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Service Innovation and Value Creation in Local Journalism During Times of Crisis

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ABSTRACT

Journalism innovation, according to service innovation theory, is about providing new journalistic services that create value for audiences, society, and the news organisation itself. This study explores how local news media responded to the Coronavirus crisis in terms of service innovation. Based on interviews with editors and top management representatives at two local newspaper groups in Norway ($N=20$), we show how local newspapers developed new digital services in response to audiences' need for guidance, overview, and a sense of togetherness, and how the media operations generated revenues in the process. Theoretically, the study identifies two key innovation dynamics in local journalism during a crisis: A social-economic value creation dynamic which captures how local newspapers appropriate their business model to accommodate new service offerings and balance social and economic value creation considerations; and a service system-audience experience dynamic which captures how innovation in journalistic offerings are linked to concurrent innovations in journalistic production processes. This research enhances the understanding of journalism innovation as a value-creating phenomenon and the factors that stimulate such value creation during crises.

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Local journalism; service journalism; service innovation; Coronavirus crisis; innovation capacity; innovation ability; value creation

Introduction

The world sees an increasing number of crises whereby dramatic events and developments on the international scene have severe local consequences. The Coronavirus crisis is one such crisis that foregrounded the importance of local journalism while simultaneously disrupting local news production and damaging local news media's advertising business (Jenkins 2020; Wahl-Jorgensen, Garcia-Blanco, and Boelle 2021). These developments accentuated the necessity for the innovation of local news offerings, newsroom operations and revenues. Essentially, local news media were encouraged to innovate the way they create value, as knowledge-producing service institutions, as well as commercial operations. Such value-creating innovation has hitherto received little attention

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in the growing research on media and COVID-19 (Jenkins and Jerónimo 2021; Finneman, Mari, and Thomas 2021). The present study addresses this research gap by investigating how local news media responded to the Coronavirus crisis as an opportunity to enhance social and economic value creation by developing new journalistic services. This approach aligns with previous journalism studies with a management outlook on journalism during times of crisis (e.g., Appelgren 2022) and takes heed of Lewis' (2020) call for more journalism research on the business of news in the wake of the Coronavirus crisis.

Based on service innovation theory, we examine innovation in local journalism as the provision of new journalistic services that create value for audiences, society, and the news organisation itself. In other words, creating new value—be it social, economic, or any other kind—is the overall objective of innovation (Furseth and Cuthbertson 2016). The service innovation approach speaks to the service journalism research tradition (e.g., Eide 2017; Nørgaard Kristensen and From 2012; Mellado 2022) which emphasises how news media serve audiences as citizens, consumers and clients by providing “information, advice and help” (Eide and Knight 1999, 525). We perceive service journalism’s focus on helping and empowering the individual, providing orientation in a complex world while simultaneously strengthening the collective (From and Nørgaard Kristensen 2018) as particularly relevant for local news media’s role as service providers during the Coronavirus crisis. Service innovation theory regards news media as service institutions that are increasingly creating value through digital news services, rather than physical goods. Moreover, news media are required to nurture individual relationships with audiences, solve audiences’ needs, create simplicity, and ease of use, and focus on interactions with consumers (Villi and Picard 2019). In journalism research, this has been observed as an audience turn whereby news media are more and more focused on “how to be of *service* to audiences” and “how to provide them with a quality experience” (Costera Meijer 2020, 2338).

We apply the Service Innovation Triangle (SIT) (Furseth and Cuthbertson 2016), to unpack local news media’s ability to innovate as service providers during the Coronavirus crisis. Specifically, we ask how local news media responded to the crisis in terms of service innovation. We focus on local newspapers’ ability to change their service system, i.e., the way news is produced and distributed and their ability to create new and improved audience experiences. Moreover, we explore how local news media monetised these innovations through their business model and how this contributed to economic and social value creation. Our research is based on qualitative data from in-depth interviews with editors and top-level managers at two local newspapers groups in Norway ($N=20$). Owing to its digitally advanced media system, Norway serves as an interesting case for studies of service innovation in local journalism.

This research makes two distinct contributions. Empirically, the study provides new insights on local newspapers’ ability to develop new digital services in response to audiences’ needs for useful guidance, interaction, and sense of togetherness in times of crisis and how they generate revenues in the process. Theoretically, the study identifies two key innovation dynamics which could inform future research on journalistic innovation and value creation during crises: (1) A *social-economic value creation dynamic* which captures how local newspapers appropriate their business model to accommodate new service offerings and balance social and economic value creation considerations; and (2) A *service system-audience experience dynamic* which captures how innovation in journalistic offerings are linked to innovations in journalistic production processes.

Journalistic Service Innovation in the Context of COVID-19

Applying perspectives from the service innovation literature may seem like an unusual approach to studying innovation in local journalism. Two key premises underpin this choice of theoretical framing: (1) (Local) journalism is essentially about creating value for key stakeholders such as audiences and society at large. This, in turn, creates economic value for news media (e.g., Picard 2010; Olsen 2021). (2) Such value creation is increasingly based on the provision of intangible, digital news services, rather than physical goods, as well as on nurturing deeper, reciprocal relationships with audiences (Villi and Picard 2019). These service characteristics of news media (Cestino and Berndt 2017) are well documented in recent local journalism research (e.g. Jenkins and Nielsen 2020; Jenkins and Jerónimo 2021; Negreira-Rey, Amigo, and Jerónimo, 2022). The findings in this research suggest an increased service emphasis in local journalism, which is closely linked to innovation—both in terms of how journalism is shaped and distributed, as well as how it is consumed and monetised. The concept of service innovation encompasses this shift by emphasising how innovation is essentially about creating value based on new services and/or improvements in existing services (Furseth and Cuthbertson 2016). This includes the process of developing new and/or improved services as well as the outcome of that process (Witell et al. 2016). Below we elaborate on these points in relation to the Coronavirus crisis.

The first premise—local journalism’s value-creating purpose—concerns local news media’s role as social institutions and business operations and how they create social as well as economic value. Local news media create social value by serving as information sources and as integrative forces that tie people and communities together (Hess and Waller 2016). During the Coronavirus crisis, news media have filled information functions by providing essential news about the virus, by monitoring and keeping authorities accountable for Coronavirus related policies (Vobič 2021; Wahl-Jorgensen and Quandt 2022), and by debunking misinformation about public health issues (Perreault and Perreault 2021). By providing constructive news that could create positive rather than negative emotions among the public and ease the burden of the crisis (van Antwerpen, Turnbull, and Searston 2022), news media have also served as community integrators. For example, Wahl-Jorgensen, Garcia-Blanco, and Boelle (2021) found that local media in the UK shared positive stories about community initiatives and offered community-based solutions to citizens in need, thus reflecting social cohesion and cooperation in the Coronavirus coverage. Such active engagement that solves problems in peoples’ everyday lives and helps them navigate a complex world, is a key characteristic of service journalism (From and Nørgaard Kristensen 2018), which arguably became particularly valuable for people amid the pandemic and the many problems caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. While news media have been criticised for several failings in their coverage of the pandemic (Mellado et al. 2021), there has been a huge potential for news media to create social value in their capacity as information sources and community integrators.

Regarding economic value creation, declining advertising revenue represents a major uncertainty for local media operations (Sjøvaag and Owren 2021), which has increased the industry’s dependency on audience revenue over time (Olsen, Kalsnes, and Barland 2021). The Coronavirus crisis may have accelerated this process by further reducing local advertising spending while also increasing online news consumption. The latter suggests an

increase in news interest which could be monetised by requiring audiences to pay for Coronavirus (and other) news online (Kim, Wang, and Malthouse 2022).

The second premise—value creation takes place through intangible, digital services and entails deeper, reciprocal relationships with audiences—captures a transformation of local journalism, whereby physical products such as printed newspapers are losing ground to digital news offerings (e.g., Jenkins and Nielsen 2020). This has been described as the servitisation of news media (Cestino and Berndt 2017). Traditional forms of journalism, adapted to digital platforms, are supplemented by a multitude of innovative digital journalism (Lopezosa et al. 2021; García-Avilés 2021) distributed on mobile and social media platforms (e.g., Chua and Westlund 2022), often in personalised formats, which disassembles the news as a finite journalistic product (Schjøtt Hansen and Hartley 2021). Digital technologies have stimulated innovation in the form of more interactive, on-demand, and customisable journalism, whereby audiences are increasingly shaping the journalistic offering (Costera Meijer 2020). As such, audiences serve as co-creators of journalism's value, rather than passive value recipients—a key principle in service perspectives on news media's value creation (Cestino and Berndt 2017; Villi and Picard 2019). In the context of the Coronavirus crisis, research shows how, for example, interactive data-journalism has allowed audiences to obtain insights about the pandemic in a self-directed fashion (Pentzold, Fechner, and Zuber 2021; Konow-Lund, Mtchedlidze, and Barland 2022).

The transformation of local journalism into immaterial, interactive services is the cumulative result of often small and incremental innovations which, as described by Paulussen (2016), represent a significant and fundamental evolution of journalism over time. So far there has been little empirical research on how the Coronavirus crisis has influenced this transformation of local journalism, specifically whether and how service innovation has been affected in times of crisis. Journalism research has demonstrated how a crisis could serve as a driving force for innovation (Konow-Lund, Hågvar, and Olsson 2019). However, it could also slow down change processes and encourage conservative responses aimed at doing journalism as usual (García-Avilés 2021). This ambivalence invites further empirical investigation of the impact of the Coronavirus crisis on service innovation in the news sector. Moreover, we are encouraged to explore factors that stimulate or impede service innovation among news media and to find a structured way of analysing how these factors come into play, how they interact and how they affect journalism's value creation.

Unpacking Service Innovation in Local Journalism

Innovation in journalism is driven (or hindered) by factors inside and outside the media organisation (Krumsvik et al. 2019). The present study focuses on media institutional factors, treating the Coronavirus crisis as the overarching exogenous influence on innovation. Previous research has described how these internal factors relate to structure, agency, and technology—from organisational hierarchy and lines of command to resource allocation, technological infrastructure, recruitment, training and professional cultures (Paulussen 2016). Different conceptualisations have been offered to capture these factors within one holistic model (e.g., Westlund and Lewis 2014; Posetti 2018) as well as the interplay between them (García-Avilés et al. 2019; Dogruel 2015). However,

the explicit value creation purpose of innovation is lacking from these conceptualisations, which makes the overall goal of innovation in journalism unclear. Moreover, they do not distinguish between factors that are more or less important for value creation.

To emphasize the value creation purpose of innovation and identify key factors in such value creation, we draw on service innovation literature and the Service Innovation Triangle (SIT) developed by Furseth and Cuthbertson (2016). The SIT-framework consists of nine factors involved in the innovation process and outcome. The founding idea of the triangle is that any successful innovation must create value. In the context of this study, we interpret this as an imperative for local media to innovate the way they serve the interests of audiences by providing orientation, help, and connection with the collective in a constructive way (From and Nørgaard Kristensen 2018). This service role creates social value when people get better informed and able to make good decisions for themselves and the collective. When audiences pay for the services of local media organisations, this generates economic value for these organisations (Olsen 2021). This economic value perspective aligns with journalism studies that emphasise how sustainable innovation in journalism includes business models and the finding of new revenue streams (e.g., Posetti 2018). Social and economic value creation are often in conflict (Picard 2010). However, in our view, economic value cannot replace or override social value creation as the overarching purpose of innovation in journalism, nor can it be ignored.

The triangle further distinguishes between innovation capacity, innovation ability and innovation outcome, visualised as three different layers as shown in Figure 1.

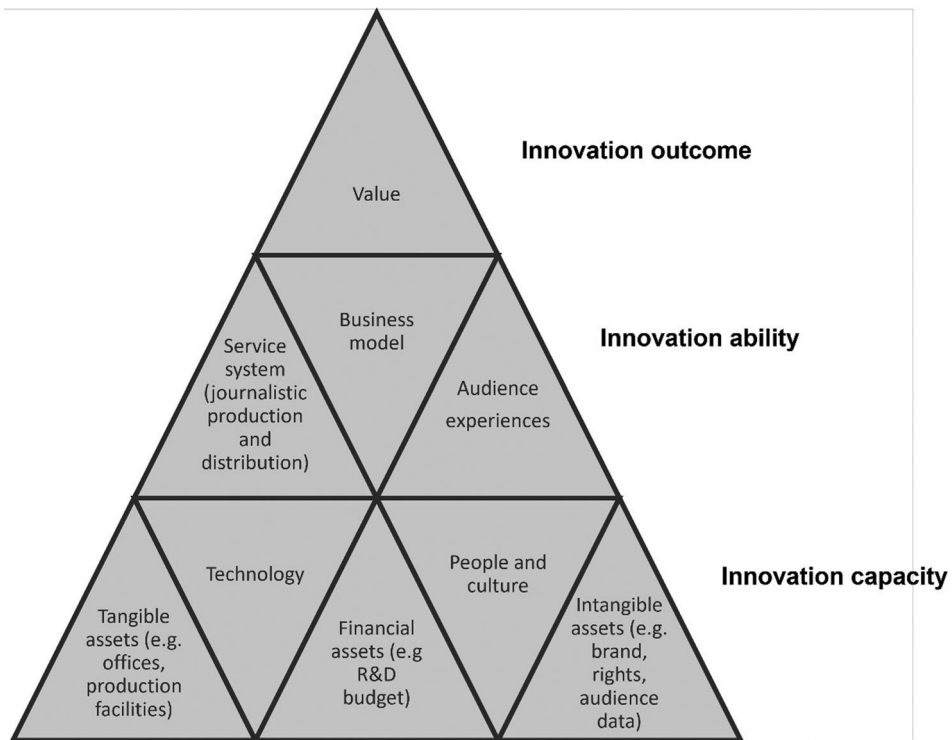


Figure 1. The Service Innovation Triangle (SIT), adapted from Furseth and Cuthbertson (2016).

Innovation capacity represents the potential for innovation provided by the media organisation's available resources. This includes tangible, intangible, and financial assets, as well as technology, and people/culture (Furseth and Cuthbertson 2016). In a media company, *tangible assets* typically encompass the physical newsroom and other production facilities. *Intangible assets* refer to resources such as audience insight and data, copyright, and cultural property rights, as well as the media company's brand value and reputation. In journalistic innovation, audience analytics has become a particularly influential intangible asset for news operations trying to satisfy their audiences (Costera Meijer 2020). *Financial assets* include all forms of cash or credit that can be invested in innovation. *Technology* includes a variety of platforms and tools for news production, presentation, and distribution, for customer management and more, whereas *people and culture* include a media organisation's employees as well as the culture and competency they represent. Several media innovation studies identify a lack of resources as a major constraint to the adoption of innovations in the newsroom (Paulussen 2016; García-Avilés et al. 2019), while others find that media organisations are too focused on one particular resource—technology—at the expense of more strategic approaches to innovation (Posetti 2018).

Innovation ability captures how innovation resources are turned into new and better services for audiences and how this can be monetised or create non-economic value in term of societal value for example in local communities. Innovation ability comprises three components: Service system, business model and customer experiences (Furseth and Cuthbertson 2016). In our application, the latter refers to *audience experiences* and articulates the imperative of innovating journalism in line with audiences' needs and wants (Costera Meijer 2020). *Service system* encompasses how news media align their assets to create journalistic content, which provide new and/or improved audience experiences. *Business model* refers to how a commercial news provider makes money from journalism by meeting new or emerging audience needs, improving audience experiences, and engaging in deeper relationships with audiences (e.g., Villi and Picard 2019). The business model is closely related to the final, top level of the SIT-framework—value—and connects this component to service system and audience experiences.

Value includes economic, social, environmental, and any other kind of value created through service innovation and offered to key stakeholders (Furseth and Cuthbertson 2016). In journalism, stakeholders could include owners, employees, partners, suppliers, and others involved in the value creation process, as well as other types of customers such as advertisers (Picard 2010). In our application of the SIT-framework, we focus on local news media's value creation for audiences, and how this generates revenues that create economic value for the media operation as well as social value for the broader society.

The hierarchical structure of the SIT-framework proposes that although capacity factors are important for innovation, ability factors are more important for innovation that creates value. Furseth and Cuthbertson (2016) base this premise on insights from empirical studies demonstrating how even some of the most resourceful firms may be unable to innovate in a way that creates substantial new value in a digital environment. Similar observations have been made in the media industry (Küng 2013; Krumsvik et al. 2019). The SIT hierarchy also resonates with Posetti's (2018) point that journalism innovation needs to focus on core concepts such as content, business development and audiences

rather than pursuing technological advances with no clear purpose. Another important aspect of the SIT-framework is how it portrays the interplay between audience experiences, service system and business model in value creation. Changes in one such ability factor often stimulate or even require changes in another (Furseth and Cuthbertson 2016) and such dynamics are crucial for value creation.

Based on the premise that service innovation is essentially about using available resources to create new and improved value through new service offerings to audiences, we apply an explorative approach to local news media's innovation amid the Coronavirus crisis. Using the SIT-framework as a guide, our overarching research question is how local news media responded to the crisis in terms of service innovation. Specifically, we investigate their ability to offer new or improved audience experiences through their service system and generate revenues in the process by exploiting available innovation capacity. By taking this approach, our focus is on journalistic innovation that, by mitigating some of the many problems created by the pandemic, creates value for individual media as well as for broader society. Moreover, we explore how this relates to economic value creation and local news media's dependency on reader revenue.

Method

The Norwegian Context and Case Companies

Norway, with its more than 200 newspapers serving a population of 5.4 million people, is a relevant case for research on local journalism innovation. The country's newspaper industry faced and responded to digital innovation challenges early on and offers an extraordinary opportunity for gaining insights from pioneers and early adopters of digital innovation (Sraml Gonzalez and Gulbrandsen 2021). The Norwegian population is among the most digitally literate in the world, with high access to both broadband and digital services (Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation 2021). Moreover, news consumption in Norway is high, with 85% of the adult population reading newspapers or dedicated digital news sites every day. About 41% of the population is willing to pay to access news online, which is higher than in any of the 46 markets surveyed for the Reuters Institute Digital News report 2022 (Newman et al. 2022). However, while reader revenue is on the rise, advertising revenue is declining among Norwegian newspapers (Olsen, Kalsnes, and Barland 2021).

While other media systems are experiencing accelerating local newspaper extinction, the number of titles has remained stable in Norway (Høst 2021). Most of these operations are small (circulation 2 000–5 000), serving one or a few local communities. These smaller titles are increasingly incorporated in larger newspaper groups with more competency and innovation resources available (The Norwegian Media Authority 2022). The leading Norwegian local newspaper companies are Amedia and Polaris and these are the two case companies in this study. Amedia is the largest of the two, publishing 80+ titles primarily on the local and regional level. Amedia's main competitor Polaris is the country's second largest local newspaper company publishing 60+ local newspaper titles. Both Amedia and Polaris have pursued expansion strategies over the last years, growing substantially through acquisitions as well as launches of new operations. Despite the Coronavirus crisis causing disruption among news media, these companies reported

considerable growth in earnings in 2020, with total revenues amounting to 3.64 billion NOK in Amedia (Amedia Annual Report 2020) and 3.51 billion NOK in Polaris (Polaris Annual Report 2020).

Material and Methods

Our research is exploratory in nature, the SIT-framework serving as a guide that helped us identify key areas of inquiry. The study is based on 20 in-depth interviews with the chief editor or news editor at six Polaris newspapers and ten Amedia newspapers, in addition to one Amedia and three Polaris top-level managers. Data collection was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) as part of the Media Innovation Through the Corona Crisis Project (MICC) at BI Norwegian Business School (reference number 227818). Informed consent was given by all participants in accordance with The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees' guidelines. The purposive sample aimed to capture the breadth and diversity of the two newspaper groups as well as local and corporate perspectives on innovation during the Coronavirus crisis. We also wanted interviewees who, based on their experience and knowledge, could reflect on innovation ability and capacity in their organisation. With assistance from the Norwegian Institute of Journalism, a leading competency and training centre for news organisations, we identified relevant cases. The interviews were conducted from March to May in 2021, the second year of the Coronavirus pandemic. The size and composition of the sample, such as the low number of small newspapers with a circulation below 5000 copies, is a limitation of the study that should not be ignored in the interpretation of findings. Despite being limited in number and thus not generalisable, the participants' in-depth qualitative accounts and their experiences with service innovation offer constructive insights that are useful for developing a deeper understanding of service innovation in journalism. These accounts should not be interpreted as evidence of newsroom practices per se but as perceptions among news managers who have first-hand knowledge and experiences with such practices. The newspapers included in our sample are listed in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Sample newspapers, mother company and total circulation (print and digital).

	Company	Circulation
Adressa	Polaris	75 630
Fædrelandsvennen	Polaris	36 614
Bergensavisen, BA	Amedia	27 068
Sunnmørsposten	Polaris	26 600
Budstikka	Amedia	22 394
Avisa Nordland	Amedia	22 210
Nettavisen	Amedia	16 530
Varden	Polaris	18 497
Glåmdalen	Amedia	15 387
Moss Avis	Amedia	14 555
Jærbladet	Amedia	13 458
Firda	Amedia	11 956
Namdalsavisa	Amedia	10 714
Harstad Tidende	Polaris	9 054
iTromsø	Polaris	8 205
Lofot-Tidende	Amedia	3 290

Note: Circulation figures are sourced by *Mediebedriftene* (2020).

Each respondent was interviewed via Zoom. The interviews, which lasted for 1–1,5 hours, were based on a set of standardised, open-ended questions developed from the SIT-framework. The questions emphasised in the study focused on how the respondents described various innovation initiatives launched amid the Coronavirus crisis, and their organisation's capacity to innovate in terms of people, technology, and other resources. The respondents also discussed innovation ability factors such as the structuring and operation of news production (service system), development of new journalistic services (audience experiences), and revenue streams (business model), and reflected on value creation as a way of serving the interests of audiences and local communities as well as the business interests of the news operations. The interviews, although following the same overall structure, did allow us to pause and follow up with additional questions when needed. The interviews were transcribed word by word by two research assistants and analysed by the authors.

The transcripts were analysed in line with the interpretivist approach of this research. Using Tracy's (2013) iterative approach, the analysis alternated between emergent readings of the data and the use of existing models, explanations, and theories. First, we organised our material in a matrix according to the SIT-factors. This, as described by Miles and Huberman (1994), organised key data, helped us compare the respondents' accounts across cases and identified areas where further analyses were needed. From this process, we were able to broadly identify what was "going on" and "why" within the different parts of the SIT-framework while simultaneously keeping an eye out for "promising in vivo codes" that could help us interpret our material (Tracy 2013, 200). As a next step, we focused on the four components on the top of the SIT-framework (service system, business model, audience experiences, and value) and conducted a thematic analysis for each component guided by axial coding principles (Scott and Medaugh 2017). We identified themes through mutual agreement between the two researchers, thus aligning our work with previous studies (Jenkins and Jerónimo 2021; Jenkins and Nielsen 2020). The respondents were anonymised in the presentation of findings referring only to their corporation and role. To keep the 20 participants apart when presenting the findings, without compromising their anonymity, we gave each participant a name and letter code. Participants A1-A11 represent Amedia ($n = 11$). Participants P1-P9 represent Polaris ($n = 9$).

Findings

Analysis of how editors and top-level managers in Amedia and Polaris described service innovation in their organizations during the Coronavirus crisis revealed three themes related to audience experiences, service system, and business model and value respectively: (1) Solving audiences' problems by developing new digital audience experiences, (2) Solving service system problems by implementing new digital work practices, (3) Managing the monetisation of new digital services balancing social and economic value considerations. These topics also encompassed capacity factors, specifically people, technology, and data.

Developing New Digital Audience Experiences to Solve Audiences' Problems

The local media managers described how new services launched during the Coronavirus crisis focused on usefulness and convenience for audiences. For example, they introduced

new digital live studio and live stats services offering people access to updated information about vaccination, infection rates, current infection control measures, etc. In a situation with high levels of uncertainty and frequently changing health and safety regulations, making it difficult for people to navigate their everyday lives, local newspapers created these digital services to guide and solve problems for their audiences. As described by one Amedia editor:

“We have created some entirely new, genuinely practical, robust, and functional services which have proven to be bestsellers for months. This indicates that these services are useful to people. It’s about having an ear to the ground and understanding audiences’ needs” (A7).

This problem-solving approach also encouraged the newspapers to nurture closer relationships with audiences. A Polaris editor described how his newsroom had increased dialogue with audiences and responded to more questions from the public: “Readers used to send us e-mails or messages on Facebook, or elsewhere—and did not receive a reply. We neglected our readers in the past, but this has now improved” (P6). Thus, the pandemic was seen to stimulate more reciprocal and individual connections with audiences.

To compensate for the lack of physical meeting places for people in the community during periods with strict social distancing, local newspapers also launched new services focused on creating a sense of togetherness and belonging. Our respondents described how a wide range of new digital arenas for cultural and social activities such as the streaming of concerts, art events, religious services, stand-up shows, workout sessions—even an online celebration of Norway’s national day—offered audiences an opportunity to come together online. One of the Polaris editors described the increased importance of local newspapers’ social glue function: “To create a sense of community during difficult times—the newspapers’ role in promoting a sense of belonging—I think that has become more pronounced during the pandemic” (P4).

In Amedia, the Coronavirus crisis was perceived as a driving force in bringing a new digital subscription service to the market. The “Pluss Alt” service, which offered subscribers access to paywalled content from most newspapers in the group, responded to audiences’ increased interest in Coronavirus news from other parts of the country. According to an Amedia manager they “used the momentum and the interest in journalism about the crisis to launch a new product” and as “a leverage” to counter internal skepticism against this new offering (A11). Thus, responding to specific audience needs served as an impetus for innovation, a point frequently emphasised by the participants. As noted by a Polaris editor: “Innovation is about seeing that there is a need there, which we, based on our social responsibility, should meet” (P4).

The managers further underlined the importance of people, technology, and data to be able to respond to audiences’ needs and develop new audience experiences. Editors in both companies said that audience analytics was a crucial resource in this work. Being able to track, analyse, and act on user data was perceived as a key success factor in remaining relevant for audiences before, during and after the pandemic. As reported by an Amedia news editor, with analytics at hand “we have become better at understanding what the reader needs information about. So, [when the crisis hit] we didn’t just stick our finger in the air, guessing what the readers wanted” (A2). The provision of data was centralised in both companies, Amedia having a well-established organisational structure

for audience insight work in place when the pandemic hit; Polaris being in the process of establishing this resource on the company level.

Though the managers' accounts show that the newspapers had responded to new customer needs, we observed that the participants' sense of preparedness for innovation differed. Some expressed a strong confidence in their innovation capacity, emphasising how they had the people, culture, and technology to offer new journalistic services. Previous experience with crises and innovation, as well as an entrepreneurial mindset in the newsroom, were seen to encourage experimentation during the Coronavirus crisis, too. An Amedia editor expressed this in the following way: "Everything we have done for the last nine years prepared us for this" and added: "It's been about handling crises, adapting and seizing opportunities" (A3). This experience was perceived as a key to success when the pandemic hit, and the news operation was challenged to respond to audience needs in new ways.

Others were concerned about lacking the capacity to innovate, describing how organisational restructuring processes and news production pressure required all their available resources. One Amedia editor complained that the pandemic felt like "running behind the bus, trying to catch up" (A4). A Polaris editor noted that "the timing of the Coronavirus crisis could not have been worse" (P6) as it coincided with a resource-demanding acquisition process in the company. Supplementing this, Polaris top-level managers described how the company—doubling its size in one and a half year—had prioritised consolidation and building a new company, the large investments in acquisitions limiting innovation capacity on the corporate level. Simultaneously, this top-level management emphasised the importance of local innovation initiatives, one saying they were "very devoted to the idea that local newspapers create new and exciting things" (P9). Amedia appeared more centralised in this respect, with top-level management describing a "develop once, roll out everywhere strategy" tailored to capitalise on network synergies in the organisational structure (A11). This centralisation was presented as a driving force in developing new services to audiences, even though, as a result, resources for independent innovation projects at the local level were limited.

Solving Service System Problems by Implementing new Digital Work Practices

Local newspapers' ability to meet audiences' needs in new and improved ways, depended on a well-functioning service system, i.e., an infrastructure for news production and distribution. When the Coronavirus crisis hit and local newspapers were forced to abandon their physical offices, they had to recreate their service system online. As described by one Amedia editor: "To establish a virtual platform on which all employees could work and produce our newspaper ... That was the one really big innovation. It happened fast and by force" (A8).

The technological resources for digital communication and cooperation were mostly available prior to the pandemic (Teams, Zoom, Slack, Workplace Chat, Trello, etc). Thus, the tools were in place and, in some cases, also the competency. As described by one Polaris editor: "We were trained in using Teams and OneDrive and had implemented many digital tools prior to the pandemic" (P4). For others, however, cooperation on digital platforms was far less familiar terrain and the transition to the digital newsroom meant that digital competency had to be developed at record speed according to the

managers. As described by one of the Amedia editors: “Many of our oldest employees have made giant digital leaps” adding that she found it “easy to train people to adapt to digital technology when they feel it’s necessary to do so” (A1). Simultaneously, digital news consumption sky-rocketed, encouraging the newspapers to make their service system more focused on online news production. An Amedia editor described how his organisation reduced print frequency and experienced a radical transition to a digital first mindset in news production:

“For years we had tried to work in a new way based on a digital first logic. We have told ourselves for 4–5 years that we were digital first because we published our news stories online first. But we weren’t truly digital first in our way of producing news. Not until March 2020” (A3).

In addition to the increased digital competency and mindset, the editors discussed how the innovation of the service system included new organisational structures. For example, one Amedia editor said: “We divided our newsroom in two, one working with breaking news and one with consequence-oriented news reporting. This was new to us” (A2). A colleague from another Amedia newspaper noted that this new way of organising the newsroom enabled them to maintain some of the communication which had previously characterised a hectic physical news desk:

“The direct communication of the news desk—the shouting across the room—disappeared overnight. However, we were able to recreate it by establishing the breaking group with its own digital communication channels where people got input from their colleagues instead of being left alone working from home” (A8).

These changes in organisation and communication point to another observation regarding innovation in the service system: Due to the digitalization of news work, the editors noted changes in the dynamics between the news staff. Some said the digital newsroom had made it easier for more people to voice their opinion. Whereas physical meetings in pre-Coronavirus times were often dominated by the loudest people in the newsroom, the introduction of written communication on chat platforms like Slack, was seen to level the playing field. For example, an Amedia editor said: “I think it has a democratizing effect. It’s easier to write something on Slack than making your voice heard in a physical meeting with many people. In such meetings, it’s mostly the same people talking all the time” (A10). Another Amedia editor said:

“It’s not the same people sitting in the editor’s office chatting. There are other ways of communicating. People connect via chat and phone. The communication lines have changed and so have the people participating in the communication” (A4).

Contrasting this more optimistic view on changing dynamics between people in the digital newsroom, some editors were concerned that the lack of physical meetings restricted creativity and innovation in a longer-term perspective. As noted by a Polaris representative: “I think the pandemic has been an obstacle for idea generation, and some of the things that are important for innovation because as human beings we are most creative when we work together” (P3). A colleague from Polaris described how he had struggled to recreate the creative power of physical brainstorming meetings on their digital meeting platform Teams: “That kind of brainstorming that just happens when you gather three people in a meeting room, open a chocolate bar and it just ... boils—I have not been able to crack that code on Teams” (P5).

Balancing Social and Economic Value Considerations

The Coronavirus crisis, while being an extraordinary ordeal for local communities, was also perceived to yield opportunities to prove local journalism's worth and create social as well as economic value. By adding new services to traditional news reporting, editors described how local newspapers had provided better, richer digital news services during the Coronavirus crisis which in turn created social value by making people better informed and connected, and economic value by increasing audience revenue. As described by a Polaris editor: "The local newspaper has strengthened its position in the local community—as a crucial information channel and as a social meeting point", adding that "this also provides financial benefits [to the newspaper]" (P4).

Regarding economic value creation, the local newspapers under study had a well-established digital paywall and a subscription-based business model in place when the pandemic struck. The respondents' described how this enabled them to monetise the surge in digital news consumption brought about by the crisis. With declining advertising revenue, particularly during the first months of the pandemic, the revenues from subscriptions became increasingly important for local newspapers. Coronavirus news was perceived to serve as a key driving force in converting non-subscribers to subscribers and in generating new revenue as non-subscribers became more willing to pay for a digital subscription. As observed by one Amedia editor regarding people's willingness to pay for Coronavirus news: "Even though the same information is available on the municipal web pages and Facebook, these stories generate a lot of new subscriptions" (A1).

The subscription-based business model enabled local newspapers to make money on new services, like Amedia's digital add-on subscription service "Pluss Alt". A management representative described this reselling of journalistic content as "free money since the entire production cost is already covered by the daily news production of the one thousand journalists in our company" and added that the company was able to "net quite a few extra million Norwegian kroner a month just by making our subscribers this offer" (A11). Another Amedia editor explained how having a functioning business model had enabled his newspaper to monetise digital events during the Coronavirus lockdown. For example, he said, a digital rock concert "was offered exclusively to our subscribers, and we sold 130 subscriptions" (A3). These accounts demonstrate that the local newspapers had a structure in place to generate new revenue based on new audience experiences. This paywall model also allowed experimentation and adjustments of the mix of open and paid-for content, including new digital services and well-established digital news reporting. This was seen to benefit subscribers who received "more value for money" as well as non-subscribers who were reportedly receiving a better service due to Coronavirus news that was not paywalled. As noted by one of the Amedia representatives: "I think among larger groups of readers, the perceived value of our services has been much higher during the Coronavirus pandemic than before" (A11). Another respondent from Polaris emphasised how the local newspapers' social responsibility as knowledge-producing institutions was not restricted to subscribers: "It's important to bear in mind that we have a fair number of readers who are not subscribers. We have a social responsibility for providing the individual with good and important information about the Coronavirus" (P9).

While the editors mostly expressed confidence in their monetisation strategy during the Coronavirus crisis, they also described how balancing business interests with their

social responsibility was sometimes challenging, particularly during the early stages of the pandemic. As one Amedia editor said: “We didn’t want to come across as cynical, capitalising on the pandemic. We wanted the most important news to be available to everyone. But local exclusive news, that we put a lot of effort into, was reserved for subscribers”, adding that “finding that balance is not always easy” (A2). Supplementing this account, a Polaris editor described how their local newspaper had struggled with paywalling of Coronavirus news:

“From March to October 2020 we chose a strategy that I think was very good for the audience, but not so good for us. We had simply too much content available free of charge and consequently we were not able to convert this incredible growth in readership to paying subscribers” (P3).

This quote is a telling example of how social value creation was sometimes perceived to conflict with economic value creation.

Discussion and Conclusion

Journalism has a strong service legacy. The media managers interviewed in this study described how this service role of local journalism was innovated during the Coronavirus pandemic. Their accounts shed light on key dynamics of service innovation in local journalism which have hitherto been unaccounted for in the journalism research literature. Asking how local news media responded to the pandemic in terms of service innovation, the study shows how local newspapers identified new ways to inform, advise and help audiences by means of new digital services focused on empowering the individual, providing orientation, and strengthening the collective. These are well-established service journalism characteristics (From and Nørgaard Kristensen 2018; Nørgaard Kristensen and From 2012; Mellado 2022; Eide and Knight 1999). The media managers in our study described how these service functions were prioritized and developed further through a series of new, digital audience experiences.

We identify a strong service ethos in our material whereby the participants emphasised the importance of being useful and relevant for people and responsive to their specific needs. This insight speaks to Posetti (2018)’s observation that media innovation should be less focused on new technology and “shiny new things” and pay closer attention to matters of more strategic importance. Indeed, we maintain that the innovations reported by the media managers were not about introducing “shiny new things” but rather about solving new problems by combining existing ideas and resources in new ways. In line with Villi and Picard (2019) and Cestino and Berndt’s (2017) more general observation about a service logic taking hold among legacy media and Costera Meijer’s (2020) accounts of the audience turn in journalism, we posit that the pandemic furthered a service orientation in local journalism.

The innovation in audience experiences described by the media managers was central to local newspapers’ social and economic value creation, offering benefits such as information and integration to local communities while simultaneously generating revenue based on the increase in local news interest and willingness to pay for local news content. The interviewees discussed how the local newspapers’ business model based on a subscription logic was appropriated to accommodate a balancing of social and economic value creation whereby some new audience experiences were paywalled and others

were offered free of charge. We identify this as a *social-economic value creation dynamic* in local newspapers' service innovation. The media managers described how this dynamic between local newspapers' business model and value creation was conditioned by the crisis. The pandemic foregrounded the need for local newspapers' new services as well as their worth while simultaneously influencing the monetization of this worth.

Another key dynamic identified in the study is the interplay between new audience experiences and concurrent innovation of the local newspapers' service system. The interviewees described how the Coronavirus crisis exerted considerable influence on these innovations, too. Without substantial changes in the way news was produced and distributed, local newspapers would not have been able to provide new services offering useful guidance, interaction, and sense of togetherness. The media managers' accounts of the crisis point at two interrelated problems solving processes—one external concerning audience's needs and one internal concerning the disruption of physical newsrooms. Both processes forced local newspapers to be creative and employ available people, technology, and data resources to find solutions to the disruptions caused by the crisis. We identify this as a *service system-audience experience dynamic* in the local newspapers' service innovation.

While some local newspaper editors reported considerable confidence and success in managing these two dynamics, we also identified problems related to balancing of social and economic value considerations as well as resource allocation towards service innovation. Regarding the first problem, the configuration of the paywall was experienced as difficult when local newspapers' social responsibility conflicted with business interests. Specifically, reserving Coronavirus related content for the paying audience in a situation characterized by collective need for help, guidance, and comfort clashed with local newspapers' role as community service institutions. As the pandemic developed, the local newspapers in our sample appeared to have found a pragmatic way of handling these contradicting value creation concerns. Notably, this balancing of social and economic interests involved both new services and well-established online news reporting. While reserving important news for subscribers may feel particularly difficult in a health and social crisis like the pandemic, excluding those who will not or cannot pay from important news and information is not a crisis specific problem but a lasting challenge with paywalls (Olsen 2021). As such, the editors' accounts of the monetization of journalistic services amid the pandemic demonstrate how news media's social and economic value creation is complex, contradicting and sometimes incompatible. We posit that this cannot be ignored with applying a service innovation perspective on local journalism.

The other problem concerning resource allocation revealed differences in the local newspaper managers' perceived preparedness for innovation of audience experiences and service system. Some complained that their resources were too stretched to allow for the kind of innovation they would have liked to see in their organization. This varying sense of preparedness was observed among smaller as well as larger players in our material and in both newspaper groups. Such insights suggest that the lack of resources like people, technology, and money, previously identified as a major constraint to innovations in the newsroom (Paulussen 2016; García-Avilés et al. 2019; Nielsen 2021), should not be viewed as a universal obstacle to service innovation in local journalism. The newspaper managers' accounts suggest that for some local news organizations this was an inhibiting factor. For others it was not.

Interestingly, the service system innovation that took place during the crisis, was seen to increase digital competency and enhance a digital first mindset in the local newspapers. This could potentially increase local newspapers' innovation capacity in the future and their ability to develop new digital audience experiences. On the other hand, there was also concern that the digital only working mode would reduce creativity and slow down the innovation needed to develop new services for audiences in post pandemic times. This ambivalence calls for future research on the longer-term implications of the pandemic on innovation in local journalism.

During the Coronavirus crisis local newspapers created value through new services in a situation of extraordinary high demand for local news and information. Moving forward, local newspapers will have to figure out how to stay relevant and important in people's lives. As the audiences' interest in local news and information normalises, it becomes even more important—and challenging—for local newspapers to innovate in ways that create value in people's everyday lives. This motivates future studies of local newspapers' service innovation ability as well as their capacity to innovate. Our study has focused on service innovation in journalism from a management perspective. Other perspectives such as those of the reporters working hands-on with service innovation in the newsroom, or those of the audiences at the receiving end of service innovation, would be a valuable supplement to our study. Moreover, we encourage future research to investigate service innovation in other national contexts, where local newspapers' innovation ability and capacity may be very different than in Norway. As such, our research provides a snapshot of service innovation in times of crises which could serve as a starting point for fruitful, future explorations of the service orientation in local journalism as well as in journalism in general.

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