of local newspapers (Shaker, 2014) and a Canadian study found the amount and diversity of coverage regarding local federal election races was directly dependent on the number of local news organizations (Lindgren, Corbett, & Hodson, 2017). The overall economic reality facing current news publishers illustrates a pressing need for reliable information and scholarship to help a new sustainable model to emerge, for the benefit not only of the community news industry, but also those who rely upon it, a goal this research sought to advance.

It is in these economic and social circumstances the problematic crisis narrative has taken root in most discussions surrounding the state of journalism in Canada (Callison & Young, 2020; Picard, 2014; Zelizer, 2015). Because of the media’s own experience of utter collapse of existing business models and scholarly tendency to focus on the end of the legacy news industry, there tends to be widespread (but arguably, erroneous) acceptance that good journalism and therefore the important democratic functions they perform are on the way out (Picard, 2014, p. 485). Much of the discourse surrounding the journalism field is focused on saving journalism or the drama of the future of journalism (Carlson, 2016, p. 363). As Gurleyan and Hackett (2016) have stated, “Canadian journalism is in a state of malaise, arguably of crisis; one of the avenues to overcome that crisis and regain its own relevance is to redefine itself as a crisis discipline” (p. 51). This

crisis narrative has emerged as a powerful discourse that generally is not accompanied with many ideas for solutions, particularly by the media companies involved. This sense of crisis, and the impending fallout on democracy has led to the controversial idea of the federal government becoming involved on both a policy and fiscal level, an issue I discuss next.

The question of government involvement. The crisis situation has devolved to the point the federal government has been compelled to step in to ensure newspapers' survival through the form of subsidies. In 2018, over \$600 million in funding over five years for newspaper companies was announced which included measures such as tax credits for editorial wages, personal digital subscription tax credits, and additional funding for journalism positions in “news deserts”, or regions or specific civic topics that we not being covered by current news organizations (<http://nmc-mic.ca>, 2020a). As a result of the pandemic, an additional \$45 million was added through the Canada Periodical Fund to assist community newspapers, known as the Special Measures for Journalism (<http://nmc-mic.ca>, 2020b). While this funding will not solve the underlying issues faced by news organizations, they may allow enough funding to continue operating through the remainder of the pandemic while other longer-term solutions can be explored, such as the solutions discussed through this research. Despite the current do-or-die political moment, the question of government involvement in the journalism business remains contentious, and its contribution going forward needs to be discussed regarding the future of journalism in Canada. While this research does not attempt to answer the complicated question of whether government subsidies should or should not be extended to publishers, it does attempt to gauge how this current financial support could be used in combination with new journalism models by independent community publishers to reach their goals of revenue sustainability.

Despite concerns about how government investment in news organizations might threaten their ability to hold power to account, it should be noted that, historically, government has always had a function in journalism through subsidization, such as through postal rates or the creation of Internet infrastructure; there is even evidence to support a media ecology reliant on government subsidies actually produced a more adversarial press toward government (Nordenson, 2007). Many in the industry argue government has an essential role to play in the future of local journalism (Pickard, 2011; Nordenson, 2007; Washburn & Raynauld, 2016). Washburn & Raynauld (2016) advocate for a “cooperative effort among Canadian academic institutions, the news industry and government” (p. 243). In his 2016 written submission to a Canadian Heritage House of Commons Standing Committee on the state of local media, Robert Picard, a leading academic in media economic studies, stated while government subsidies can be useful, in general they have not been able stop the decline of local news and if used, they should “support company transformation, specific journalism functions, or start up and young enterprises, not merely to put money into a declining media businesses that decreasingly serve Canadian audiences” (Callison & Young, 2020, p. 133). From what I have found in the literature published to date, it appears that overall, the current policy of the Canadian government is not encouraging the creation or incubation of new journalism models or organizations and is therefore deepening the crisis narrative. Despite a cultural resistance to change and innovation among the newspaper industry in Canada, other solutions must be explored and any future government funds should support experimentation in this regard. Before moving on to discuss research on innovative journalism models, I will review recent studies on the sector’s resistance to innovation next; understanding the deeply held assumptions within the industry allows me to frame my research in ways that make those assumptions more visible and thus a point from

which to acknowledge and discuss the business creativity demonstrated by the news organizations participating in my research.

Resistance to innovation. From both a critical and business perspective, the Canadian news media industry has deeply rooted traditions and beliefs, built on a bedrock of control of ownership and upholding existing power structures. Research specific to understanding barriers to innovation in this industry has found there are several factors that can inhibit innovation and other changes in legacy organizations, such as hardwired newsroom culture and organizational processes (Steventon, 2016, p. 2). Some examples of this culture include an intellectual block regarding an overconfidence of the product being created, fear and discomfort surrounding change or experimentation, a “legacy mindset” in regard to digital products, internal processes, and lack of technology or lack of willingness to embrace new technology (Steventon, 2016). Steventon’s (2016) recommendations to facilitate change in news organizations include a call to foster innovation at the ground level and to create an environment where failure is acceptable, both of which are very challenging in large, top down organizations (p. 141). Villi and Picard (2019) have been quite blunt in arguing that the industry is its own worst enemy, when it comes to innovation: “The brakes on media innovation are mostly cultural, in the news industry frequently residing within the newsroom where systemic, well-rooted practices and preferred work patterns dominate” (p. 128). As well, questions regarding “the ramifications of white male newsrooms, editors, and publishers” (Callison & Young, 2020, p. 203) must be asked. While the main and most obvious organizational change may be centered around revenue, to be successful in adopting a new way of doing business, news organizations must also examine their own inherent organizational power structures and how they relate their own inability to create

meaningful change in their work and industry, as some community news organizations have begun to do.

In Canada and other countries, smaller, more flexible news organizations have begun to experiment with new models and methods that take advantage of the very digital media tools that have devastated the legacy media, and have not been daunted by the overwhelming negative discourses, allowing their passion and commitment to community news to shine through. Radcliffe (2017) has shown how, despite the uncertain economic reality faced by local news organizations, they are putting greater effort than ever into producing local content such as podcasts, newsletters, and events in an effort to foster deeper connections with their readership and illustrate their value. Currently, many community newsrooms are using a mixture of traditional revenues diversified alongside products and services such as display advertising, sponsored content, classified and directory listings, paywalls, membership drives, events, and additional media services such as copy writing and graphic design (Radcliffe, 2017; Cook, Geels, & Bakker, 2016). Multiple revenue streams are becoming the norm (Villi & Picard, 2019, p. 123) as news organizations continue to experiment to find ways to meet the high fixed costs of producing journalism, potentially taking time and valuable resources away from their essential functions. These emergency funds are inherently stop-gap measures while society looks to solve the issue of necessary public discourse on a larger scale, such as changes to existing regulations. This research is aimed at helping those struggling without clear guidance on the way forward to outline the practices and models that are best supporting and reaching the ideals of public journalism.

Effects on democracy and society. Increasingly, journalism scholarship is lamenting that while publishers are distracted with keeping the lights on, the deeper failings of current

journalism models are not being addressed and are affecting the public's relationship with the press and with their democracy. As stated above, the loss of local news organizations has a direct impact on the quality of news that residents can access and thus on civic engagement itself. The role of journalism in democratic society is thought to be fundamental; however, "Canada has faced several disturbing and interacting trends that have undermined its ability to serve this role, [such] as job losses, ownership concentration, changes in management structures, and the influence of public relations" (Skinner et al., 2016, p. 77). For generations, Canadians have relied on the civic function of newspapers to provide information for political decisions, investigate the power of government and others, help analyze complex situations, build social empathy, encourage dialogue, and mobilize citizens around social action (Schudson, 2013). However, as noted above, while having many positive effects on media and journalism, the meteoric rise of social media has also contributed to the deterioration of the traditional spaces where civic engagement takes place (PPF, 2017; Skinner et al., 2016).

Therefore, the economic situation may be considered a crisis, or, it can be framed as an opportunity for renewal and correction, particularly in terms of decolonizing community news reporting and in reflecting the diversity of the public more generally. As Callison and Young (2020) contend, this narrow perspective of the economic factors has overshadowed another crisis—one of lack of representation of Indigenous perspectives and worldview and the perpetuation of a dominant colonial viewpoint (p. 111). As the majority of Canadians receive their news and form their opinions regarding Indigenous issues from the media (Wilkes, Corrigan-Brown, & Ricard, 2010, p. 41), the industry plays an important role, especially in era of professed reconciliation at both the governmental and societal levels. However, scholarly analysis firmly places Canadian media coverage and organizations as continual instruments of

ongoing colonization and Othering of Indigenous peoples. (Anderson & Robertson, 2011; Elliot, 2016; Todorova, 2016; Wilkes et al. 2010; Wilkes, Corrigan-Brown, & Myers, 2010; Vowel, 2016). For example, Todorova found “when reporting on land issues, print media in Canada rely on stereotypes, oversimplifications, and ahistorical frames that are devoid of discussions of ideology and colonialism, thereby negatively shaping modern land treaties and Indigenous/settler relations” (2016, p. 677). From a community news perspective, studies have found local media coverage lacking the context and nuance needed to properly address issues in a way that improves settler and Indigenous relations (Nagy & Gillespie, 2015; Chow-White & McMahon, 2011). As this study included a newly established news organization, *IndigiNews Okanagan*, focused on producing Indigenous news written by Indigenous journalists, it provides new insight into how new models of journalism are helping to create enhanced understanding between settler and Indigenous communities, and provides recommendations for other independent publishers in this regard.

Summary

It is imperative that as a discipline and as an industry, scholars and journalism practitioners work to transcend this limiting discourse. Journalism studies tend to shy away from the business aspect of the field which is a limitation to understanding its direct relationship with the craft (Nielsen, 2016, p. 52). While the economic and revenue question tends to dominate the crisis narrative, this research concurs with the assertion that “the central question needs to shift from saving journalism as we have known it to instead asking what kinds of work, intervention, and transformation one can make with journalism” (Callison & Young, 2020, p. 201). As a publisher working on the ground, I feel that these discourses can be overwhelmingly negative, especially when there is a gap in knowledge regarding potential solutions at the local level. This

research was an attempt to transcend this crisis narrative by focusing on what is working in communities. My action research approach allowed me to inquire into the cultural dimensions of these new community papers and how their own newsrooms are structured and how their processes reflect a cultural shift. The next section looks at the recent research on the kinds of models that have emerged in recent years.

The Call for Innovation

Having sketched out scholarly perspectives on the challenges facing community news organizations in Canada, I turn now to an examination of scholarship on innovation in the journalism sector, both in terms of process but also in terms of the purpose a community news organization could and should serve to its public. In addition to the studies on the crisis in legacy media, there is also research to show that the decline of legacy media does not necessarily mean the overall decline of journalism and the current situation instead can be looked as a call for innovation and an opportunity to improve and despite the above mentioned closures, new publishers are answering the call. Beyond the ill-fated advertiser-centric models that no longer support legacy media, there are several other possible solutions or models being explored including digital start-ups, not-for-profit media, and reader supported journalism, each of which expands the discourse on what the news is or what it could be. I now discuss each in turn, below.

New models. While many have been focused on the number of traditional news outlets closing, a global start-up journalism culture has been born (Wagmans, Witschge, & Deuze, 2016). Overall, “the media system in Canada is seeing decline in some commercial journalism organizations, job loss in legacy media, and growth in digital-born journalism organizations, along with evidence of a shifting regulatory and policy climate toward government funding of the media” (Young & Hermida, 2020, p. 2). These new independent digital start-ups are better

suited to embrace innovation compared to legacy media (Young & Hermida, 2020). As Briggs states:

Emphasizing individual traits, skills, attitude, and mindset, such curricular interventions envisage the future of journalism in the form of journalists who (alone or in collaboration) are able to monetize content in innovative ways, connect to publics in interactive new formats, grasp opportunities, and respond to (and shape) its environment. (Briggs, 2012)

Many digital journalism start-ups embrace the independent, counter-culture frame, challenging the status quo (Harcup, 2016) and research has shown their lack of traditional business training has actually been an asset which favours the production of impactful journalism that audiences are looking for, contributing to their long term success (Wagmans et al., 2016, p. 165). These entrepreneurial values and components are the key to building a sustainable, replicable model going forward, whether they are reliant on governmental, not-for-profit, or reader support, or a unique combination of all three.

Not-for-profit revenue models. Unlike the US, Canada does not have a strong tradition of foundational supported news organizations (Creech & Nadler, 2018; Picard, Belair-Gagnon, & Ranchordá, 2016; Konieczna, 2018, p. 48); however, recent federal regulatory changes have encouraged not-for-profit models. Original and impactful journalism has been the result from organizations such as *The Conversation*, providing in-depth academic inspired reporting, and *The Narwhal*, which focuses on environment reporting. These organizations have been helping to address the gaps left by shrinking legacy newsrooms, however the model has been criticized for being potentially limited by partisan obligations to funders and narrow, elite audiences and “is not a substantially critical counterforce to this commercial system, but rather supplements and

increasingly cooperates with it” (Benson, 2018, p. 4). In addition, much of the challenge in using this model is that it works well initially for start-up funding, however fails to become a long-term sustainable model (Young & Hermida, 2020, p. 8). So far in Canada, it has been used mainly for niche interest reporting and its ability to contribute to the community news sector has not yet been fully realized. The 2019 federal budget announced a new type of qualified donee, known as a registered journalism organization for not-for-profit media, which came into effect in January 2020 (CRA, 2019). It is too soon to assess if this will be widely adopted by entrepreneurial journalists and publications in Canada, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic pushed back the designation process required to take advantage of this tax law. When readers are able to receive official donation receipts for supporting their community news organizations, there may be a significant impact on the quantity and quality of local reporting. However, existing media organizations would have to make a difficult and expensive corporate structure change to not-for-profit and many may decide not to pursue this avenue. Other not-for-profit local journalism organizations may rise in their place or unique new models blending the different elements of corporate and society may be able to emerge.

One such unique model has been put forward by French scholar Julia Cage (2016), who argues as news organizations are a knowledge creating public good, similar to universities, they should have similar special consideration by government and advocates for “non-profit media organization, intermediate in status between a foundation and a corporation” (p. 10). This proposed model would supply a new legal and fiscal framework to create a stable environment for media production with long term capital while reducing the power of largest stockholders and puts power in hands of audiences and journalists. While this idea may seem radical, Cage (2016) reminds readers they should not expect “revolution to come from the regular economic actors”

(p. 64). Unlike fully adopting the complete not-for-profit model, this concept would both save existing news organizations while encouraging new ones (Cage, 2016, p. 66), which is a beneficial variable for existing publishers, unlike what is currently available under the new Canadian not-for-profit status. Other scholars agree such a middle ground “democratic ownership” would be beneficial to help with shortcoming of non-profit media (Benson, 2018, p. 1074). But whatever forms new journalism models take in the future, new relationships and stock in their audiences will be a key factor. Several of the publications chosen for this study are funded or partially funded through non-profit organizations or foundations, and all media organizations involved in this study stand to potentially benefit from the new federal regulations.

Reader supported revenue models. Developing reader support as a revenue model allows for a new financial opportunity while also focusing efforts on developing stronger relationships and connections with the readership and community, which allows for an enhanced journalistic impact. While digital paywall subscriptions run the risk of denying community journalism to the most vulnerable in societies and creating a two tiered system where only those who can afford the expense have access to quality journalism, other models rely on a segment of readers to financially support the organization while keeping the content free for all those need it. According to Villi and Picard (2019), to achieve this, organizations must build and nurture value-creating relationships with readers, and other partners, which can then become a reliable source of revenue and this trend puts pressure on journalism enterprises to create quality content so people will pay for it (p. 123). However, publishers must not make the mistake of viewing audiences as “commodities instantiated in a capitalist mission, and not active, diverse, publics” (Callison & Young, 2020, p. 133). In the past, general attitudes were that Canadians would not pay for news and it remains to be seen if the COVID-19 pandemic has changed this. A 2020

Reuters study found only 13% of Canadians pay for online news although this is up from 9%, where it had sat since 2016 (Reuters, 2020). In order to create the conditions to motivate readers to contribute, engagement and connection with readers needs to be authentic and conducted in the spirit of supporting the public role of journalism, rather than the corporate goals of a business, to be genuine.

News companies built on reader-membership models are well suited for community news, as “the small journalistic enterprises are more likely to seek supporting memberships and offer member events that produce higher engagement with audiences,” (Villi & Picard, 2019, p. 124). As a case in point, *The Discourse*, an independent media company that has experimented successfully with reader supported journalism in Canada, and whose Cowichan outlet is included in this study, found their most powerful stories were connected to a specific place (Callison & Young, 2020, p. 146). It is important to note many community newspapers solicited reader donations during the COVID-19 pandemic, including many from large news conglomerates like Black Press and Glacier Media. However, as these campaigns were conducted without full transparency, it is difficult to immediately evaluate their success as scholarly literature has not yet tracked the result. Anecdotal evidence implies there were mixed results, and this research is intentionally designed to identify what factors were present in the successful instances conducted by the selected publishers who employ this revenue model, and how these findings can be carried forward to inspire innovation and sustainability in community news.

Summary. My research aimed to help discover how independent community news organizations are employing entrepreneurial skills and traits, and how embracing this entrepreneurial mindset has contributed to their overall success or potential future success. I engaged other community news entrepreneurs in discussions of what type of newsroom or

organization they have sought to create, and how their business models align with the models noted in the literature, in distinction from traditional local news outlets. In doing so, my purpose has been to add to the literature by producing a set of principles and insights that can be helpful to those looking to establish their own community outlets using new revenue and journalism models, and particularly by identifying what type of proficiencies or competencies they may want to develop among their teams and staff.

Public Journalism: A Revolution in Metajournalistic Discourse

So far, this literature review has sketched out the economic crisis facing journalism as an industry, the costs to democratic process and civic engagement, and the array of new business models being offered as possible ways to meet the crisis. However, these studies tend to focus on business sustainability, and focus less on the facet of metajournalistic discourse. This last part of the literature review looks at studies that address the deeper challenge of rethinking the nature of news itself and taking advantage of the new media environment to enable a new conception of the community news organization and its relationships with its public and its various stakeholders.

More specifically, this thesis research was concerned with advancing what is known in the scholarship as “public journalism,” also known today as *engaged journalism* or *civic journalism*, which is focused on engaging with the readership, building authentic relationships and networks in communities, and producing meaningful and valuable news stories (Bro, 2018; Min, 2020). The public journalism movement (mainly attributed to Jay Rosen and David Merritt in the 1990s) was loosely defined and came to mean many different things to different people as time went on, but scholars have generally embraced four tenets comprising good public journalism: “Public journalism should engage the community through an open dialogue, let

ordinary people have power to help set news agendas, make the news more digestible and easy to understand, and report on issues in a way that galvanizes, not frustrates, the community” (Ferrucci, 2015). In other words, the news should be for the people, promote public conversations about issues of importance, invite public input, and develop a community’s ability to act for itself. As a stand-alone discourse, the idea of public journalism eventually faded away, however many of the principles have been translated into more current conversations about the role of news in human societies persist today. For example, the principle that “journalists should connect more with local communities and help create public conversation” (Min, 2020, p. 626) is being revived by newsrooms today, due in part to new technological tools available to journalists (Ferrucci, Nelson & Davis, 2020; Min, 2020). We now are developing a discourse of *engaged journalism*, which is being defined as “a range of practices that aim to build relationships journalists and the public and involve the public in the process of cocreating journalism” (Wenzel, 2020, p.17). Many of the ideals these publishers espouse through their own discourses centre around the principles of public journalism. To complement this values-motivated move towards public journalism, new styles and journalism practices (as noted above) are being embraced to counteract much of the digital noise and failing of legacy news media seen in the digital journalism field today. By embracing these ways of thinking about and practising journalism, newsrooms are embarking on changing the metajournalistic discourse at play by pushing the boundaries of community journalism.

The new revenue models go hand-in-hand with new journalism methods and practices, all of which are related to the concept of public journalism through their values of serving and connecting to the readership in unconventional ways and mitigating unintentional negative attributes of traditional journalism. For example, *slow journalism* is a newly developing concept

and is mainly seen as a counter to the over stimulating 24-hour news cycle (Drok & Hermans, 2016; Le Masurier, 2015). This approach focuses on in-depth, quality reporting, using elements of transparency, inclusiveness, investigations, and nuance (Drok & Hermans, 2016). *Solutions journalism*, closely related to constructive journalism, is another relatively new concept and adopts the principle that a journalist's duty is to move beyond reporting on problems and instead explore and provide potential solutions to social issues (Bro, 2019, p. 507; Wenzel, 2020, p. 17). *Peace journalism* focuses on the divisive nature of regular media which tends to focus on conflict, and instead provides tools and guidelines for working journalists surrounding conflict resolution techniques (Chow-White & McMahon, 2006, p. 346). *Generative journalism* also focuses on changing the status quo, which traditional media tends to uphold, by embracing a strength-based approach to storytelling (Spruyt, Boessenkool, & Van der Pol, 2020, p. 7). Through the process of practising these methods, publications are strengthening their relationships with readers and their communities, which is the foundational component of public or engagement journalism and works to create new metajournalistic discourse. By embracing these emerging journalism methods and applying them to community news, the publishers and editors selected for this study are working to provide important perspectives and elements often overlooked or unattained by existing local news providers.

The impact of these journalism practices can be viewed and analyzed through Matt Carlson's (2016) theory of metajournalistic discourse, that connects journalistic components "to processes of definition making, boundary work, and legitimation" (p. 349). These cognitive processes as defined by Carlson are important to this study, and are discussed further in the method section of this thesis, as they were used to anchor my final analysis and discussion. This theory allows for analysis of the evolution of metajournalistic discourse that is already in motion

(Wenzel, 2020, p. 30) as these modes of journalism distance themselves from the traditional journalistic norms such as objectivity, neutrality, and detachment (Min, 2020). When analyzing the manifestos of several digital news start-ups through this lens, Carlson and Usher (2017) found the organizations do not completely turn away from traditional norms, but do “advocate for enlarging journalistic culture to incorporate previously unfamiliar practices and normative commitments” (p. 576). Another recent metajournalistic study of journalism trade magazines’ discussion of public and engaged journalism as being the answer found three common themes: “First, journalism is in trouble and needs fixing; second, there is a need to remodel how journalists think and act; and third, the industry needs a market-driven or nakedly capitalistic approach due to an economic downturn” (Ferrucci, et al., 2020, p. 1593). My own study was designed to build on the use of this theory, and show how journalism is being re-conceptualized through the practices employed by several independent publications in Alberta and B.C. and their resulting metajournalistic discourse.

Through their public or engaged journalism practices, the publications involved in this study hope to address the deeper issues plaguing traditional community journalism, but also the sustainable revenue question. As Ferrucci states, “the future of successful and impactful news organizations depends on a focus on engagement, the aforementioned main goal of public journalism” (2017, p. 357). According to Pavlik, producing quality news content, “engaging the public in an interactive news discourse” (2013, p. 83), and using new, digitally based reporting methods are key factors for building innovative and sustainable news organizations in the future. For example, proponents of solutions journalism feel readers are more likely to value and support journalism that enhances their lives and provides rich meaning (Min, 2020, p. 363). The independent publishers chosen for this study were selected because of their commitment to

forging ahead with new models they believe will best serve their communities, and will translate into sustainable new models.

Summary. Practising news publishing through the lens of each of these public engagement-related concepts is an attempt by publishers to provide communities with rich, contextual, comprehensive journalism to support enhanced civic engagement, initiate change, and demonstrate the organization's value to the community. Not only does this practice reflect the moral commitments of "new journalism" publishers, the appeal to the community and its wellbeing is also a vital component of revenue models that rely on readers as opposed to advertisers. These practices are challenging legacy media news values such as objectivity, conflict, and expertise, and as such are changing journalism discourses. The findings generated by this study have allowed me to illustrate how the selected community publishers in the two provinces are engaging with these approaches and methods, and how they are contributing to building robust and sustainable new journalism models while creating new and powerful discourses in the industry.

Summary

Journalism practices and the quality and civic impact of news are all inextricably linked to the revenue model being used. While this research arose from research on the open question of the economic driver of local news production, what it is truly concerned with is the ability to produce quality journalism in a sustainable manner for all who require it. Situated in the quantitative and qualitative research on the causes of the crisis in community news and possible ways to make the most of the crisis, this research began with recognition of the environment many in the community news industry in Canada find themselves in, which is a vast, interconnected, web of global economic, technological, and media trends and forces, layered on

top of the hyper-local community context. The literature clearly shows the formation of a metajournalistic discourse, which offers plenty of criticism but not many solutions, creating problems for news professionals who wish to overcome this problematic narrative to make real change in their communities. While some efforts have been made to remedy the situation, specifically in recent announcements of federal funding, progressive media scholars point to the dire need for innovation for the news media industry and to seize this opportunity to better reflect and inform their diverse readerships and communities. There is now clear evidence that by embracing the tenets of public and engagement journalism, new CNOs are using new models and creating solutions on the ground level in several Alberta and B.C. communities. Their efforts deserved greater examination in not only providing important journalism for their readers but also in terms of how they are changing the metajournalistic discourse in these two western provinces.

Methods

The purpose of this research was to create actionable, regionally-situated knowledge regarding new models of journalism and examine how publications employing these models are creating and changing metajournalistic discourses. This study was conducted through the interpretive paradigm using an Action Research (AR) methodological process informed by an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach. The interpretive or constructionist view is concerned with understanding the world through the subjective experiences of individuals and holds that the researcher cannot be removed from the research, which is suited to journalism and journalism studies, as there is no one absolute truth or story, but rather a construction or interpretation of facts based on a person's experiences, beliefs, and where they situated in society (Carlson, Robinson, Lewis, & Berkowitz, 2018, p. 9). Journalism, and therefore journalism studies, relies

on a constructed account of events “through a complex array of professional, organizational, technological, political, economic, and cultural factors” (Carlson, 2016, p. 351). My research was well suited to working from this paradigm as it relied on the participants’ subjective views, and also my own reconstruction of the facts presented to me, and was self-reflexive. In addition, AR is situated in the interpretive or constructivist paradigm as it views the truth as uncertain and the results are based on a specific subjective process, are not usually replicable, and seeks local, not general, knowledge (Willis & Edwards, 2014; Grubenmann, 2016). Any AR study, through the social constructionist view, looks at “how people co-construct knowledge, learning and change together through action research,” (Hersted, Ness & Frimann, 2019, p. 3). As a publisher who was also struggling with the problems felt by many in working community news, it was important this research provided an opportunity to make real change within the industry and for those who took part in the study.

Methodologically, this qualitative study was well suited to studying the problems faced in journalism as demonstrated in recent action research on various journalistic challenges and complexities created by the shifting digital media landscape (Grubenmann, 2016; Wagemans & Witschge, 2019). AR is a broadly defined methodology, but “typically involves attempts to solve practical problems in real world settings through the involvement of stakeholders who live or work in those settings” (Willis & Edwards, 2014, p. 19). By bringing together a range of voices in a broader community to imagine a functional future for community news, it can be considered future forming research, with social change being the primary goal (Hersted, et al., 2019). The process can be very collaborative and includes reflexivity at three levels: the first person, or the individual; second person, or interactions between individuals; and third person, which “extends to wider community with intent of transforming the politics of the issues being researched”

(Hersted, et al., 2019, p. 6). This process took place in my research involving myself, my interaction with those interviewed, and sharing the co-created knowledge through the wider industry through publishing the resulting recommendations and hosting the future planned digital panel.

Grubenmann (2016) argues for AR's place in journalism studies as it is a framework which helps answer the call for innovation, encourages collaboration between scholars and practitioners, creates locally based contextual knowledge, and aims to improve journalism practice (p. 1). My own recent experiences as community publisher experimenting with new revenue models and journalism practices was not a part of the research; however, my position as a fellow practitioner allowed me to take on the role of insider action researcher, as I am a part of the industry being studied. This position allowed me to shape the context and framework of the research, leaning on my pre-understanding, my experiences, insight and knowledge, both tacit and explicit (Coghlan, 2019, p. 77). In addition, as an insider action researcher my own motivations and "emotions can be embedded in the process and have a powerful impact in terms of facilitating or impeding progress" (Cunliffe, et al., 2019, p. 152). By embracing both a reflexive stance and relational attitude, I worked to deepen perspectives, understanding, and trust within the participants and industry (Cunliffe, et al., 2019). When AR is paired with Appreciative Inquiry (AI), the two approaches have gone hand-in-hand as a method employed by practitioner-scholars who are aiming to co-create knowledge to spur innovative social change (Zandee, 2015), which was precisely the purpose of this study.

As this research focused on transcending the dominant crisis narrative in Canadian journalism, it embraced an AI approach to use collaborative inquiry to focus on the strengths, energy, and successes of the selected publishers. The AI approach is also grounded in social

construction as it rests heavily on the assumption that people construct meaning and reality from the way they interpret stories regarding their individual past, present and future (Reed, 2007). As a standalone concept, AI is rooted in organizational change and “consists of the cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them and that solving tough problems from that perspective results in creative solutions, which is life-giving for people” (Stravros, Torres, & Cooperrider, 2018, Ch. 4, p. 1). The process uses several stages, and engages the participants in rich, inquiry-based conversations inspired by a “4D” framework consisting of phases of discovery (what do we want more of), dream (what could be), design (how could it be), and destiny (implementing and reflecting). In using the first phase of the 4D cycle, that of discovering what is already working well in community news organizations, I created a positive framework to focus on potential solutions that “strengthen connections, enhance relationships, expand awareness, broaden and build human potential, add new knowledge and move us toward desired outcomes” (Stavros, et al., 2018, Ch. 2, p. 2). The methodological stance of appreciative inquiry action research was useful in this particular context of publishers who are working to break with the status quo crisis narrative in the journalism industry for the betterment of their communities and organizations, and who are working to implement those changes immediately on the ground in their newsrooms. My hope was that by embracing AI, this study could be a starting point for change for those seeking to provide community-powered journalism through their publications. This approach was used during the interview process, which is further elaborated on in the data collection section of this thesis.

For this research I selected six community news organizations which I collected data from through in-depth, semi structured interviews. This data were analyzed through thematic

coding analysis as well as through Carlson's (2016) metajournalistic discourse framework to deductively code the data. This research will help create a community of practice for independent publishers and other news entrepreneurs in Alberta and B.C. by building regionally specific knowledge, and breaking out of limiting crisis narratives deeply rooted in the journalistic industry (Reed, 2007; Grubermann, 2016). Due to the significant and speedy changes that have taken place in the journalism industry, the regional independent community news industry would potentially benefit from creating and recognizing an interpretive community of practice (Meltzer & Martik, 2017). Publishers and journalists who are experimenting with these new revenue models are already working on an area of mutual concern regarding the state of journalism in their communities. This research process helped to initiate the first stages of collaboration and sense of community that is already happening and could potentially draw more interested people to the industry as it is currently comprised of few individuals in the two provinces. As a fellow practitioner, I was well positioned to bring them together and engage them in a reflection on the elements that are contributing to their success. Through the data collection process, practitioners took part in reflective practice, built professional empowerment (Willis & Edwards, 2014) and gave voice to innovative metajournalistic discourse that others may be able to build on.

Data Collection

Data collection took place through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with six independent, community news publishers, editors, or reporters to reveal how new models of journalism are working to become sustainable and successful options, and how these individuals and organizations are affecting the metajournalistic discourse in the province. In-depth interviews allowed for the capture of the complexity of an individual's feelings, thoughts, and perceptions (Goodman, 2001, p. 3). The interviewing was grounded in an Appreciative Inquiry

approach. While the full structure of the reflective participant process of AI wasn't followed through the course of this research, the first part of the process was used as an interview technique, as outlined by Michael (2005), who approached their interviews as a "mini version of the discovery phase of the appreciative framework" (p. 224) in which the goal was to discover what is already working well and building on the elements of an organization when it is at its best. The findings that arose from these appreciative interviews formed the foundation for a reflective, collaborative, and ongoing learning process with members of the industry who participated in the study after this research has been completed. My first step upon completing this research will be to share the results of this study with the participants in a digital panel format hosted through my own publication's digital channels, (or potentially through another better suited collaborative organization) essentially using the research findings to form a professional community of practice among the participants and their professional networks. Media and journalism studies can generally be overly critical and focused on problems, however by employing AI those working and studying media were asked to imagine a new way of producing community news. This call to embrace the spirit of inquiry, "a sense of wonder, curiosity, and surprise" (Zandee, 2015, p. 64), dovetails with the current need to move beyond the overwhelming crisis narrative currently in Canadian media and answer the call for innovation, and this research aimed to create a point of focus for answering that call by inquiring into what is already working in the Alberta and B.C.-based community news context.

Sample. The data sample was comprised individuals representing six selected community news organizations (see Appendix 1) that produced predominantly local news and were linked to distinct geographic communities in Alberta and British Columbia of varying populations and levels of urban development. Although technically competitors, this

“community of peers” (Reed, 2011) consisted of people who do not work for the same organization, but rather among the same discipline, and therefore gave strength to the sample through a diversity of “personal, professional, experiential, or geographical experiences and ideas” (Reed, 2007). I selected these outlets through my professional network and connections, which is nearly identical to the very limited number of publications currently operating within the geographic and other parameters of this study. Keeping the focus on B.C. and Alberta, I essentially included every organization I felt met the parameters of the study. The selected CNOs all utilized new models as their ongoing source of revenue support. In addition, the selected publications all shared espoused values relating to public or engaged journalism. The publishers, editors or reporters were chosen for their specific knowledge, lived experience, and perspectives unique to their specific positions within the community news organizations, which made them vital sources of information to assist in answering my research questions. As there were two levels of analysis, the data generated from the sample created a sufficient amount of information to meet the requirements of an MA thesis (Durak, 2016).

As mentioned, all the selected CNOs utilized new journalism revenue models, as well as employed methods related to public or engaged journalism, with a few noted nuances. All the selected organizations also served specific communities with the slight exception of *The Tyee*, which has grown from its original coverage area of Greater Vancouver to include provincial matters. However, as it is one of the longest established organizations in British Columbia employing new revenue models, it was important they were included in the sample, especially in light of gleaning information regarding sustainability, a key focus of the study. In addition, *IndigiNews* was a newly established outlet; however, it illustrated the ability to produce dynamic journalism in a short amount of time, specifically serving Indigenous readers and giving context

and nuance to important Indigenous topics. For this reason, I determined it was particularly important to include them in this study although they were not yet meeting the threshold of financial sustainability. It was also important to the basis of this study to ensure the participant being interviewed on the publication's behalf identified as an Indigenous person. *The Discourse Cowichan* has experienced a number of successful years, and their experience was being used to launch similar outlets in underserved communities across Vancouver Island. In regard to the Alberta publications, they were chosen in part to expand my sample size as well as serving as a possible point of comparison for the B.C. news organizations, given the political and economic differences obtaining between the two provinces. *The Sprawl* grew from a small pop-up experiment to count over 2,000 members in the province's largest city. *The Yards* and *Taproot Edmonton* both served the city of Edmonton, although *The Yards* focused specifically on the downtown area and produced a print publication. The two community news outlets also used different revenue models—*Taproot Edmonton* was multi-revenue stream based, while *The Yards* was funded through a sister not-for-profits—and there were interesting points of comparison and contrast to draw out of their experience. It should also be noted that there were several other successful new organizations utilizing new revenue models operating in these provinces, such as *The Conversation*, *The Narwhal*, and *The National Observer*, however they did not fit the definition of a CNO used in the Introduction of this thesis. I was limited by the amount of existing community news organizations practising new models and journalism practices in the region; however, new organizations are being established. I would also have liked to include an independent news organization currently transitioning from an advertising model to new revenue model, however one was not available. When put together, the selected outlets represented a vast

breadth of different experiences in working with new journalism models in community news which contributed to a rich data set to explore and analyze.

Table 1

Table Showing the Selected Publications

PUBLICATION	COMMUNITY	EST.	REVENUE MODEL	PARTICIPANT
THE TYEE	Vancouver, B.C.	2003	Reader Support / Foundational	Jeanette Ageson, Publisher
THE DISCOURSE COWICHAN	Cowichan, B.C.	2018	Foundational / Reader Support	Jacqueline Ronson , Community Reporter
INDIGINEWS OKANAGAN	Kelowna, B.C.	2020	Foundational / Reader Support	Emilee Gilpin, Managing Editor
THE SPRAWL	Calgary, AB	2017	Foundational / Reader Support	Jeremy Klaszus, Editor-in-Chief, Founder
THE YARDS MAGAZINE	Edmonton, AB	2014	Foundational	Simon Yackulic, Publisher
TAPROOT EDMONTON	Edmonton, AB	2018	Reader Support	Karen Unland, Co-founder

Interview Data. Participants were asked open ended, appreciative questions aimed at eliciting stories about how participants were meeting revenue and business challenges, creating deeper relationships with readers and financial contributors, the link between new journalism models and the ability to produce better public or engaged journalism, and next steps for both their publication and the community news industry in the region. Open-ended questions enabled me “to capture the complexity of individuals' feelings, thoughts, and perceptions” (Goodman, 2001, p. 3). As well, as someone with experience conducting media interviews, I used this skillset to unearth the expertise of the participants by using “open ended, neutral, singular and clear” questions (Goodman, 2001, p. 7). Appreciative inquiry based questions, positive (what is already working well) and generative (what could be) in tone, allowed participants to focus on what was working well for them and what was possible for the future of the industry, as a way to help overcome the journalism crisis narrative (Reed, 2007; Stavros, et al., 2018). Initial answers were also followed up with open ended questions focused on how a component may have gone better, or what would be helpful in the future, following the design and destiny phases of the 4D framework (Reed, 2007, pp. 111-135). These questions were designed to draw out key ideas and variables integral to developing sustainable, successful, and replicable CNOs going forward. I utilized my interview skill set to allow for the main research questions to be addressed while also giving space for other relevant information to present itself through the organic process of the conversations as they unfolded through the interview process. Making space for additional information and emotions to emerge was important as these organizations “are not just about systems, structures, and processes; they are also about people, their experience and their feelings at work” (Cunliffe et al., 2019, p. 154). Drawing on Reed’s AI research framework was important to the interviewing process, insofar as “AI focuses on supporting people getting

together to tell stories of positive development in their work that they can build on” (2007, p. 3) with the goal of learning how innovators in journalism were using new journalism models connected to the concept of public or engaged journalism.

The interviews were conducted and recorded virtually through Zoom software and saved on a Google Suite digital storage cloud, which was password protected. I transcribed each interview in preparation for coding. To create greater trust with participants, they were given a copy of the transcript to review. This allowed for any additional embellishments or clarifications, or for information to be deleted if deemed too sensitive upon reflection. A transcription service called Ottr was used to assist with the volume of data. All data were stored on my personal computer, which was password and biometrically protected.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through two processes in order to answer the two sub research questions of this study. To answer the first question— *What can we learn from innovators in community-based news publishing in Alberta and B.C. who are using new journalism models and practices to create successful, sustainable, and replicable outlets?* — the data were analyzed using a thematic analysis. This method of analysis worked well for communication scholars who align themselves with interpretive approaches (Scharp & Sanders, 2018, p. 4), and was a flexible approach that worked well across a variety of methodologies (Braun & Clark, 2006). The data were analyzed for inductive themes and allowed for the construction of new knowledge regarding new journalism models based on the subjective experiences of those interviewed. Similar experiences, beliefs, values, and aspirations for the community news industry were brought together within the themes, categorized under the anchor themes of what was allowing for them to be successful, sustainable, and replicable, using QDA Miner Lite software (Adu,

2019). Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method was used which is a six-step iterative process, first becoming familiar with the data, then generating coding categories and then themes, followed by reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes, and concluding with locating exemplars. These exemplars embodied the AI approach, demonstrating strengths, energy, and what was working well for these individuals and organizations (Reed, 2007; Cunliffe et al., 2019). These themes were further synthesized to generate recommendations for the industry moving forward and used to create a framework for the digital participant panel following the conclusion of the research.

To answer the second research question—*How are these publishers creating new metajournalistic discourses in the Canadian journalism industry?* — the data were analyzed a second time through coding using the conceptual lens of metajournalistic discourse processes, which was developed specifically for exploring the discursive field surrounding the future of journalism and about how the news is understood and ideas regarding what it should look like (Carlson, 2016). This research question was premised on the notion that the conversations around new journalism models are more than just talk, they are “analytically meaningful as an interpretive space in which actors vie to define and shape the transformations taking place across news” (Carlson, 2016, p. 363). The theory connects actors, sites/audiences, and topics, to the processes of definition making, boundary work, and legitimation (Carlson, 2016, p. 349). Definition making is the process of defining social practices and norms; the second process is boundary setting, which identifies spaces where this can occur, what is journalism knowledge, and what is journalism; the final process builds off the previous two, and is legitimization (Carlson, 2016). As journalism is a constantly evolving practice, the components that make up the profession are constantly up for debate; what constitutes best journalistic practices and where

this work can and should appear, who is allowed or qualified to practice journalism, and even what constitutes professional journalism, are all set by industry discourses. By analyzing the interview data, it became clear how these publishers and the work they were doing was reshaping journalism discourse in their communities, and for the larger region and industry. It was my hope that by analyzing the interviews using this lens, this study also contributed to the metajournalistic discourse and worked to shape the possibilities of journalism for all future publishers, journalists, and readers.

Ethics

It was imperative that this research took into account informed consent, confidentiality, avoiding harm, and integrity, and professionalism (Gibson & Brown, 2009). As the interviews were with participants who were publicly known for their roles within their organizations, confidentiality was not be able to granted, however informed consent was used to ensure the interview subjects understood the potential implications of publishing their responses and consented to their information being made public in the publication of this research and the subsequent digital panel. There were also ethical considerations insofar as I was a fellow practitioner of new journalism models, therefore throughout I have been reflexive regarding my own internal bias and preconceived ideas surrounding this research. There was a danger of assuming too much, and not probing deeply enough during the research process (Coghlan, 2019, p. 79). While the action research methodology did make provisions for this, it was part of the process I was highly sensitive to (Cunliffe, et al., 2019, p. 154). In addition, as I gathered the research participants partially from my existing professional network, I was managing several roles, such as colleague, client, and peer. Dealing with this role duality “may compromise [my] ability to see people more objectively and constrain possibilities for building new kinds of

relationships and processes” (Coghlan, 2019, p. 81). As an inside action researcher, by focusing on reflexivity I helped mitigate these factors on my research, or even used them to my advantage.

Findings

For this research I conducted semi-structured interviews with six journalists, editors, and publishers working at independent news organizations who employ new revenue models and related journalism practices to determine what was contributing to their current success, their growth toward sustainability, and what would allow for industry replicability, while also analysing how they are changing the metajournalistic discourse in the Canadian journalism industry. These interviews were conducted using an action research appreciative inquiry approach, meaning my experience as a fellow publisher shaped the conversations and research goals, which were to focus on what was working well for these organizations and dream together about what building on that could success could look like for the wider industry which has been struggling for decades under the dominant crisis narrative. Following this style of inquiry, several strong themes emerged during these interviews relating to external practices and factors, but more surprisingly strongly around internal newsroom culture and values, as well as identified building blocks to help create a sustainable and diverse media ecosystem to support community journalism in the future. While challenges organically emerged and were not ignored in the conversations, the emphasis was on discussing solutions and embracing practices, values, and beliefs that were resulting in strong, impactful journalism in the communities served by these organizations. The themes contributing to their current success were developing positive internal newsroom culture, an intentional journalistic values metamorphosis, and fostering rich reader relationships. Themes around creating long term sustainability were creating financial security, skill development, and creating a diverse media ecosystem. Themes around building towards

replicability were developing industry support, shifting public perceptions, and utilizing technology, which will be further discussed below.

Factors Contributing to Current Success

Before other stages of collective community news success could be discussed or developed, it was important to uncover what was currently working well for these organizations, and what had contributed to some of their most successful moments. While there were economic realities and contributing factors at play, internal culture and value systems were high on the list of components that allowed these organizations and their employees to produce meaningful journalism for their communities. Part of the strength of this theme can be attributed to specifically asking about values; however, across the board and through the entire conversations, the following themes emerged: developing positive internal newsroom culture, a purposeful and intentional shift in community news values, and a dedication to creating and fostering rich reader relationships. As you will see below, these themes contribute to both their editorial and financial successes, and in many cases the two cannot be separated as their new revenue models rely heavily on the symbiotic relationship between the organization and its audience.

Developing positive internal newsroom culture. Newsrooms are often portrayed and thought of as hectic, high pressure, cutthroat working environments, however the six news organizations I spoke with had created and embraced internal newsroom cultures that were quite different from traditional journalism outlets, which in turn lead to healthier working environments and better journalism. All six interviewees expressed multiple instances of a supportive internal newsroom culture purposely composed of the “right people”. As Jacqueline at the *Discourse Cowichan* said:

“Something we've talked about with people in the company is how it's a bit of a rehab for journalists, because a lot of journalists come from quite toxic work environments. So we have to sort of train people out of that really defensive, self-protection mode, where it's competitive, and you can't be seen as weak or vulnerable, or someone's going to attack you or, like that sort of thing.”

This emotional support was also key in *IndigiNews*, where the Indigenous reporters are immersed in heavy topics which they often resonate personally with:

“I think one of the really cool things about *IndigiNews* is that we have a really strong culture of supporting one another. We check in, we don't just go right to pitch meetings. It's not as cutthroat, I think, as other newsrooms. We check in with how people are doing, we make sure that people are taking care of themselves and each other, you know? We have a high value of self care, because we haven't always been in workplaces where that's been a real thing. So we want to make sure that everybody's doing okay. And feeling okay. We're reporting on hard things that a lot of us are connected to personally. So when we're reporting on, ongoing case with a man who's accused of stealing money from kids in the foster care system, or birth alerts, or missing and murdered women, or police brutality, you know, we really try and hold space for each other.”

Jacqueline also expressed how this foundational support, combined with other tangible resources such as robust editorial support and legal advice, supported higher quality journalism, which led to having a significant community impact in an early hard-hitting community investigation: “But what needed to happen for that investigation to go out and get into the world was just a lot of support for me as a reporter.... So yeah, just an enormous, like more support than I'd ever had as

a reporter to make that story”, she explained. A key component of building this supportive environment was bringing in the right people.

All six of the news organizations interviewed expressed a high regard for their colleagues and team mates, attributing a significant amount of their success as an organization to assembling like minded people: “I think our strength as an organization is just finding and holding on to those people who make really great teammates and [who] contribute to our organizational culture in a positive way”, said Jacqueline at *Discourse Cowichan*. Karen Unland at *Taproot Edmonton* expressed a similar sentiment regarding their organization: “I think that our partnership is strong, and it has enabled a lot of other things to happen”. At *The Tyee*, the largest organization included in the sample, Jeanette attributed their success in memberships campaigns to a strong trust and internal reliance on the entire team to come together: “So that's really helpful to have positive, collaborative, can-do teammates who are willing to help”. The right people also went hand-in-hand with an organizational structure that fostered easy and open cooperation.

Another important component relating to internal culture was the majority of these organizations tended to be structured as non-hierarchical, collaborative, and transparent, in contrast to legacy newsrooms, which feature an inherently top-down, traditional organizational structure. This new heterarchical internal structure helps to create better journalism, as it has motivated staff to contribute, and also enhanced all employees’ understanding of the revenue stream components of the media organization. While the small nature of these new organizations helped with their structure, the larger organizations included in the sample had also committed to this structure through their growth. At *The Tyee*, the largest organization included in the sample, the interview said it is not a “top down newsroom”, stating:

“So we're very, it's a very flat structure. So there's not a lot of hierarchy or bureaucracy. There's actually too little bureaucracy and there's no middle management. So everyone has a very direct relationship with one another, there's not that many intermediaries. And there's a very open door, or open Slack message, policy. Like everyone can talk to everybody, and everyone can feel free to start up conversations and collaborate with each other.”

At *The Yards*, the only not-for-profit organization included in the sample, the publisher placed high importance on internal transparency and communication as the three founding organizations needed to work closely together to achieve both editorial and revenue goals. At *IndigiNews*, the transparency was fostered in the newsroom where ongoing critical conversations regarding decolonial journalism and media's impact on their communities bleed into the conversations with their readership regarding the behind the scenes politics of publishing stories and personal impacts.

Another key distinction is business model innovation, and five of these internal cultures embraced an internal attitude of innovation regarding both the revenue and entrepreneurial aspects of the business alongside innovative editorial initiatives. Innovation has been identified in the literature as an important component of successfully practising new journalism and revenue models. The *Discourse Cowichan* has embraced this at every level of their organization:

“And that can apply to everything... But like, just in story selection, and everything we do from the work of the reporting on the ground to the big business decisions. It all has to have that culture of we're gonna try things and it's not gonna work. But we're gonna keep trying.”

IndigiNews, while a very young organization, said they are always evolving and learning, and *The Sprawl* credited their success in the city to their adaptability, and to be able to change direction easily based on what their community says they need in that moment. *TapRoot*, which employs a unique revenue stream based on media monitoring, was nominated for a publishing award for their idea. Karen Unland said:

“And that's our innovation as far as the business model goes. It's different from the usual way of thinking, which is that the only way that a journalism outfit can make money is to sell access to its content or sell eyeballs on its content, right?”

In this way, all the organizations differ from legacy newsrooms, which mainly focus on traditional advertising revenue options. In addition, this attribute is critically upheld by those already previously discussed, such as support and collaboration. Creating an innovative space and culture would not be possible without also embracing the previous attributes and by employing people who are willing and able to take both creative and business risks. When analyzed collectively, these participants' commitment to collaboration and exploration of new ways of “doing” news tells a compelling story of organizations who are dedicated to upholding a new kind of journalism grounded in a specific value system.

While one could expect all journalism organizations to be values-driven, simply by the public-serving function of their work, these selected independent news organizations have taken this component to a higher level, both internally and externally. The interviews revealed that all of the participating journalism organizations are highly values-driven, both in their internal newsroom culture and in how they have allowed these values to permeate their outward facing work as well. In fact, four of the six organizations referred to a set of ideals encapsulating their organization's values which had been created as a guiding and living document. The fact that

four of these documents were publicly posted for readers and others to review, shows each organization's serious commitment to upholding and being accountable to their readers and communities for the values that motivate their sense of journalistic mission. Whether it was a described as a manifesto, set of intentions, or values these espoused ideas tended to focus on producing community journalism in a purposely different way than the mainstream:

I think really, first and foremost, it comes from all of the people who comprise the team. I think all of us, we really do share the intentions, like *IndigiNews* has a set of intentions. And we all really do share that, we all value similar things. And these are values and intentions that aren't, at least, articulated in a lot of newsrooms. So that's been really exciting. I think it's the people coming forward, believing in the stories, believing in the work, believing in the impact, and then the importance. So that culture, that this is something that's bigger than just us.

And when selecting employees or financial or other partner organizations, these values were an important part of deciding who were the best people to work with. Jeanette at *The Tye* stated:

It was all about just trying to find values aligned people who agreed that we need more independent journalism and we need different types of journalism. And you know, where can we find valued aligned funders who we could work with?

By embracing a values-driven newsroom culture, where all journalists, employees, and partners are aligned in their intended purpose and impact, it has allowed these organizations to create strong teams of dedicated individuals. These employees are supported while doing challenging work through purposely created collaborative and non-hierarchical organizational structures, which fosters an environment of innovation to meet the current challenges facing community

news organizations, both on a revenue and editorial aspects. The specific internal and external values, and the process by which they came to embrace those values, will be discussed further in the next section.

Intentional journalistic values metamorphosis. The state of media is changing rapidly, demanding a shift in internally held values and beliefs regarding the practice and the industry of journalism. While these journalism practitioners have purposely set out to do things differently, an adherence to selected traditional journalism values remained, which is echoed later and further expanded upon in my secondary analysis using Carlson's (2016) metajournalistic framework. However, they also turned away from certain journalism values they felt were no longer serving their communities, and practised other values legacy journalism organizations have generally not yet embraced. As outlined below, some of these values were reflected outwardly, through their journalism practices, while others were practiced internally and had greater influence over their organizational practices.

Traditional and new values. All six selected organizations felt strongly tied to the journalistic values of accuracy and integrity, and half mentioned investigative journalism, which is a strong traditional practice, as an important component of what they do. "We value real journalism done in the public interest", said *The Tyee*. "We want the quality of the content to be strong and accurate," said *IndigiNews*, a sentiment that was echoed in *The Discourse Cowichan*: "It has to be good work. It has to be accurate and it has to have integrity". While they embrace these traditional values, there is also a strong resistance to certain traditional journalism values and norms, which was generally validated by negative experiences in traditional newsrooms and positive and motivating experiences surrounding new journalism models and practices.

Five of the six people interviewed discussed positive and formative experiences with traditional journalism that helped stoke a passion and dedication to the craft, although further experiences and changing newsroom conditions lead to disillusionment. Karen Unland of *Taproot Edmonton* worked in a legacy newsroom for decades before creating her own outlet after a series of experiences and realizations, culminating in what's known as Black Tuesday in the Canadian media industry. In 2016, Postmedia amalgamated its newsrooms in Edmonton, Calgary, Ottawa, and Vancouver, resulting in almost 100 journalists and editorial staff losing their jobs:

“I love print. I love newspapers. I loved my job until I didn't. I do think that lots of the things that I loved about it don't exist anymore, or weren't as good as I thought they were at the time.”

The Sprawl and *The Yards* have also been influenced by the declining number of journalism positions in Alberta and the resulting decline in local community coverage. *The Tyee* also noted their origin story was born out of a decades-long frustration with the few existing journalism options in Vancouver in the early 2000s, which was mainly Canwest's Vancouver Sun, now owned by Postmedia:

And there's no other options. Also, if you're a journalist, there's only one place to work. So if you're dissatisfied with working at The Sun, there's nowhere to go. And there were other things about the culture of newspapers that he [founder David Beer] was not super fond of, as a journalist. So the Tyee is kind of like, it's a response to that. So it's kind of created in the image of everything that a very experienced journalist with decades in the business [wanted]. There were things that he wanted to get rid of. And so that's why he created *The Tyee*.

These types of experiences were formative to all those interviewed in regards to purposely shaping news organizations with altered values outside of the regular journalism norms, which led to a desire to test and build these values in new organizational environments.

In addition to the negative experiences with traditional media, there were also positive and enlightening experiences provided by independent and other media outlets practising new journalism models that continued to shape the values and practices in these new outlets. Five of the six people interviewed expressed formative experiences in working in these type of newsrooms, which helped bolster their confidence in new journalism models. Before landing at *IndigiNews*, Emilee was able to experiment with decolonial journalism and putting her ethics into practice at *The Tyee* and *The National Observer* (specifically the *First Nations Forward* series), and learned from other Indigenous journalists while travelling in South America:

“And it has been [changing], I think, for the last several years, and I think it will continue to be, and so there is a lot of room for us to shape the culture and ethic of the practice that we want to see moving forward. And that we can take some of the things that work from mainstream media and from Western journalism as being a tool to protect democracy and to hold truth to power, but that we can also embed a new standard and a new ethic that works for our diversified audiences and communities and the people who are now comprising newsrooms. So I do feel like there's been room for that in independent media, outside of government funded organizations. I feel like there's been room, at *National Observer*, *The Tyee*, you know, *IndigiNews* for sure, to really apply some of these new ideas around what that culture could look like.”

Other publishers and editors looked to outlets using crowdfunding or other revenue models, and reporters alluded to important community impact through journalism that ran against the grain,

such as *The Discourse Cowichan's* breakthrough investigative series on the existing local newspaper's coverage of a controversial infrastructure project related to the organization's relationship with select lucrative advertisers: "It sort of just told this whole story about how shrinking local news and monopolization of local news was, was really hurting communities."

As mentioned before, almost all the newsrooms selected in this study had a public facing set of espoused values created by the news organization. These are internally created and externally practiced, with the most highly mentioned value being that of community engagement and community building, a point expanded upon later in the Fostering Rich Reader Relationships theme. While most community journalism has an inherent community building function and involves reader interactions, especially in an age of social media, the examples brought to light in this study point to a much deeper and intentional practice of community engagement which traditional journalism may consider breaching into the unethical, as these new outlets allow for a opportunity for readers to help shape the editorial direction of the publication, especially when those readers contribute financially. *The Tyee*, which was a pioneer in B.C. regarding this method, recalled how an early fundraising effort tied to their 2009 provincial election coverage created controversy at the time:

"And when you give, you'll get to vote on what your priority issue is. And we'll make sure that our reporting reflects those priorities. And it got like news coverage, the fact that *The Tyee* was doing this, and people were like, this is super weird. What are you doing? Isn't this unethical? What, you're giving people who give you money control over what you report on? It was really controversial at the time. So yeah, I do think that we sort of busted through that, and then kept on doing it. And then you can see a lot of people just started to notice."

However controversial reader-funded news may be, the foundational aspect of community engagement was fundamental to all six publications, and was mentioned by those interviewed in far greater instances than any other espoused value. *The Sprawl* has capitalized on its ability to create community connection and build meaningful relationships with its readers within a large Canadian city:

I think another one would be just being able to connect people; that's what a lot of people say about *The Sprawl*. Like it connects me to Calgary. And actually, we have a bunch of supporters who don't live here, who moved away, then they say, *The Sprawl*, it's my connection to home. It serves as kind of a connective tissue for them to a place that's still important to them. Yeah, so then that flows through everything that we do.

This type of journalism or approach to journalism has many titles, including service journalism, or community-focused journalism, and is a component of engaged journalism discussed in the literature review section. By giving readers the chance to help define the issues the publication should be looking into, by pulling back the curtain and allowing readers to learn and understand how decisions are made in the newsroom, and by intentionally focusing on building relationships with readers instead of positioning the news outlets as on a pedestal above the rest of the community, these outlets have embraced a value that both flies in the face of legacy newsrooms and builds more authentic and effective communities around their organizations. This overarching value was reflected in many of the journalism practices employed by these new journalism outlets.

Values reflected in journalism practices. Values created internally were also present in their journalism practices, such as inclusive journalism, complex reporting, slow journalism, and creating societal change.

Strongly related to the value to community centered journalism is a value of inclusive journalism, which was reflected in five of the interviews and with the second highest number of mentions by those interviewed. The intentional practice, or at least reflection on, ensuring all members of the community are considered in their journalism was strongly repeated in their discourse as well as their journalism practices. This generally came from a recognition that historically minorities and Indigenous communities have been negatively affected by media in Canada. These practitioners saw these new journalism outlets as an opportunity to include those who have historically been underrepresented in media or actively harmed by it, an aspect that legacy media has been both slow to acknowledge or enact change on. Karen Unland at *Taproot Edmonton* said:

It's more opportunity for when you have journalism that kind of comes up from the community instead of from on high. There's more opportunities for people who are from different kinds of people to be involved in that work. And that will be better than the very white, very middle class, very university educated, pretty male, newsrooms of the past. And I think that's the other opportunity of our moment is to have our media be truly reflective of people.

At *IndigiNews*, which was created specifically to serve Indigenous readers and employ Indigenous journalists, this value permeated every aspect of their reporting and is how they measure their community impact:

And then I just think representation can't be understated. But when people see themselves in the media, when people realize that their stories and a story we're sharing, when we're uplifting voices of women, non gender binary folks, when we're uplifting stories of

families and community members. That's making a shift, no matter what. So it's been exciting to see that.

In addition to amplifying Indigenous voices, the publication has also seen an impact in creating better understanding of Indigenous issues in the wider settler community. The other outlets also felt embracing the value of inclusive journalism had helped them have a positive impact and raised important conversations in their communities. *The Yards* pointed to an investigative article into a controversial historical figure who their neighbourhood was named for which sparked meaningful dialogue among residents, and *The Sprawl* pointed to their series on race in Calgary, which by listening to its community, was perfectly timed to fit into a larger international movement of Black Lives Matter in the summer of 2020. To these journalists, new journalism models have given them the space to create a more welcoming media environment, although acknowledged it is an ongoing practice, which is complex in nature.

Tackling complexity, creating understanding, and reflecting nuance through their journalism practices was another value reflected by all six new outlets. While complex reporting could also be considered a traditional journalism value, in this context those interviewed are rallying against the divisive nature of current community reporting that can create, and the traditional view of balance, which can lead to overrepresentation of inaccurate opinions, such as the history of the media and climate change. This approach to journalism was reflected by Jacqueline at the *Discourse Cowichan*:

How can we be a bridge between these two sides and show the complexity of this issue, rather than just saying, here's one side, here's one side, which sort of gives the message like, pick a side, you know? And we're not interested in creating more division on controversial issues. We're interested in creating understanding and pointing towards

what's the evidence. What do we know and what works? Where are there solutions that have some evidence behind them?

Closely related to this was embracing a slower pace of news in a direct response against the increasing urgency of the 24 news cycle and click bait journalism of social media. Half the outlets mentioned *slow journalism* as being a central practice. Jeremy at *The Sprawl* identified the practice as integral to their success in covering their community differently to existing outlets:

A big one is slow journalism. So in other words, not chasing the news of the day or trying to keep up with the other outlets. But taking a step back and looking at the big picture and being like, what story is not being told here? What's missing? So that's certainly a part of it.

By slowing down and rejecting the current media's tendency to "feed the beast", meaning the insatiable appetite of social media platforms for content, it has allowed these outlets to connect to their communities in a more meaningful way and address the gaps left by other community news outlets who are generally understaffed and under resourced to put time and effort into crafting slower journalism. As these outlets are not relying on traditional advertising or clicks to create revenue, it allows journalists to focus on crafting quality work developed over realistic timelines. This meaningful journalism allows them to have a strong impact in their communities by fostering important dialogue around issues that may not be treated as carefully by other media.

Values reflected in their internal practices. In addition to outwardly projecting a shifting and intentional set of values through their journalism, these organizations have also chosen specific values that are reflected in their internal practices which relate to their revenue and

business models that contribute to their current successes which are innovation, sustainability, and professional fulfillment.

Two of the most prevalent values, mentioned in all interviews, were innovation and sustainability. In regard to innovation, all the organizations expressed this as one of the main components helping to drive their successes, specifically when it comes to revenue models and adapting to the ever changing challenges presented by the digital media landscape. In some cases, these organizations drew inspiration from outside the media industry and adopted practices from elsewhere, such as *The Tyee* which looked at innovative nonprofits that were utilizing digital tools as a model for their fundraising campaigns. In addition, failure is looked at as part of the process, which helps facilitate organizational learnings. At the *Discourse Cowichan*, systems and technology have built around community outreach, membership revenue and have led to experimentation using economies of scale at sister company, Indiegraf. Overall, a focus on different ways of leveraging the readership to meet the costs of producing journalism is prevalent among all the interviews, which will be examined more closely in the Creating Financial Security section.

Sustainability, both at industry and individual levels, was mentioned heavily in five of the interviews, and was a central value to the organizations. At the *Discourse Cowichan*:

I'm really thinking about how can we build something here? How can we build a news organization basically? And so like from that point on, which was two and a bit years ago, it's been, how do we make this sustainable? How do we do journalism that offers a real value to the community that then they'll be willing to support it and keep it going? It's surprising to me that we've actually kind of done it. Like, we're not fully there, but the trajectory is. All the evidence suggests we can keep this thing going.

By embracing sustainability at the core business level, as opposed to large profit margins of traditional journalism, or at the other extreme, which is to ignore the business aspects of producing journalism, these organizations are building this extremely important component into the ground level of their structures. By carefully analyzing their business models and success, through initiatives like memberships, successful grants, and other funding potential, these organizations are growing at a measured and intentional pace. Karen Unland at *Taproot Edmonton*, spoke passionately about their organization living on into the future:

“Well, I think one thing that has to happen is everybody who's doing it right now has to not burn out and die. Right? So that we need these we need to have a bunch of places that are so strong, that they go on beyond the working life of the founders, that they can be acquired or passed on to new owners or whatever. That they are not solely reliant on the passion and enthusiasm and semi-insanity of the founders. So I guess that's my dream, I want *Taproot* to go on without me. I want it to be a thing that goes on, then, like, I'm just a name on an About Page for how it all started, but it carries on.”

As Karen alluded to above, to ensure this value is honoured internally, it is not only about financial sustainability, but also the sustainability of those involved to continue their work in the face of ongoing challenges and an overarching crisis narrative regarding their industry which requires staff to be fulfilled professionally.

Professional fulfilment is important to many journalists working in countless newsrooms across the world and those selected were no exception. However, as this was a foundational value for five of the included organizations, it reflects an organizational embrace of this value, layered on top of the individual value that many journalists hold to find purpose and public

service through their work. Emilee of *IndigiNews* described her how she operates in her work as an extension of herself:

“I think I bring this fire, you know, curiosity, I asked hard questions to people who wield power and have resources. I'm not afraid to ask questions, be transparent. I think being a mixed person too. I do embody different worldviews and cultures and relationships. And so I can bring that nuance as well. I don't live in a binary experience. And I don't believe that binaries even exist or are helpful. So I really think I don't try and support stories that are black and white, and kind of perpetuate division. But I really want to kind of flex into that threshold space, that in between space where a lot of us exist, and it helps us understand the bigger picture. So I think I bring all of that into, just who I am and how I walk in this world, into the work”.

By honouring this value as an organization, it goes against traditional journalism organizations which may uphold this value superficially but when tested tend to buckle under the weight of opposing forces, such as business profits or advertising relationships. For those who were the founders of these organizations, professional fulfilment also holds a deeper level, as they have chosen to go against the grain and embrace the challenging journey of making journalism work in their communities for a greater societal good. “I just feel like this is the work I meant to do”, said Karen Unland at *Taproot Edmonton*, which was echoed by the publisher of *The Yards*, who makes a living outside the publication, but viewed his volunteer role as his passion.

Summary of intentional journalistic values metamorphosis. In the previous section we have seen strong evidence of the importance of a guiding set of values, which are part of a strong internal organizational structure, as well as expressed outwardly through relationships with their sources, readers, and their craft. These values are an integral component of their success,

allowing the journalists to move their days with a strong adherence to selected traditional journalism values, but also giving them the freedom and ability to meet their readerships' needs in news ways by embracing new values related to the specific way they are perusing community news, which is purposely different from the accepted norms in the Canadian community news industry. This collective decision, or an *intentional journalistic values shift*, has been an imperative move in order to meet the ever changing conditions and challenges of producing community news in the current climate, allowing them to succeed in areas where traditional news organizations may have failed. All those interviewed had both positive and negative formative experiences in traditional journalism, leading them down the path to new journalism models and practices which allowed for further opportunities to pursue these new values and practices, especially community building and connection. The values that are reflected in their journalism practices are slow journalism, inclusive journalism, complex reporting, and creating societal change, all at a level above and beyond the regular community newsrooms. Externally, these values are related more so towards their ability to generate revenue and meet the digital and other challenges of producing the news: innovation, sustainability, and professional fulfillment, which are all values traditional news organizations have struggled to implement. The community building value, which was discussed briefly above, will now be expanded upon the final section of factors contributing to successes.

Fostering rich reader relationships. The strongest theme to emerge regarding their current success from all six interviews was the intentional practice or policy of fostering rich reader relationships, which for the purposes of this research was defined as an opportunity or experience of meaningful communication and interaction between the organization and their readership. While all six interviews also mentioned instances of strong general reader support,

which will be discussed further in the legitimation section of the secondary analysis, developing rich reader relationships takes this support to a higher level of two-way communication, breaking down the barrier or disassociation that traditionally exists between a news organization and their community. This relationship was further developed in instances where readers contributed financially to the organizations, and is fulfilling for both the journalists and the readers. This level reader engagement is inherently baked in to these journalism organizations, who rely heavily on their communities for both financial and editorial support: “*The Sprawl* could not do what it's doing if it was just publishing articles; it needs to be building a sense of community and building a sense of being a part of something and sense of purpose.” This concept is strongly related to Jay Rosen’s ideas surrounding public journalism which were discussed in the literature review, and also reiterated in the community driven journalism values discussed above. These organizations were able to foster these relationships by practising transparency, creating personal connections, listening and engaging with their readership on community issues, and by creating spaces and opportunities for additional community discussion.

All of the newsrooms interviewed practised a level of transparency to provide a sense connection with their readerships. For example, this could be around providing information regarding editorial or newsroom decisions, financial information on how the organization receives and spends money, or information regarding how organizational stakeholders communicate. This was especially important for *IndigiNews*, who regularly publishes newsletters that provide insight into how they practise decolonized journalism, or the behind-the-scenes politics that are involved in publishing certain hard hitting stories. *The Sprawl* described their processes as being “open” to the public and the *Discourse Cowichan* described their organization as “radically transparent” both internally and externally. This level of transparency also extends

into their financial practices, especially in regard to their contribution campaigns. For example, *The Tye* has a dedicated page on their website which tracks, automatically updates, and presents the amount of money raised in a campaign. This transparency lends itself well to creating personal connections between the journalists and the readership.

Communicating to the readership on a regular basis outside of regularly reported news stories allows for a deeper connection for all parties, and like all relationships, changes and develops as time goes on. The *Discourse Cowichan* said:

“We do a lot of newsletters, which is great, because it allows for a really personal connection with the audience. And in the beginning, it was very focused around me. And it was like, here's what I'm thinking about, here's who I talked to this week, here's what I'm working on, that sort of thing. And it was very much about the audience and me building a personal relationship with the audience. That has transformed, so now, not only are there multiple reporters and people having that communication line with the audience, but it's also like more about the community.”

This has resulted in readers feeling comfortable coming to the organization with concerns or ideas, resulting in better and more nuanced editorial coverage for the entire community.

By making engagement with the audience a priority, these publications have created an organization that values what their readers feel should be covered (which was discussed earlier in the values metamorphosis section), and also a way for reporters to be validated and motivated by reader support. All six participants each mentioned several strong examples of reader support, both solicited and unsolicited, which had a significant impact on their organization. This reader support will also be discussed further in the legitimation section of the secondary analysis;

however, it is important to point out here the galvanizing effect this feedback had on the organizations and their reporters. For one, consistent positive and meaningful comments from readers, whether through email, social media, or other channels, verified to these organizations their work and journalism was needed and appreciated in the community. For example, *The Sprawl* has become an anchor for readers who are currently navigating a turbulent social, political, and economic environment in Alberta:

“A common one we hear now is that basically *The Sprawl* helps me to still live here. Some people who are in Alberta right now, they're like, I'm having trouble being here with this environment and like, what is going on? But they're like, *The Sprawl* gives me hope, basically. And that's always inspiring to hear that. Wow, this actually contributes hope to people. So that's high on the list.”

This reader feedback has a reciprocal effect, as it also helps to motivate the journalists and their organizations to continue working hard in the face of challenging and uncertain industry circumstances. All of those interviewed had a way of collecting and storing reader feedback in a way that could be used to measure their community impact and be a motivating factor in their work. Emilee at *IndigiNews* said, “That's been really exciting. I think it's the people coming forward, believing in the stories, believing in the work, believing in the impact”. Karen of *Taproot Edmonton* said:

“Yes, it's definitely fuel for the engine. And that's what I say when people say nice things, like you have no idea how nice it is to hear that you value what we're doing. Thank you for taking the time to do it. And inside, I'm thinking like 10, bad hard things happened this week. And this really nice thing helps me forget.”

When working in an industry where even at the best of times the work can be high pressure and emotionally draining, this type of feedback is important in creating a supportive and positive environment. In addition, when the work is being done by a newly established organization who is struggling to secure financial sustainability, this type of feedback and reader relationships can make a significant difference in the organization's ability to keep going.

All of the included organizations expressed a willingness to create additional spaces and opportunities for community discussion and engagement through various channels and events. This type of work is outside the regular reporting duties of a news organization; however, it provides an important sense of value to the readership. *The Tyee*, for example, through careful management has created an online platform that encourages civil discourse around the stories they publish:

“And it's like weeding a very weedy garden, but we're one of the few sites that I feel still has a comment section or puts that much effort into moderating our comments. Because sometimes you get a really beautiful thing happening in the comments.”

Many of the organizations also facilitated events, both in person and virtually, to help connect with their audiences and dig deeper into complicated issues. These events helped to create a sense of community around the publication and also give the readers something “extra” in terms of value for their financial contributions. *The Yards* recalled one of their successful pre-COVID issue launches that featured articles on a new NHL arena downtown at a venue overlooking the construction site:

“It was super controversial at the time, like a lot of arena projects, in terms of the public money being used for the arena to help a private hockey team owner. So with that launch,

we actually got a U of A prof who was super opposed to the tax law that had been used to debate someone from the Cates Group, who is building their arena, at our launch overlooking the actual construction. That was great.”

The Sprawl has also used events to connect with their readership, which have grown from “10 people around a table” at a pub to experimentation with larger online member-only events, to “try and keep that sense of strong connection”. By going above and beyond simply publishing stories and moving on to the next article by creating new spaces for community discussion and understanding, these outlets have demonstrated ongoing commitment to their communities which is appreciated by their readers. This fits into the larger theme of creating rich and rewarding reader relationships, which will be summarized below.

Summary of rich reader relationships. Together, the additional energy spent on creating a strong and evolving relationship with their readers has allowed these organizations to both be successful, and to gauge their success. By capitalizing on new technologies that allow for two-way communication between the organization and its audience, it has created opportunities for the journalism organizations to be successful editorially, financially, and emotionally. Unlike many news organizations who view themselves as separate to their communities, these organizations have practised “radical transparency” both internally and externally, created personal connections between journalists and the readers, deeply listened and engaged on issues identified as important by their readers, and created new spaces and opportunities for additional discussion and community discourse. These relationships are integral to the outlets’ success, and provide important feedback, guidance, and motivation as these outlets move from their initial formation to the success they are experiencing today.

Summary of factors contributing to success. Starting a new community journalism organization is a gamble, and there are no guarantees of being successful, financially or otherwise; however, the participants of this study have moved beyond that uncertainty and along the way created their own unique recipes for success in their communities. There are common ingredients among these recipes, which can be looked at as the components that are integral to the success of new journalism organizations in the provinces of Alberta and B.C. As we have just discussed, fostering rich reader relationships is the crux of these models, especially those that are pursuing reader membership models. But perhaps most interesting, these organizations have taken the values they need from traditional journalism, tossed out what was not working for them, and added their own dash of new values that have been overlooked or rebuked by many established organizations. This journalistic values metamorphosis is a fascinating evolution in regional community news, and is explored more deeply in the secondary metajournalistic discourse analysis. Equally as surprising, is the importance placed on creating supportive and positive internal culture, which in many cases can be considered an antithesis to what can be the toxic culture of other newsrooms journalists have previously worked in. When viewed collectively, these practices, beliefs, and attitudes can be viewed as the foundational building blocks of success that have propelled these organizations forward while they work towards the next stage, sustainability.

Factors Building Towards Sustainability

While all the selected organizations were dedicated to creating success at their own organizations, a wider theme of creating sustainable, diverse media ecosystems emerged in the course of the interviews. While traditional news outlets may see these independent community news organizations as rivals, those creating and working in the new outlets had a strong desire to

supplement existing journalism outlets by addressing gaps created by shrinking newsrooms and creating strong journalism in areas that traditional outlets may have failed in. They universally were not looking to replace traditional news outlets, but to elevate the level and impact of journalism for their communities. This was encapsulated by Jeanette at *The Tyee*:

“But it's not our dream to be in a mono culture, you know? We wouldn't consider it success if the big papers went out of business. And we're like, and ‘now we will replace them’. Like, that's not what we want. What we want is a thriving, healthy media ecosystem. And a thriving ecosystem has lots of different kinds of species and they're different sizes, and they have different specialties. So we do hope for many different organizations working in the region. It also helps because we all work off of each other's stories, right? So it's actually easier for our reporters to do work, when there are strong, credible organizations putting out high quality work that we can kind of respond to, and healthy competition is a fantastic motivator.”

In addition to not replacing traditional journalism, they also wanted to inspire the founding of new independent news organizations, share their learnings to help the industry survive its current challenges, and work together to build a strong network of diverse media outlets to meet the diverse needs of their communities. Unilaterally, they felt the future of journalism was to be found in small, hyper local or niche organizations, working alongside traditional outlets. But the first step in solving these difficult industry-wide issues is to create financial security at their individual organizations. This section of my findings begins with the theme of financial security before moving on to skill development, diverse media ecosystems and supportive industry culture.

Creating financial security. Creating long term revenue security was a top priority of all those interviewed; however, most of the organizations were still learning how to make this a reality. All of the selected organizations are at different points in their journey towards long term financial security, ranging from the longest established, *The Tyee*, to the fledgling *IndigiNews*, and each has adopted a different mix of revenue streams with the goal of creating a sustainable media organization. All the organizations selected were for-profit models, with the exception of the sole not-for-profit, *The Yards*. As many media organizations now do, all the selected organizations relied on a variety of revenue streams, the most prevalent being membership contributions, but also including foundational or grant support, current federal government funding, and large injections of one-time financial contributions. Less prevalent were sponsorship or advertising and other media-related client work. *The Yards* also relies heavily on volunteer support.

Leaning on readers has proven to be the most popular revenue stream, as all six of the selected organizations had some form of membership contributions, although none employed a subscription or paywall model. Securing recurring or annual payments was especially important, as this consistent revenue allowed these organizations to create a long term business strategy and operate from a place of security. Several of those interviewed reported ongoing success with this revenue stream. The *Discourse Cowichan* generated more than \$60,000 in direct contributions from individuals in 2020. *The Tyee* has grown its member contributions by 500% in five years, bringing in over \$500,000 in 2020 which now comprises 34 per cent of their revenue, up from 27 per cent the year prior. They are working toward the goal of being majority reader funded. *The Sprawl* recently grew to 2,000 monthly members. *The Taproot Edmonton* was founded on a membership model and it has remained their smallest, but an important, revenue source. *The*

Yards has also experimented with memberships, which gave readers access to events. *IndigiNews* had a financial contribution option for their readers and mentioned they have plans in place to launch their first membership drive in spring of 2021. As this revenue stream gained momentum for these organizations, other revenue streams were working in the background.

These organizations have also been assisted by large injections of revenue through different channels such as foundational or grant support, seed funding, or some form of government money. *The Sprawl* was involved in two programs through the Facebook Journalism Program, which amounted to \$235,000, and which Jeremy described as a game changer in terms of what they could then accomplish. Taproot Edmonton qualified for a \$23,500 Investment Readiness Grant which allowed them to develop their unique business-to-business media product. *The Tyee* has been able to operate with consistent funding from a group called Working Enterprises, which agreed with the vision of creating an alternative news source in Vancouver, and it also worked with a sister non-profit, Tyee Solutions, which ceased operation in 2018. Four of those interviewed noted they had qualified federal government support available, either through the QCJO, the Local Journalism Initiative federal program, or the emergency COVID-19 funding provided through the Canadian Heritage ministry, which will be discussed further in this analysis. Taking advantage of these larger financial opportunities allowed these organizations to start up and grow, while building out more reliable sources of revenue, but this road is not without its challenges.

While many of the organizations had benefited in some way from funding infusions into their businesses, five of the organizations also expressed frustration around short term funding. This was generally tied to challenges around creating journalist job security. Karen Unland at *Taproot Edmonton*, who has focused on finding a sustainable, working multi-revenue model and

had recently hired their first full time staff member outside of the original founders said: “You have to know that you have some kind of idea that's not living from grant to grant, or just putting out a bunch of tweets out saying please, please support us because you love journalism”. Jeanette at *The Tye* mentioned that emergency COVID government support was appreciated and helpful, however stated their organization couldn't hire new reporters based on one-time money.

IndigiNews, whose reporters were mainly funded through the federal Local Journalism Initiative in its first year secured by *The Discourse*, said the money was appreciated as without it, their reporters wouldn't be funded; however the funding also created stress around job security, as well as placing strict requirements around what topics they could report on and how often they needed to publish. In addition, three of the organizations expressed a lack of access to funding. *The Tye*, which has been able to grow at sustainable rate and build their team of journalists, stated how “patient capital”, or long term investment without expectations of an immediate return, had been a key to allowing this to happen. While many of these founders have been working hard to cobble together working budgets, relying on one-time funding has been a hindrance to their ability to hire more journalists, make long term plans, and generally, become a sustainable news organization.

Only half of those interviewed were currently benefiting in some form from the millions of federal dollars poured in funding journalism since 2018, which has been increased in the face of the pandemic to include additional emergency funding. None of those interviewed felt strongly that government should be supporting journalism organizations, but did find current government funding a helpful boost if they were able to access the money. *The Tye* specifically mentioned the labour tax credit tied to the CQJO program as welcome as it lowers the cost of hiring new journalists. *The Sprawl* did not qualify for certain federal funding because they rely

on freelancers and contractors as opposed to permanent staff, which is similar to why *The Yards* did not qualify. The current criteria around federal funding has proved problematic for independent media in Canada, while those owned by larger media conglomerates have easily qualified.

All six felt strongly that if government support was going to be spent to support journalism in Canada, it should be more accessible to independent media outlets, especially those that were meeting the current economic challenges with innovation. Many expressed worry that current taxpayer money wasn't being used smartly, insofar as it was only being allocated to propping up older, legacy organizations that weren't focused on meeting the needs of their readership. Jacqueline at the *Discourse Cowichan* said:

“I think the systems are all sort of built in a way that makes it sort of biased against the innovative, the experimenting, the digital first, the new entrants, and bias towards sort of keeping these big old players afloat. Which like, fine, I want them to stay alive. But let's have a level playing field. So we're not supporting existing players that are suffering for good reasons at the expense of people who want to innovate and can really deliver community journalism in a way that's so much more lean and cost effective. And also can be a spur for the big players to innovate themselves and to do better, both in terms of the journalism and in terms of the business side.”

This was echoed by Jeremy at *The Sprawl*: “It's like, are these funds for supporting journalism? Do they go into just basically prolonging the death spiral of legacy newspapers? Or do these funds go into new outlets and new models that have a future?” Similar to the academic and industry arguments around whether government should be supporting the creation of journalism, those interviewed had complex views and experiences surrounding the current government

supports, prompting questions of the government's overall policy direction. If applied evenly throughout the industry, government funding could be a key factor in moving these outlets toward long-term sustainability.

Another factor identified as building towards sustainability was creating a business model that wasn't designed around large profit margins and keeping operations as lean and adaptable as possible. Half of the participants noted their main motivation was not profit, which translates into allowing for the creation of journalism not intended to draw large audiences to advertising, and also more realistic expectations around what success looks like as a news organization. Jeanette at *The Tyee* stated:

“But the thing is that it seems like a lot of problems stem from the fact that newspapers used to be like a license to print money. And I think that's just over. And I think that you can make money, but it's not going to be, you know, venture capital scale money.”

Five of those interviewed stated fair compensation for journalists was an important factor in their models, which is a departure from an industry that is known for poor wages or even relying on free content. *The Yards*, while relying on volunteer board positions, does pay its staff and contributors. Four of the organizations stated their daily operating costs are kept as low as possible, with the vast majority being used to produce journalism, as opposed to other operational business costs larger news organizations must consider into their budgets. This has given them an advantage, according to Jeremy at *The Sprawl*:

“This is what's crazy, is that we have the advantage in almost every way nowadays. Like honestly, and it's real weird to think of that because 10 years ago I was trying to get a job at the Calgary Herald and I thought that's where you want to end up. But now it's the

opposite. We're not tied to a print product; we're not tied to a schedule. We're not tied to just this legacy infrastructure.”

In addition to shifting how participants conceptualize journalistic success, this lean business model has allowed for greater flexibility and adaptability in meeting challenges, such as the recent global pandemic.

These organizations’ financial success and sustainability factors have all recently been tested by the major economic “disrupter” of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, unlike traditional journalism outlets’ reliance on advertising, which saw dozens shut down across the country, and major layoffs at community newsrooms, the new journalism organizations saw their financial security generally increase over the course of the pandemic. Some organizations received emergency federal funding. *The Tyee*, *The Sprawl*, and the *Discourse Cowichan* all saw their memberships increase as their readerships responded to the immediate need for reliable, local health information, as well as authentic community connection. Jeremy at *The Sprawl* said:

“In March [2020], we kind of sprang into action. And we're like, Okay, let's do an edition, a pop up edition about being alone, together. So like our comic artist did a bunch of comics on this theme that really connected with people. We did a project called *Sprawl Kids*, where we'd give kids an assignment, like a journalism assignment, and ask them to report back. So tell us about something cool on your street, whether through a picture or a podcast, or whatever it might be. So yeah, when that happened, we responded to it. And then people responded to that. It's like they wanted to be connected as they were being disconnected physically from each other.”

The Yards reported the most disruption to their organization, which unlike the other organizations, produces a print product, has a significant advertising and sponsorship revenue stream, and hosted many in-person events. However, they relied heavily on their volunteer base and scaled back on their hard costs throughout the pandemic, and didn't lay off any paid staff or decrease contract work or salaries. In general, these news organizations were in a better place to respond immediately to the effects of the pandemic, whereas traditional news organizations faltered. Overall, these new organizations are building towards financial sustainability by focusing on reader generated revenue while taking advantage of short term or government funding as it's available, but not relying on temporary measures to create journalist job security, which is their main objective as opposed to large profit margins. This has allowed them to be adaptable going into the future.

Essential skill development. In addition to revenue streams, skill development is another important area that can help news organizations make the transition from initial success to ongoing sustainability, relating to both the journalism skillset and the entrepreneurial skillset. Having highly skilled employees and leaders in the organization is important in any organization, and journalism outlets are no exception, especially with an industry undergoing such rapid change.

Three organizations said intentionally learning more about revenue streams has been helpful to their growth as an organization, specifically for journalists who typically aren't exposed to much about the journalism business. Emilee at *IndigiNews* said:

But I really like to learn how the funding models of independent media work because I think we all need to know. It's something that's changing, and there's some aspects of it that's new. So I'm trying to learn about it just as much as anyone else. So I don't really

know, that's just to say that I'm kind of new to it. Although I am trying to learn as much as I can.

In addition to being exposed to the revenue aspects of journalism, all six organizations felt there was an opportunity for strengthening journalism skills in order to be sustainable using new journalism models, especially around areas of community engaged journalism, exposure to more inclusive journalism practices and journalists, and core storytelling skills. Other non-traditional journalism skills were mentioned, including project management, building partnerships and relationships, some technical and digital skills, leading to larger conversation around entrepreneurial and business skills needed to scale to sustainability.

All six organizations pointed to the need for entrepreneurial mindset and skill development to build capacity within their organizations and within the industry, especially as this is not a traditional skillset for journalists. For example, Karen Unland at *Taproot* said, in order for new journalism organizations to succeed long term, they needed overcome a pervasive sense of “business illiteracy” in the industry. Many reported to developing the required entrepreneurial skills on the job, without any formal business training. Jeremy described the business aspect of his organization as a means to an end, and something that had to be done. Interestingly, while many agreed it would be beneficial for young journalists to have more exposure to business training, half also had resistance to the idea taking too much precedence in formal journalism educational settings.

Building diverse media ecosystems. As mentioned at the top of this section, all those interviewed felt there was no single way forward for the industry, and the future of journalism lies in many diverse solutions, dependent on the unique circumstances of particular regions or communities. Their hopes and dreams for the future of industry included success at every level

and size of journalism organization to serve Canada's diverse communities, building on the success they have seen within their new own organizations. While all of these journalists have been working hard within their organizations to build individual success, their version of success includes others succeeding as well. Jacqueline at the *Discourse Cowichan* said:

“It's really about sustainability. It's not really just about us. It's also about the news ecosystem overall. And you know this from working with Indiegraf, the mission of the company is not to grow and get really big or make a ton of money. It's to make a difference for individual communities and build systems that can be exploited so that every community gets innovation and community led journalism.”

Many of those interviewed felt the answer was in smaller, more agile organizations who could focus on filling specific gaps left by legacy media. “I think it'll be small, community scaled projects that will really emerge and connect with communities and make a difference,” said Jeremy of *The Sprawl*. One key to allowing these different types of organizations to flourish is to create a more supportive industry culture.

Supportive industry culture. Traditionally, journalism is known as a very competitive business, which can be detrimental to facing industry collective challenges. All those interviewed felt this aspect needed to be cultivated in order to assist all journalism organizations towards sustainability. Emilee of *IndigiNews* voiced her hopes for the future of the industry as there being room for everyone. “I would love to see the future of community media to allow the fact that there's space for all of us”.

This concept of cooperation over competition was echoed by the other publishers, some of which had positive formative experiences with gaining support from outside their own organization.

Several of the organizations have been assisted by programs and organizations, both within and outside the media industry, which have been key to building sustainability. Some of these programs provided financial support, such as The Facebook Journalism Project; others provided mentoring opportunities, entrepreneurial training, or collaborative initiatives and spaces, such as the Canadian Association of Journalists symposium, ATB Financial's X Growth program, or the Threshold Impact Venture Mentoring Service out of the University of Alberta; some provided industry recognition, such as the Digital Publishing Awards or LION Publishers. *The Discourse* media organization, which includes the *Discourse Cowichan* and *IndigiNews*, has launched a sister company called Indiegraf, which helps journalist entrepreneurs through a program called the Independent News Challenge, and also provides technology, marketing assistance, and other components to independent news organizations. (Full disclosure, this author's own news organization was involved in the pilot program.) All of these additional supports helped these organizations grow, which points to a greater need for these types of programs to be created or made available to journalist entrepreneurs. In addition, the larger independent news organizations have begun to answer this call for cooperation with the newly established Press Forward industry association, which began accepting new member applications in 2021.

Summary. Sustainability can be viewed as both the ability to continually produce financial revenue, but also creating the conditions that allow for people in these organizations to continue meeting the challenges all community news organizations are currently facing. All the

organizations included in this study are at different stages of sustainability, and are working to develop their own best practices to allow for their continued existence. Overall, the keys to sustainability involved generating initial revenue, creating long term financial security, entrepreneurial and journalism skill development, and opportunities around industry support. Once the formula to continued growth or sustainability has been achieved, the next chapter is that of potential replicability. This is important for organizations which have dreams of expanding to other communities, but also for those whose goals are to inspire other new or existing community news organizations to find their own successes.

Factors Moving towards Potential Replicability

Once individual organizations have proven to be sustainable news organizations, the next step is asking if their success can be replicated in other communities. As this is the most unproven area, the ideas and possibilities around replicability are the most hypothetical participant ideas included in this analysis; however, they are grounded in the lived experiences of those interviewed and merit mention and future discussion. When asked about their hopes and dreams for the industry, finding a successful formula to allow for their success and other's was strongly communicated, such as by Emilee at *IndigiNews*:

But I know, for me, I would love to see *IndigiNews* as big as CBC. I would love to see *IndigiNews* as its own news organization that has made its way into the mainstream, that has the same kind of reach. And I would love to see it comprised of a majority Indigenous people...But I would love to see more Indigenous people in the editorial stage and the editorial side of things, and on all levels, and just hiring reporters, paying reporters, paying people to share the stories that they're doing in their community.

Overall, three potential factors to developing replicability were revealed, which are fostering a supportive industry culture, utilizing technology, and shifting public perceptions.

A shift in the media industry. As mentioned above, a recent shift in the industry to value collaboration has been helpful to these new entrepreneurs and a trend needs to continue in order to create a welcoming environment for new media outlets to be established, or for the existing ones to branch out into other communities. Four of the people I interviewed felt they were perceiving this industry shift, noting general feelings of optimism generated by their own success and the stories of success they have been hearing regarding other independent media organizations in Canada. “There are a lot of good things happening. And yeah, a lot of us have been toiling away. And I feel like [we’re] having some success, despite the conditions that we’re working in, and not because of them”, said Jeanette at *The Tyee*. This success and momentum is being reflected in the creation of the new industry association previously mentioned, which will have the capacity to better represent independent media organizations’ needs and perspectives to the collective media industry in Canada. Jeremy of *The Sprawl*, who is a founding member of Press Forward, expressed a desire to present a stronger, unified voice to Ottawa regarding issues around media policy and funding: “If we could get organized and can put forward a vision and put ourselves on the radar, I do think it will make a difference”. This shift of acceptance of independent community media is also being felt at the editorial level, as one third of the organizations mentioned instances where their outlet was setting the news agenda in the region for other, more established outlets to follow, especially *IndigiNews* in the realm of Indigenous issues in the province. These shifts towards legitimization, both at an industry and readership level, will be explored further in the discussion section of this thesis.

A shift towards valuing local journalism. With all the interviews taking place with the background of the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a sense among those interviewed that a renewed sense of the importance of quality, locally produced journalism was taking place for the public. “More people are noticing the value missing, what's been left behind with all the newspaper closures,” said Jacqueline at the *Discourse Cowichan*. If this trend can continue into the future, it will contribute to the growth of strong community news outlets who are harnessing the power of strong reader relationships and membership contributions. In addition, this growing sense of increased value was matched by a perceived shift in the amount or willingness of people to pay for the journalism they are consuming.

Technological advantages. Historically, legacy news organizations have been slow to take advantage of new digital technologies which have disrupted their industry; however, new, primarily digital news publishing organizations have embraced this factor. As mentioned above, the research participants have used digital platforms and distribution methods to allow them to run lean and cost effective models. They have also utilized social media as a tool for promoting their journalism and growing their audiences, but also more importantly, to create two-way communication with their readerships. If community news organizations can continue to utilize digital technology in creative ways, it will make it easier to scale their organizations in other communities. Two of the organizations specifically mentioned hopes of potentially expanding their models into other communities: “I think that our long term goal is to turn this thing that we have now that has really grown iteratively and in a bolted on way into a repeatable process that could move to another city” said Karen Unland of *Taproot*. This desire to expand to other communities is also illustrated in *The Discourse / Indiegraf*'s use of economies of scale to provide other independent media organizations with digital publishing technologies, as well as in

The Tyee's, *The Sprawl's* and *Taproot's* sophisticated digital fundraising platforms and strategies.

Summary of moving towards potential replicability. None of these participants possess an ability to tell the future; however, from their interview data we can detect current perceived shifts in the external environment that may allow for replicability of new journalism organizations. Despite the overwhelming refrain of the demise of community journalism, several of these participants reported sensing a change in the industry created by their success and the success of other independent organizations across the county, a change in the public's attitude toward the value of local journalism, and the opportunities provided by new digital technologies. These changing conditions are opening the door toward future replicability; however, many challenges still remain.

Challenges to Overcome

Although the methodology for this research cast a specific focus on what was contributing to participating organizations' current successes and where they could envision themselves and the industry if this trajectory continued, discussion around current challenges did arise, primarily around frustration around the crisis narrative, frustration with sustainable funding, and frustration around a lack of resources. While being small, lean operations had many advantages, half of those interviewed mentioned challenges around a lack of manpower and other limitations faced as a small organization. As discussed earlier in the financial security section of these findings, four of the people I interviewed felt there was limited access to funding as an independent community news organization. Jeremy at *The Sprawl* elaborated on this issue, pointing out that initial funding is very difficult to obtain, and even more so for marginalized communities. Five of the organizations repeatedly expressed challenges around one-time funding, and needing to

find ways to bring in a steadier, more consistent revenue, alongside issues around not qualifying for current government funding.

Despite these familiar challenges, they have continued to put their best forward and lead from their values when facing the ongoing negativity in the industry. Simply by continuing to produce journalism in the face of the current media crisis narrative, these journalists and publishers are facing and meeting the most insidious challenge; however only two of those interviewed specifically mentioned frustration around this discourse. Karen at *Taproot*, a veteran of the industry voiced her concern:

So much of the oxygen around the future journalism and community journalism is just taken over by the doom and gloom of the legacy players that are disappointed that they don't get to keep doing what they've been doing. And that makes people think there's no journalism anymore, or everything's being overtaken by so called “fake news” and I just get impatient.

While not explicitly stated, much of what was discussed by all the participants was a direct result of and challenge to the crisis narrative. This issue of crisis discourse will be addressed in a more fulsome manner in the Discussion section following these initial findings.

Summary

Throughout the previous section, I have attempted to shed light on what we can learn from innovators in community-based news publishing in Alberta and B.C. who are using new journalism models and practices to create successful, sustainable, and replicable outlets. While this group of organizations is small, they have all achieved success of varying degrees in their journalistic impact and financial viability. The shared keys to this success are a dedication to

engaged journalism by creating rich reader relationships, fostering a supportive and positive internal culture, and embarking in an intentional shift in journalistic values, which was reflected both internally and through their journalism practices. Regarding both their financial and internal sustainability, several common themes emerged. They were generating financial security through a variety of revenue channels while maintaining lean operations focused on creating journalist job security, building out a set of essential skills comprised of new journalism practices but also business and entrepreneurial skills, fostering the creation of diverse, healthy community news ecosystems, and by receiving support through industry initiatives and collaboration. Although the factors allowing for potential replicability are few, they are powerful. The shift of industry allowing for the acceptance and success of new journalism models, more Canadian realizing the value of local news and the potential for paying for it, and the advantages provided by new digital technologies, are all combining to create conditions that may be more favourable to innovators in the journalism field. However, the road ahead still includes challenges, such as a lack of funding, lack of resources and frustration around the crisis narrative. The latter point will be expanded on in the following Discussion section of this thesis as explored through Carlson's metajournalistic discourse framework, alongside a deeper examination of the findings surrounding my first research question.

Discussion

Throughout the last section, we have seen how these outlets are answering the call of media scholars for new and innovative ways to produce community journalism, and their current success and trajectory supports the literature that contends community news not in state of crisis, but rather of necessary and vital transformation (Ferrucci, Nelson and Davis, Callison & Young). Through the action research appreciative inquiry lens, we are able to further discuss the ways in

which these outlets, when operating at their best, can produce co-created, regional knowledge regarding what is needed for community news entrepreneurs and innovators to be successful, sustainable, and replicable, in the face of overwhelming economic challenges. In a departure from a standard thesis format, I will dive into a discussion regarding my secondary analysis through Carlson's metajournalistic discourse framework (2016), which also includes findings from the conducted interviews, before moving into the final discussion surrounding the answers to my first research question, and how they are further underscored by the secondary analysis. Together, the dual analysis process informed my final recommendations for the industry to allow for the creation of new and existing community news organizations to create meaningful journalism for their communities.

Through Carlson's Metajournalistic Discourse Framework

To further uncover the ways in which these CNOs are challenging and reshaping metajournalistic discourses in their communities and in the larger industry, the data were deductively analyzed a second time using Carlson's metajournalistic framework, which was specifically developed to measure elements surrounding discourse and developments regarding the future of journalism. As discussed in the methods section above, this framework uses three layered discursive processes. The first two processes include *definition making*, which identifies the practices and norms, and *boundary setting*, which "demarcates the spaces in which these practices occur", (Carlson, p. 360). These two processes build to create the third process, *legitimization*. In addition, these discourses are created by actors, both journalistic and non-journalistic, and on sites where discursive action takes place, both within and outside the news sites, and regarding specific topics (Carlson, 2016). As this framework was originally developed to work with case studies and textual analysis in mind, the six in-depth conversations in my

research created a vast amount of nuanced data intersecting many of these interpretive processes and actors, sites, and topics. However, coding the interview data as regarding definitional control, boundary work, and legitimation proved to simplify the data while still providing interesting and solid analytic conclusions, hence, my inclusion of the analysis and data excerpts here. The analyzed discussions presented below are *generative metajournalistic discourse*, as it constitutes “generalized discussions originating from broader considerations of contemporary journalism” (Carlson, 2016, p. 358).

This discussion includes information gleaned while coding the interview data a second time; under definitional control I uncovered the themes of critiquing traditional journalism, support of traditional journalism, and support of new journalism practices and journalists. Under boundary work, I uncovered the themes regarding redefining where journalism takes place, how journalism can be financed, how the audience is involved, as well as changing internal organizational structures. Under legitimization, the most powerful and influential themes emerged, regarding both and non-acceptance by the larger industry and acceptance by readers. Furthermore, interpretation of the collective summary of data shows an important, and potentially watershed, moment in the evolving practice of community journalism in these provinces, documenting the creation of a positive metajournalistic narrative as a creative and passionate response to the ongoing crisis discourse surrounding journalism in Canada

Definitional control. As journalism is an ever-evolving practice, what constitutes journalism and its best practices are in a constant state of flux, as illustrated through interviews with the six selected CNOs. In regards to definition control, many of the conversations revolved around the theme of accepted norms and “what journalism ought to be” (Carlson, 2016, p. 358). In all cases, there were strong examples of what constituted critiquing traditional or legacy

community journalism, and the larger systems and companies responsible for that journalism, as having unintended negative effect on communities. This especially was so within the contexts of underserving visible minorities and Indigenous peoples. They spoke of poor quality journalism resulting from the pressure of the 24/7 news cycle, or fewer news stories, especially on important civic issues, as result of journalist layoffs and slashed budgets. In this instance, those interviewed felt traditional community journalism was not living up to the espoused ideals of journalism or meeting the journalistic needs of the communities they served. “Yeah, if you don't have in-depth journalism in your community, do you get the sense the stories matter?” said Jeremy of *The Sprawl*. Simon at *The Yards*, said the existing journalism norms and practices were not meeting the needs in his city: “I think there's a lot of traditional news organizations that have reduced their local coverage so much that there is not a lot of value add to consumer...But to be fair, a lot of news organizations aren't adding a lot of that local coverage that would make them stand up”. When analyzed through Carlson’s framework, these comments point to a strong and ongoing discourse surrounding what constitutes and defines journalism in this regional context. As discussed in the findings section, these outlets also all promoted and accepted certain values that are outside of current journalistic norms, such as innovation, inclusiveness, transparency. This process creates “the reiteration and negotiation of shared meanings and acceptable practices” (Carlson, 2016, p. 357). However, alongside the strong critiques were also ongoing conversations surrounding a reliance on many traditional journalism ideals and practices.

While the critique theme ran strongly throughout the data, there were slightly more instances of discourse of relying on traditional journalism practices and values. This leads me to conclude that, while there was creation of evolving discourses involving what constitutes journalism, there were also familiar discourses at play. Similar to the conclusion of the findings

of Carlson & Usher (2017), when analyzing the manifestos of new digital news startups; this “duality between tradition and innovation” (p. 569) means that, while these independent CNOs are critical of existing practices and norms of journalism, the foundation on which their work is based rests solidly on a bedrock of traditional journalism discourses such as accuracy and integrity. Emilee of *IndigiNews* captured this duality while relating that technologies or funding models may change, some components will stay the same. “Because journalism is not going away. And the fact that we want to highlight community stories, that's evergreen, that's always going to exist”. According to Carlson, “the repetition of arguments for journalism reveals deep-seated beliefs” (2016, p. 358), therefore while those practising new methods of journalism in these outlets may seem to be a radical element, they are actually reinforcing many existing beliefs regarding community journalism. That said, the ways in which they want to continue telling community stories through new journalism practices was the strongest definitional discourse that was present in the data.

As the topics of conversations surrounded new revenue models and journalism practices, it is not surprising that the highest number of mentions fell under the definitional control theme of supportive or positive comments for new journalism practices. However, this represents a strong departure from existing discourses, and therefore warrants special attention as Carlson (2016) contends “scholars should take seriously the divisions among journalists” (p. 356), as they represent a strong, interpretive community in this work and “definitions become points of contention among actors with differing perspectives” (p. 359). Some of the most interesting ideas and practices that were discussed fall into this theme, such as Emilee’s take on the work they are doing at *IndigiNews*: “You can say ‘decolonizing’. But I also think about it as relationship-based reporting and anti-oppressive ethic in the work”. When speaking about the larger industry as a

whole and *The Tyee's* place in it, Jeanette said: "The point is just that there's all different kinds of journalism. And it should be different organizations delivering it, not just one." There were also several mentions of who is defined as a journalist, including Emilee of their team at *IndigiNews*:

And then no one called themselves a journalist, like no one had really journalism experience before. So it is a lot of emerging journalists. But that's just the reality. If we want more Indigenous journalists or diverse journalists in newsrooms, we need to train them. And folks aren't always going to grad school for journalism for different reasons. And so they're not getting jobs. So we've also really been pushing like training. I've brought in an Alaska-based journalist, I brought in Winnipeg-based journalist Leonard Monkman, with Wet'suwet'en journalist, Trevor Jang. We have someone and each person is given training sessions on you know, just talking about their experience. So we really try and make time to do that, but it's on the fly. There's a lot of on the fly learning but, you know, I think other newsrooms and other people could take up from that as well as. You don't have to know everything going in. But you do need to have a place where you can train, you do need to have continual counselling and mentorship. I think that needs to be a part of any emerging journalist experience.

Karen Unland of *Taproot Edmonton* spoke of citizen journalists on Twitter, and other independent bloggers and podcasters, and their place in the larger context:

"And so that, just observing this whole world, I was thinking, this is amazing. Like, we have so much richer coverage of our city than we ever had before. And so I started trying to figure out ways, how could the newspaper incorporate this? How can we work with these people? How can we extend out into the community instead of just being the people on high that were like beaming down: this is the news."

Also of interest, Karen's partner in *Taproot* had no journalism experience, Simon at *The Yards* currently works in a public relations role, and Jeanette worked in the non-profit realm before moving to *The Tyee*, strongly illustrating these independent outlets are making their own definitions when it comes to who is qualified to practice or contribute to journalism. Like the definitions surrounding practices, these definitions matter, as they can include or exclude what is considered journalism in the final process of legitimization (Carlson, 2016), which is discussed further below. Carlson (2016) also points out that these definitions carry considerable weight when discussing topics relevant to the journalism crisis because these discourse guide what types of solutions are ultimately implemented (p. 359). These potential solutions are discussed further in the next section regarding boundary work.

Boundary work. Through metajournalistic discourse boundary work “various actors continually make and remake boundaries of acceptable practices though their interpretive labour” (Carlson, p. 360). Through their practices and related discourses, those interviewed were constantly pushing the boundaries of traditional journalism norms by creating new spaces and contexts where community journalism takes place, how that journalism can be funded and created, and what role the audience or the readership (a very powerful actor) should have in creating that journalism. As “boundaries demarcate the spaces in which these practices occur” (Carlson, 2016, p. 360), simply by creating their own independent outlets, these journalistic actors have redrawn the boundaries of metajournalistic sites, which they further expand by engaging in metajournalistic discourse with nonjournalistic actors, such as their readerships, in non-traditional spaces such as the comments sections under articles, on social media channels, and even in communication with their readership through tools such as surveys, events, and email exchanges. Jeanette at *The Tyee* said:

“There's different kinds of communities that we have relationships with. Like, one very distinct community is the comments section. So there's a community of like, 20 people, and they comment on every story. And they themselves create, like a little sub community of leaders.”

Jeremy at *The Sprawl* credits much of their success on harnessing the power of Twitter to engage with and build their community, and Jacqueline at the *Discourse Cowichan* regularly relies on digital surveys to interact and solicit feedback from their readers. As discussed in the findings, by creating these additional sites for metajournalistic discourse, they create stronger connections with their readership which in turn leads to consistent and growing financial contributions.

By looking outside of the traditional funding streams for Canadian media and adopting an array of ways of generating revenue, such as membership contributions, not-for-profit models, and foundational, grant, and government financial support, these outlets are remaking the metajournalistic discursive boundaries delineating how sustainable journalism is produced in the region. They also are connecting with stronger metajournalistic conversations in other areas that have seen more success with these models, such as the U.S. By proving these methods are viable by continuing to produce community journalism, they are adding to the discourses surrounding the future of journalism in Canada. Jeremy at *The Sprawl* said he was inspired by other crowdfunding journalism initiatives, including the podcast *Canadaland*:

“Yeah, it's made a big difference. Like, because we've kind of grown according to our crowdfunding. As the crowdfunding grows, it's like, Okay, this much is coming in per month. That means we can afford, you know, these people on contract and these freelancers. But then like with the membership program, it was like, Okay, now we can

do some extra stuff, specifically to build up our membership. Which then, it's that recurring monthly support that makes the whole thing sustainable."

The not-for-profit *The Yards* said their unique tripartite agreement between community organizations, combined with funding from sponsorships and membership events, had allowed them to achieve a successful level of community journalism. Karen Unland at *Taproot Edmonton* said they have been able to grow and expand using a unique combination of revenue streams, and felt there were many possibilities for financing journalism specific to the communities involved:

Because there's not any, there's not just one solution. Some of this is going to work as in a not for profit sense. And some of it is going to work possibly as offshoots of universities, and some of it is going to work as maybe even kind of like mainstream skunkworks that actually catch on and don't wither and die. And some of it is going to be little businesses like ours. And that's, that's the 1000 flowers that will bloom and I really do believe that what we could end up with at the end of all this is better than what we have.

As we discussed in the findings section, these boundaries surrounding new revenue models are closely linked to the metajournalistic discourses surrounding public and audience involvement.

The strongest theme to emerge under boundary work is related to the non-journalistic actor, the audience. According to Carlson (2016), scholars should be concerned with how the news audience fits into the equations and processes of metajournalistic discourse (p. 361). As illustrated throughout the data, the audience is one of the most important actors to these news outlets, and these organizations have purposely sought out new ways of engaging and working

alongside the audience to both finance and create community journalism. Jeanette at *The Tyee* explained:

“We believe in listening to our audience and involving our readers in meaningful ways. And the way that our model is set up is wherein we are incentivized to do that. Because if people feel like they are really involved, then our idea is that they will be more likely to financially contribute to the publication.”

When these organizations operate from a perspective of fostering rich reader relationships, it remakes a longstanding boundary in journalism as being outside of, detached, or above the audience. But as demonstrated throughout, these relationships were deeper than just financial arrangements. Jacqueline at the *Discourse Cowichan* said:

“And then with *The Discourse*, and starting to do the work, and realizing *The Discourses*’ approach to the work, it's not about barriers between you and the community. Certainly there have to be boundaries on what's acceptable and what's not. But it is really about having a relationship and a good way with the community where you're serving the community. And not just like, ‘I'm a journalist, I tell the news, I don't care about the impact of that news.’”

As “boundaries provide shared ways of understanding news work, and these mindsets inform how news is produced and consumed” (Carlson, 2016, p. 360), the importance of this generative discourse could be profound if adopted as a growing and accepted practice. These boundaries are important, as they are part of the process on the way to be recognized as a legitimate community journalism organization.

Legitimacy. As Carlson & Usher (2017) note, “newly established companies face not only the challenge of achieving a sustainable funding model, they must also establish themselves as legitimate chroniclers of the world” (p. 569). As we have seen throughout the data, these organizations feel their methods and models are effective, and are demonstrating their worth and value to readerships and communities, alongside the media industry, journalism schools, and the government, who are all powerful journalistic and non-journalistic actors. This ongoing process is that of legitimating, and it builds off distinctions of “certain actors, forms and norms” (Carlson, 2016, p. 360). The strongest theme to emerge under the banner of legitimation was an acceptance by readers. All six outlets expressed many instances of reader support and acceptance from a variety of metrics such as growing web traffic and email newsletter lists, sharing content and articles, posting comments and social media messages, sending unsolicited praise and feedback, and culminating in making financial contributions, the ultimate sign of audience legitimating. By analyzing this metajournalistic discourse through the lens of non-journalism actors, we can “better capture the fluidity of journalistic work” (Carlson, 2016, p. 356). By capturing a moment where the readership is conducting the main legitimizing process, we may be capturing a moment in time as these new models and practices become more widely accepted in the larger media industry.

While growing memberships and audiences are powerful legitimizing actors, the surrounding media industry is powerful in its own right, and this was the second strongest theme to emerge. This came in the form of other news outlets redistributing or picking up journalism produced by these outlets, the organizations setting the news agenda in their respective communities, or achieving recognition in the form of media industry awards. While there were fewer instances of the media industry supporting these new outlets than of the audience, they are

nonetheless important as “journalist-centric metajournalistic discourse usefully illustrates paradigmatic protectionism and efforts at jurisdictional control” (Carlson, 2016, p. 356); therefore, these instances go a long way in regards to legitimation in the Canadian news media industry. However, this process is by no means complete and many feel they still must continually prove themselves to the larger industry.

Half the interviews contained references to discourses of non-acceptance by the larger media industry, including the federal government. The organizations shared experiences of not qualifying for governmental funding and not qualifying for grants. In this context, government officials are functioning as non-journalistic legitimatizing actors as they decide which organizations are Qualified Canadian Journalism Organizations (QCJO) and benefit from federal tax credits and other opportunities. As Carlson notes, these boundaries, while social constructions, are important as they can affect the distribution of resources, as we see regarding the federal funding (Carlson, 2016, p. 360.) While this is only one component of the process of legitimation, it will continue to be important as more independent organizations are founded and the industry association finds its voice. This analysis also shows the industry should take its cue from the communities and work to grant these organizations the resources and legitimacy they require to continue in the work they are doing, both in their local communities and in the larger arena of finding solutions for producing community news. While this was the weakest theme, it still provides an important perspective on the road to legitimation these organizations are on, and it is important to note it is probable there would have been more evidence regarding challenges, but for the nature of the methodology focusing on the positive aspects.

Summary. In closing, Carlson (2016) asks the important question of what all this discourse surrounding the future of journalism actually does (p. 363). By analyzing

metajournalistic discourse, the data shows “this conversation is analytically meaningful as an interpretive space in which actors vie to define and shape the transformations taking place across news (p. 363). It is my hope that by analyzing the metajournalistic discourses of these independent news organizations who are building on their current successes, it can contribute to the growing body of knowledge publishers are looking for, as well as contribute to the important generative metajournalistic discourses in the regional context. The arguments surrounding legitimation have especially helped to inform my conclusions and industry recommendations, as they are a powerful tool. Through the above discussion I have addressed my research question surrounding how these publishers are changing metajournalistic discourse, and now I will return to discussing my first research question, which asks how can these organizations shed light on what it may take for new journalism organizations to be successful, sustainable, and replicable.

Dreaming of Success

As we have seen in the finding section, much of the initial success of these community news organizations have been gained by going against current industry convention and limiting dominant crisis narratives (Gurleyen & Hackett, 2016; Picard, 2014). By meeting the needs of their communities through innovative journalistic and business practices, they are illustrating that new and potentially sustainable ways of producing news in Canada are possible when properly supported. Many of the solutions, words, and themes that emerged through this section of the research are not regular attributes of journalism; collaboration, innovation, inclusion, transparency, and audience engagement are not high priorities at many Canadian newsrooms. By remaking their own definition of success anchored in creating positive, secure spaces, these organizations have done important journalistic work that supports their communities in meaningful ways. They have intentionally created newsroom cultures and organizations centred

around putting journalists first, as opposed to profits, and prioritizing well defined internal values which serve both their own and their audiences' needs. These practices are the opposite of the norm, and therefore struggled to be accepted as legitimate by the greater industry, as illustrated through Carlson's (2016) framework.

This emphasis on internal organizational structure and overall newsroom culture has not been well documented as an essential component to producing community news. However, previous research supports the call for a cultural shift within the news industry towards innovation and the need to adopt new business models (Steventon, 2016; Picard, 2016). I suggest further research should be done on the internal culture and organizational structure of emerging, independent journalism organizations.

These independent outlets have bravely engaged in creating new beliefs, norms, and values regarding the journalism they practice, while still adhering to the foundational components of "what journalism ought to be" (Carlson, 2016). The dichotomy of experiencing positive aspects and outcomes of legacy journalism, but at the same time realizing its limitations and unintended negative outcomes, has resulted in a shifting and changing set of journalistic values and practices anchored in tradition but reaching toward a new future of creating enhanced community impact and understanding. This emerging set of values should be examined and explored by not only new journalism organizations, but also those existing organizations who are struggling to stay relevant in a competitive digital environment.

While the larger news industry is struggling with, or completely ignoring, Canadian media's abhorrent history and negative effects regarding Indigenous peoples (Callison & Young, 2020), as well as other underrepresented communities, these organizations are dedicated to inclusive journalism and are driven to create news for everyone in their communities. Their work

and practices show a vital way forward in addressing the inequities upheld in our current models (Callison & Young, 2020). *IndigiNews* in particular has shown promise in helping to solve one of the largest faults of Canadian news organizations, which is creating further misunderstanding and division regarding Indigenous peoples and issues (cite). Not only has their work had a positive impact on their reporters and the Indigenous communities they serve, it also has assisted in creating better and more empathetic understanding in the settler community.

At their most successful, these organizations are practising the tenets of *engaged journalism*, further strengthening the evidence suggesting public journalism is undergoing a renaissance in independent media, bolstered by new technological capabilities and creative approaches to community journalism (Bro, 2019; Ferrucci et al., 2020; Min, 2020; Wenzel, 2020). Although legacy organizations may be hesitant to adopt these practices as they are a departure from some accepted “rules” of journalism, the participants and their success shows the need for these tenets to be included in accredited journalism training, alongside more exposure to new journalism models and practices. By purposely engaging deeply with their communities and readers, not only are these outlets creating better journalism, they are also harnessing the economic power of their audiences which has proved extremely relevant to creating sustainability.

Dreaming of Sustainability

These independently owned CNOs are an antidote to many of the problems created by the concentration of media ownership in Canada. The need to maintain high profit margins has been a stumbling block as legacy organizations attempt to respond to the current economic conditions and challenges (Skinner et al., 2016). In contrast, these lean organizations spend the majority of their revenue providing fair compensation for journalists and creating journalist job security,

which translates into producing more and better journalism. The economic and social disrupter of the COVID-19 pandemic is further indication and opportunity for the industry to embrace the sense of innovation media scholars say is required to create healthy news organizations. While many legacy news organizations are currently able to continue operating through the pandemic because of federal wage subsidies and the emergency COVID journalism funding, those outlets who have not shifted their business model may be left struggling when the federal money slows down as the pandemic passes, or stops completely with a change in governing federal party as it's yet to be seen if advertising revenue will rebound to the previous levels.

While no one revenue stream or combination of revenue streams has yet emerged as the perfect, sustainable formula, memberships were the common denominator between all the participants and seemed to hold the most promise for growth and long-term funding. However, even the most established outlet is still working toward becoming majority reader funded. Although the number of Canadians paying for news is growing, this trend needs to intensify (Reuters Institute, 2020). As underscored in the secondary analysis, if the value of locally produced journalism can continue to be illustrated to the public, they will respond with an increased willingness to pay for their local news. In addition, reliable and accessible long term funding is the essential key in making the transition toward majority reader funded, as we have seen with *The Tyee*, *The Sprawl*, and are beginning to see with the *Discourse Cowichan*. This type of patient capital is rare in Canada and should be the top of discussion for all policy makers going forward. Canada has been slow to adopt these trends and we have seen a greater acceptance of new models and funding in the United States (Picard, et al., 2016), although the regulatory environment in Canada is slowly shifting (Young & Hermida, 2020). Regarding non-profit models, greater exploration of the new Special Donee Designation is needed, specifically

in the context of community journalism, and this research does not help clarify the current uncertainty regarding the potential impact of this model (Benson). None of the publications in my research had yet to take advantage of this new classification.

Despite their steps toward sustainability, these organizations are not being supported or encouraged by the larger industry in the way they could be, which was made very explicit through the legitimation section of Carlson's (2016) metajournalistic framework. As discussed in Carlson's theory, these discourses are powerful, as the solutions that are heavily discussed are those that are implemented, and at this point, new revenue models are not being discussed at the industry and government levels. The ability of the federal government to assist in these outlets becoming sustainable is significant if they commit to long-term funding while other sustainable revenue streams are built out, particularly membership. As discussed in the literature and further illustrated by the research participants, government subsidies for journalism do not lead to long term revenue sustainability if they are not used in innovative ways (Picard). The federal government's current significant financial commitment and related policies should be re-examined in this light. As we have learned, the editorial tax credit is helpful if organizations can qualify for it as it allows organizations to hire journalists at a lower cost, however the LJI program, while helpful short term, creates internal instability. It remains to be seen how effective the federal Special Measures for Journalism funding will be. In other words, did organizations seize the opportunity to make innovative changes, or simply to prop up their existing operations in the hopes local advertising revenue will bounce back after the pandemic? As the literature reminds us, government has always subsidized journalism in Western democracies in some fashion and progressive media scholars agree that the government does have some role to play (Cage, Ren, etc.), which is supported by the evidence here.

Outside of government funding, other long term funding opportunities should be made available for news organizations and entrepreneurs, as almost all of the selected participants can attribute their success to some type of long term funding helping in the background. If this were to become more accessible, it would help to create healthy media ecosystems.

Dreaming of Replicability

While all of these CNOs have been able to achieve varying levels of success, there are external factors which could spur significant growth, one of those being increased levels of industry cooperation and collaboration, both at the independent media level and the wider community media level. During the research process for this thesis, the new independent media association Press Forward was formed, marking a significant milestone in this regard (Press Forward, 2020). By uniting the voices and efforts of the growing number of independent publishers in Canada and elevating their knowledge and concerns, it will help push their ideas and solutions into the realm of industry discourse. As Carlson's theory reminds us, legitimizing these discourses is extremely important as not only does it allow us to think, believe, and practice journalism differently, it also affects what type of solutions are actually implemented in the face of the media crisis. With a friendlier, more welcoming and helpful environment for all publishers, there is increased potential for growth and change, and for inspiring and building the healthy and diverse media ecosystems that are needed to meet the needs of our communities.

Recommendations

As this study was conducted in an action research methodology, driven by an appreciative inquiry framework which aimed to create practical co-created knowledge in a regional context, the discussion below further outlines steps and recommendations for both

individual practitioners and the larger Canadian industry to assist in the future creation of a diverse media ecosystem of CNOs. The following are my recommendations for community news publishers, their industry in Alberta and B.C. and at the federal level:

- 1) Training and exposure to new journalism models and engaged journalism should be a component of journalism training.
- 2) Long-term funding programs and financing should be made more available to independent community journalism organizations.
- 3) If current government funding is to continue, funding requirements should be more inclusive of independent community journalism organizations who are showing impact in their communities.
- 4) If current government funding is to continue, it should be redirected to fund innovation in community journalism and existing organizations should be incentivized to embrace innovation.
- 5) Current journalism funding models should concentrate on fair compensation for journalists and creating long-term job security over profits.
- 6) Creating positive and supportive internal cultures and values-driven newsrooms should be an internal priority for journalism organizations.
- 7) Collaboration at the industry level should be valued above competition.
- 8) The industry should adopt a collective goal of creating and supporting a diverse media ecosystem to better serve all communities.
- 9) BIPOC journalists and journalism organizations led by and serving BIPOC communities and should be prioritized for funding and support.

- 10) Collective effort should be made to foster the shift in Canadians valuing and paying for locally produced journalism.

Conclusion – Challenging the Crisis Narrative

The interviews and conversations with those editors, publishers and reporters using new revenue models and journalism practices in B.C. and Alberta provided a rich data set, layered with nuance and powerful metajournalistic discourses. These conversations capture a moment in space and time towards a more sustainable, equitable, and diverse media landscape in their respective provinces. When taken collectively, they produce their own powerful narrative regarding potential solutions for producing community journalism in Canada. As many of the participants voiced, they are sensing independent community media is turning a corner in its ability to become a viable option. Karen Unland of *Taproot Edmonton* said:

“I do think that our fellow travellers in this space are putting a lot of exciting things into the world, they are increasingly getting recognized for that work in lots of different ways. And all of the efforts for everybody to kind of help each other go forward is also very encouraging. A lot of us are so heads down and trying to make our businesses or organizations work that I don't know that we have as much time or that we dedicate as much time as we ought to that optimistic narrative.”

By putting their shared experiences and knowledge into one space, we have co-created new knowledge on the pathway towards those more optimistic narratives that will help bolster existing organizations, while encouraging others to start up or grow and change.

My first research question attempted to provide practical and tangible knowledge for the issues facing the journalism industry, while my second research question attempted to provide

insight in the ways in which we talk about these issues and solutions. Through this dual approach, it was my hope as a fellow publisher to provide concrete answers and solutions regarding new models of journalism. While this research goes a long way to bringing a variety of formative experiences into one space, it does not provide a be-all, end-all answer or definitive formula for success. It does however, provide several significant building blocks publishers in the region can use to create successful, sustainable and replicable CNOs, as no significant data regarding Western Canada and new journalism models and practices existed. While it may be too early to determine if all of these outlets will make the transition into long-term sustainability, there is a significant amount of data to confirm they are on their way, especially those with dedicated and growing memberships, and access to alternative long-term funding. In addition, these successes validate the connection between pursuing strong reader engagement, or *engaged journalism*, and potential solutions to the challenges facing community news publishers. This analysis also shows that while these organizations have made it a long way on their own, much greater success, sustainability, and potential replicability can be achieved with stronger industry support and acceptance of these new models.

At the same time, this research also shows how these innovative CNOs are challenging and changing metajournalistic discourses. They are defining how journalism should be practiced in their communities and who is best qualified to produce that journalism, generally at odds with many accepted norms, values, and beliefs of traditional journalism. They are redefining boundaries regarding how and to what degree audiences should be involved in producing community news, and creating new and effective spaces where metajournalistic discourses take place. Most importantly, they are gaining ground as legitimate organizations with their growing

readerships, and going on to further legitimize their models and practices in the larger media crisis context.

While noting this research is specifically aimed at producing local knowledge, it should be noted its findings may be of limited use in other regional or national contexts. In addition, I would have liked to include a larger number of publishers in this sample; however, there are a very limited number of independent news organizations in the geographic region. I would have also liked to include an independent news organization currently transitioning from an advertising model to new revenue model, however one was not available. While this research is critical in regards to existing legacy media and the failings of its current funding model and related government policies, it is important to note this criticism is aimed a larger structures involved in community news gathering, and not at individual publishers, editors, or journalists, and hopes to bridge the gap between the functional concerns of business and critical concerns related to democracy and justice. This research also recognizes the issues facing traditional journalism organizations and Canadian news media are complex, and alternative models may not be suitable for every community or publication. However, as the answers may lie in the combination of “private, public, and community ownership” (Crowther et al., 2016, p. 5), it is important work to discover as much as possible regarding new models, especially in this crucial moment of a pandemic fallout. By analyzing six independent, community-based publications who are exploring new journalism models in 2020 this research can contribute to this growing body of knowledge to help facilitate real change at the local level.

As mentioned above, this is only the beginning of the type of research that could be done regarding this topic in the region and throughout Canada. Effort should be made to continue to track the creation and success of those news organizations employing new journalism models

and methods. These studies should take place at the national level, but also comparatively between provinces, and between remote or rural communities and urban areas. As the membership model is proving to be the most effective in this region, quantitative research and effort should be conducted to discover a more exact formula, and find what are the additional variables necessary for success. These outlets' success should be revisited at regular intervals to track a variety of metrics indicating success to track their ongoing sustainability. In addition, a comparative analysis should be conducted using the COVID-19 pandemic as an economic disrupter, including both new revenue models and legacy models.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Questions to Guide the Semi-structured Interview

- 1) What experiences have you had that led you to believe that community news could and should be done differently? Can you think of a positive experience you had or examples that convinced you that news could be done differently?
- 2) What has been a high-point experience in your organization when you felt most alive, successful, and effective? What contributed to or allowed that high point?
- 3) What are the values of your organization and how does that shape your newsroom culture and organizational structure? How does this play out in your community journalism practices? (Does this differ from legacy newsrooms or other publications you may have worked for?)
- 4) What are the goals and aspirations of your organization, and tell me about a time you've seen these play out to fruition or have the desired impact in the community? What did you learn in that instance?
- 5) What are the core factors or positive strengths that make this organization function at its best, when it feels a great place to be in, and without which it would cease to exist? (What are the values, beliefs, and capabilities of the organization when it's 'at its best'?)
- 6) Tell me about your organization's relationship with its community and readership. What are you noticing as this relationship evolves? What are you hearing from your readers, and what are the most inspiring and energizing comments you have received or communicated with those readers? Can you tell me a story that captures what is happening when your relationship with readers and the community at large is at its best?

- 7) What do you value most about yourself, your work, and your organization? What are your strongest individual assets that contribute to your organization's success? What are the traits, skills, attitudes, and mindsets needed to thrive using new models of journalism?
- 8) What are your hopes and dreams for the community news industry in your current province? What is needed to create a media ecosystem of successful, sustainable, and replicable outlets? If there were no impediments to realizing these dreams, what would the community news industry be doing 5 years from now, or 10 years if you can see that far? What will it take to get there?

Appendix 2 – Letter of Invitation / Consent Form

My name is Brandi Schier, and I am inviting you to participate in my thesis research, part of the requirement for a Masters of Arts in Professional Communication at Royal Roads University. My credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by emailing my supervisor Dr. Virginia McKendry (faculty member in the School of Communication and Culture), at virginia.mckendry@royalroads.ca. My credentials can be further checked by telephoning the program head of the School of Communication and Culture, Dr. Chaseten Remillard, at 250-391-2600.

This document constitutes an agreement to participate in my research project, the purpose of which is to create actionable, regionally-situated (BC and Alberta) knowledge regarding the successful development of new models of journalism and examine how publications employing these models are creating and changing metajournalistic discourses (in short, the ways in which we conceive of and talk about journalism and the news industry). I am reaching out to you and others who are independent publishers using new journalism models and related journalism practices to produce local news, tied to a specific geographic community in B.C. or Alberta, which are the parameters of this study.

The research will consist of semi-structured interview questions and is foreseen to last 1 to 1.5 hours long. The foreseen questions will refer to your personal, professional, experiential, or geographical experiences regarding new journalism models and related practices. In addition to submitting my final report to Royal Roads University in partial fulfillment for a Master of Arts in Professional Communication degree, I will also be sharing my research findings by publishing resulting recommendations on my own news organization's website and social media channels, and hope to host a digital panel event with the study participants on my news organization's social media channels.

As a participant, it is my hope you will benefit from this study by helping to create a supportive community of practice among other independent publishers by networking and learning together, while co-creating a new discourse in the industry. After the research has been concluded others in the industry may learn and apply these findings to their own newsrooms and communities. Not only will this assist me in fulfilling my degree, it will contribute to the small but growing body of scholarship surrounding new revenue models of journalism and related practices to assist those in both journalism and journalism studies in finding new ways of producing community news. This is especially important as Canada is currently facing a journalism crisis which has only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This will also assist Royal Roads University in its mission of change making.

Information will be recorded in video format and electronic transcriptions.

These interview transcripts and recordings will be kept strictly confidential on a paid Google Suite storage cloud which includes data security and only I will have access to that raw data. I will hold the data for a period of one year from the date of my thesis defense to allow for the data to be used for the digital panel event, however no one on the panel except myself will have access to the interview data. This is in case the panel discussion suggests that there is value in revisiting the interview data. In addition, an appendix will be created to hold the interview findings for potential additional research uses once the interview data is destroyed. An electronic copy of the data collected, with no public access, will be held for a period of one year at Royal Roads University.

As you are publicly known for your roles within your community news organizations, confidentiality will not be able to be granted, however at no time will any comment be attributed to you unless your specific agreement to attribute that comment has been obtained beforehand. A copy of the interview transcripts will be provided after the interview so the participant has the opportunity to clarify and elaborate on answers, or to deem information too sensitive for publication. If desired, a pseudonym can be created so your name would not be searchable on the published thesis.

You are not compelled to participate in this research project. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without prejudice. Similarly, if you choose not to participate in this research project, this information will also be maintained in confidence. By consenting, you have not waived any rights to legal recourse in the event research related harm.

By signing this letter, you give free and informed consent to participate in this project.

Name: (Please Print): _____

Signed: _____

Date: _____