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The Economics of News and the Practice of News Production

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ABSTRACT

Conceptually, the business of news is often separated from the practice of news production. In this essay, I borrow from practice theory to show that this separation is misleading. According to a practice approach, the influence of economics is not exogenous to journalism. Rather, economics serves as a series of considerations that are baked into news practices. As journalists take up these practices, they naturally reproduce these considerations, which is to say, they reproduce the structural conditions of journalism. Borrowing from the secondary literature, I show how and why economic considerations have been integral to news practices since the beginning of modern news. Then, I demonstrate the point in a different way in a discussion of the recent rise of nonprofit news. As the example of nonprofit news shows, any argument that journalism needs a new business model is also, if only implicitly, an argument that the way news is produced should change as well. Practice theory helps us to make this argument explicit, and to tease out its implications for new ventures in journalism.

KEYWORDS

Business of news; economics of news; news production; practice theory; future of journalism; nonprofit news

The Economics of News and the Practice of News Production

After more than a decade of decline, the economic situation of local journalism in the United States shows few signs of improving. Large newspaper chains, which once employed the vast majority of daily working journalists, are in bankruptcy (e.g., McClatchy), or consolidating into mega-chains run by venture capitalists (e.g., Gannett). For lack of a viable business model, “news deserts” are popping up in cities and towns across the country (e.g., Abernathy 2018). The Covid-19 pandemic is only exacerbating these trends (e.g., Doctor 2020).

This situation is so vexing, it is tempting to see economics as the pre-eminent problem facing journalism (e.g., Lepore 2019; Rusbridger 2018). If only journalism could find a new business model, the thinking goes, the profession would be alright. Something like this idea is common among journalists. However, it contains an implicit assumption, namely, that it is possible to change the way journalism is funded without changing the way news is produced. This assumption is misleading. Conceptually, it is misleading because it implies that economics acts as an exogenous force on journalism, when, in fact, its influence arises mostly from within the practice of news production. And practically, it is misleading because it mischaracterizes what it means to say that journalism

must find a new business model. Any such model will have consequences for how news is produced. Recognizing as much requires a better understanding of how the economics of news are embedded within the practice of news production.

Practice theory helps us gain that understanding. When I say practice theory, I mean the collection of theories arising from the work of Bourdieu, Giddens, Latour, and others (e.g., Schatzki 2001). According to these theorists, social action is organized into practices—symbols logically connected to one another into strips of activity. According to practice theory, these strips of activity serve as meso-level resources that mediate the impact of macro-level forces, like the economy, on social action. News production consists of such strips of activity. Crucially, these practices incorporate economic considerations. As actors turn to available practices to navigate social situations, they recursively reproduce the economic considerations that inform news production.

It is difficult to see how it could be otherwise. Modern news writing began in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe, much of it produced for sale (e.g., Pettegree 2014; Sommerville 1996). Ever since, news has been produced in commercial contexts, meaning that, from the very beginning, commercial considerations have informed practices associated with news gathering and production. On a practice perspective, then, when we say that journalism needs a new business model, we are saying much more than that it needs to find a new way to make money. We are saying that practices of news production will change as well.

In normal times, demonstrating this point can be difficult. Social practices are often naturalized by actors, coming to seem as “just the way things are (and, perhaps, should be) done.” At such moments, it can be hard to unpack the elements of a practice, and make them visible to examination. Luckily, for journalism, these are anything but ordinary times! Across the field of journalism, actors are experimenting with new economic models. These efforts provide ample opportunity to examine the role of economic considerations in the production of news.

In this article, then, I wish to accomplish three things. First, I introduce a practice approach to the economics of news. Second, I borrow from the secondary literature, much of it written on the history of news production, to show how and why economic considerations have always been intrinsic to the practice of news production. Among others, scholars have associated economic considerations with periodicity, efficiency, and, exclusivity in news practices. Finally, using a small sample of 20 sites associated with the Institute for Nonprofit News (INN), I discuss the growth of non-profit news in recent years as a current example of my broad point: when the economic circumstances of journalism change, so, necessarily, do practices of news production. The result, I hope, is a better understanding of how and why it is the case that when the business of news changes, changes in news production inevitably follow.

The Economics of News

The basic economic facts of journalism are well understood (e.g., Hamilton 2004; Ludwig 2000; Picard and Wildman 2015). These facts help to define the context in which commercial news is produced.

Among the most important of these facts is that producing news entails high-fixed costs. Consider a newspaper. In order to produce one copy of one edition of the

newspaper, a news organization must pay a staff to find newsworthy information, write and edit stories, compose these stories on a page, engage with potential advertisers, and so on. These costs are “fixed” in the sense that they do not vary according to how many copies of the newspaper are produced. The same logic holds for broadcast and television news. The upfront costs of news production in both media are substantial. It also holds for digital news. It is true that the fixed-costs of producing news online are lower than for legacy media like newspapers. However, these costs remain substantial. As Picard (2016, 148) writes, “Although digital journalism reduces the costs of production and distribution, it does not equally reduce the costs of gathering and processing the news ...” In other words, it remains costly to gather and produce news even for digital news outlets (e.g., Küng, Newman, and Picard 2016). To these costs, we might add the significant infrastructural costs (e.g., computers, internet connections, servers, and the like) associated with operating online. Thus, the economic story of news production begins with the fact that, like all information goods, it involves high fixed costs.

A second economic fact of news production naturally follows: news organizations benefit from scale. For legacy news media, the more copies of a newspaper produced, the less the marginal cost of producing the next copy becomes. This is because so much of the cost of producing news is born by producing the first copy. The same logic holds for broadcast and cable news production: the more widely it is distributed across these platforms, the lower the marginal costs for producing news. With one important amendment, it even applies to digital news production. In digital environments, scale works not by lowering next copy costs—those costs are nearly zero for digital news—but rather from an addition of *value*. As in mass mediated markets, the more people use digital news, the more valuable it becomes to advertisers in the form of reach. However, in networked environments, there is an additional value in scale: the value created by the user data organizations are able to gather (e.g., Napoli 2011). The more people interact with online news, the more user data gathered, the more precisely organizations can target content [in the form of news and advertisements] to users. This is why legacy news media are concerned that the Internet is dominated by so few companies: Facebook and Google alone account for two-thirds of the digital advertising market. Operating at a scale beyond the wildest dreams of traditional news organizations, these companies are able to reap most of the economic value from the circulation of online news (e.g., Rashidian, Brown, and Hansen 2018). This fact serves to demonstrate the larger point: scale is as important to digital news as it is for traditional media.

With respect to scale, however, there is a catch for news providers. Most people most of the time are not much interested in news, at least interested enough to pay for it (e.g., Picard 2016). The lack of consumer interest has plagued news providers for centuries, but it is especially consequential for digital news providers because the audience for online news is so fragmented. Because online news providers face lower fixed costs than legacy media, there is more competition in the digital news industry. It is also the case that digital news providers compete not only with other news providers for the attention of audiences, but with every other information provider—from app developers to movie companies—distributing their wares online. The result is a highly fragmented digital news market, one that features an extraordinarily “long-tail” for online news consumption: a few digital news providers attract enormous audiences, and the rest attract

much less attention. Not only then, is the audience for digital news necessarily low, that audience is highly fragmented.

There is also the problem that news is a public good, meaning that it is very difficult for news providers to control the circulation of news once it has been published, broadcast, or uploaded. Once I leave my newspaper on a table at the coffee shop, other people may read it—people who may have some interest in the news but not enough to pay for it. Similarly, once a news article is uploaded to the Internet, others may easily distribute it along the network. For people who have some interest in the news, but not enough to pay for a subscription, the fact that news is a public good is a great boon. They gain access to news without having to pay. For news organizations, however, it is a dilemma that only exacerbates the problem of making a profit.

High-fixed costs, the benefits of scale, a lack of consumer interest in the news, and the fact that news is a public good—these are some of the most consequential economic facts of news production. As I say, they have been long understood by scholars. With a few distinctions, they apply to newspapers, television, cable news, and even digital news.

Connections between these facts and news production have been more difficult to come by. Most efforts link economics to broad statements about news bias. One line of research, for instance, suggests that market competition may lead news organizations to slant the news toward the political views of the audience, or some subset of the audience (e.g., Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006; Mullainathan and Shleifer 2005; Petrova 2012). More broadly, news organizations may restrict coverage to issues and events that are of immediate interest and relevance to their audience (e.g., Galtung and Ruge 1965); or, publish stories that conform to community values (e.g., Gans 1979; Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien 1973). Another line of research shows that economic facts lead news organizations to produce news that is more easily and cheaply gathered (e.g., Allern 2002), “softer” forms of news that appeal to hard-to-reach market segments like young people and women [whom advertisers are keen to reach] (e.g., Beam 1996; 2003; Hamilton 2004; Harcup and O’Neill 2001).

These arguments are persuasive, in their way, but evidence for them tends to be circumstantial. In order to demonstrate bias in the news, for instance, scholars examine news content, and then reason backward to the economic context which news organizations face. The actual actions reporters and editors take to produce these results remain a black box (but see Vandendaele 2018). Despite a commonsense understanding that economic considerations shape news production (e.g., Allern 2002; Joye, Hinrich, and Wohlert 2016) then, we are left with a persistent gap between the study of news economics and the production of news.

Practice theory, an approach to social action developed in the work of Bourdieu, Giddens, Latour, and others, helps to close this gap. This is not the place for a comprehensive overview of this theory. Luckily, many other such reviews exist (e.g., Schatzki 2001), including discussions of practice theory and journalism (e.g., Ryfe 2018). Here, I highlight the theory’s conception of structure and agency, as it speaks most directly to the relationship between economics and the production of news.

We might begin with a definition of a practice itself. Practice theory developed as a way of understanding how social action tends to produce social order. As Reckwitz (2002) observes, economists have developed one answer to this question: people produce social order by acting on the basis of their rational interests. Sociologists have offered a

second answer: people produce social order by acting on the basis of shared norms. Practice theory is a version of a third, culturalist, answer: people produce social order by borrowing from shared symbolic structures to inform their actions. For practice theorists, these shared symbolic structures take the form of social practices. Ryfe (2018, 219) helpfully outlines the elements of practice. They include:

- a set of actions, or doings and sayings;
- that are logically linked to one another so that they form blocks or strips of activity;
- by what are variously called conventions, rules, or strategies;
- and, they extend in time, meaning that practices persist as recognizable sets of doings and sayings.

In this definition, we learn that practices consist of logically connected strings of things said and done, and that these strings of doings and sayings tend to persist over time.

A key benefit of viewing social action in terms of practice is the way it resolves the relationship between structure and agency—a longstanding binary in the history of social analysis. As meso-level entities, social practices mediate the relationship between macro-environments (e.g., the economy or politics) and individual action. They do so by incorporating macro-considerations into the cultural schemas of practice. For instance, within commercial newsrooms, journalists do not confront something as large and abstract as “the economy.” Rather, they confront specific social situations: interactions with their editors; interactions with sources; the necessity of writing stories on deadline, and so on. In figuring out how to act in these situations, they borrow from the social practices available to them. Economic considerations are baked into these practices, and it is in this way that “the economy” influences the actions of journalists.

The obverse is also true. Practices shape action, but practices are not self-generating and they do not simply bear down on actors from the outside. Rather, practices exist only to the extent that people repeatedly and habitually perform them. It is here that practice theorists elide the distinction between structure and action. As shared bits of culture, practices shape action—the range of choices for acting in a particular situation. But practices emerge from within action. For this reason, performance is crucial to practice. Moreover, since the limits of performance lie in what is meaningful (sensible and reasonable) to a community of practice, there is no need to impute a structure to social action (economic, political, or otherwise) beyond the conditions of practice. As one practice theorist (King 2000, 20) puts it, the negotiated exchanges between individuals represent the “ultimate tribunal” for action within a given practice.

There is an interesting question, one relevant to our discussion, about precisely how practices shape, or lend structure to, performance. A conventional answer is to imagine the doings and sayings contained in a practice as *rules* of behavior. Giddens (1984, 377), for instance, defines structure as “rules and resources, recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems.” Elsewhere in the same volume, he refers to rules as “generalized procedures applied in the enactment/reproduction of social life” (21). Giddens’ idea is that, in borrowing from social practices to inform their actions, people reproduce the generalized procedures—the rules—implicit in those practices. Social order is thus created and recreated by people following rules. Hence arises the duality of structure, or what Giddens refers to as the “structuration” of society.

It is natural, perhaps, to assume that economics informs news production through such formal rules. Think again of arguments that economic realities lead news organizations to slant the news toward particular views or audiences. As evidence for this claim, scholars sometimes point to explicit rules in newsrooms, as when a publisher demands that certain kinds of stories be written (or squashed), or when editors give reporters explicit instructions (e.g., Allern 2002; Sparrow 1999). These kinds of edicts certainly happen, which is an indication that some aspects of news production have a rule-based character.

As Sewell (2015, 128–129), observes, however, there is a problem with imagining that practice is reproduced only through rule following. If people simply follow the rules, then practices will always be reproduced, leaving little room for human agency or social change. This is a common charge leveled at Bourdieu, whose conception of “habitus” sometimes seems to lock human agents into an iron cage of generalized procedures: “As an acquired system of generative schemes ...” he writes in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977, 95), “the habitus engenders all the thoughts, all the perceptions, and all the actions consistent with those conditions and no others.” Rule following seems to render practice as a serial order of actions (“first I do this, then this, then this”) that inevitably leads to the reproduction of social order.

As a general matter, Sewell argues (129), we should dispense with the term “rules.” “The term ...” he writes, “is probably not quite the right word, since it tends to imply something like formally stated prescriptions.” In its place, Sewell prefers “cultural schema,” a concept he borrows from anthropology (e.g., Shore 1996; Tomasello 1999). The notion of schema implies that social practices are organized as what Norman (1986, 536) calls “flexible configurations.” Practices, this is to say, consist of agglomerations of symbols organized in network form, rather than of logically organized symbols organized in serial form.

As D’Andrade (1995 chapter 2) observes, there are benefits to imagining social practices as schematic amalgams of symbols. For one thing, it allows that practices may have missing elements. On a rule-based conception, if one symbol is out of place, it becomes difficult to adhere to the practice. Viewed as networks, though, it is possible for people to fill in the gaps, that is, to interpret the cultural schemas at their disposal. In these interpretations, individuals may adapt or modify practices to fit new situations, and they may transfer practice to new contexts. A schema conception also explains why the enactment of social practice is often automatic. Rules are relatively easy to learn but take more conscious reflection to follow. In contrast, because they are learned through experience, schemas take more time to learn but are quicker to enact. Schemas are not followed; rather, they are activated.

The notion that the doings and sayings of practice are connected schematically rather than via rules suggests a different relationship between generalized procedures and action. Where rules have people applying (or not) logically organized sets of procedures, schemas have actors engaging in *pattern recognition*. In a social situation, people are not following the rules of practice so much as trying to match the cultural schemas they know to the situation in which they find themselves. These schemas are only loosely organized and often incomplete. To figure out which schemas fit, people reason by analogy and rely on past experience. This process allows for creative interpretation and misinterpretation (for gap-filling); it allows that two people may apply different schemas to the same situation (and that both may be right); and, it allows that the same person may apply different

schemas at different times to the same situation. It allows, in other words, for the possibility of difference and change.

It is not necessary to choose between schematic and rule-based conceptions of practice. It is likely that both kinds of organization exist. But there is reason to believe that social practices associated with journalism are mainly schematic. For one thing, journalists learn the practice of news production primarily via experience. For another, scholars have shown that news decisions tend to be automatic and unconscious—more a matter of pattern recognition than of rule-following. For still another, if news production consists of rules, they are poorly understood by journalists. It is an axiom of the sociology of news production literature that journalists are notoriously bad at articulating why they do what they do. Finally, despite the relative uniformity of news production, journalists insist that their work involves a great deal of interpretation (or gap-filling). All of these aspects are more characteristic of a schema than rule conception of practice. This is not to say that news practices never have a more serial, rule-like character, only that news practices are often organized more schematically.

We are now in a position to ask the relevant question: if news routines are social practices, and these practices typically have the look and feel of loosely coordinated cultural schemas, then how do commercial considerations inform these schemas?

Commercialism and News Production

As we address this question, it is helpful to remind ourselves where we stand. The economic context of news production begins with the fact that the cost of producing news is relatively high while the opportunity to recover these costs from consumers is relatively low. Recovery of these costs, therefore, requires a subsidy of one kind or another. Since the early twentieth century, advertising has been a preferred subsidy across the industry. Advertising works, however, only if news producers can distribute news at scale. These economic facts inform the context in which journalists produce news.

Note that this is not the same thing as saying that economics are the *only* considerations important to news production. Other kinds of considerations, political and professional among them, also shape the context in which news is produced. In fact, it is likely that particular news practices endure to the extent that they address a variety of the considerations in play. This said, the economic considerations at work in news production are not insignificant. They play an important role in defining the context of news production.

In the past few decades, scholars have connected these considerations to a variety of news practices. Space considerations do not allow a discussion of all of these practices, or their various histories. Instead, let me highlight some of the most obvious and important as a way of illustrating the relationship between economics and news practices.

I begin with periodicity, or what is sometimes referred to as seriality. Periodicity is the practice of publishing news at regular intervals: monthly, weekly, or daily. As many scholars observe, this practice is intrinsic to market-based news (e.g., Brownlee 2017; Meyers and Harris 1993; Sommerville 1996). Partly, this is due to the contractual arrangements between advertisers and news proprietors, which require that ads appear on a regular basis. And, partly, it arises out of the need for news producers to transform news reading into a habit. Since its inception, it has been an intrinsic feature of professional

journalism. Anyone can discover and write news; only professional journalists, that is, people paid to produce news, do so on a routine basis. Even when there does not seem to be much going on, professional reporters must contrive ways to find newsworthy stories to fill the space between advertisements.

The practice of offering news on a regular basis is associated with a range of other news practices. One is facticity (Sommerville 1996). Facticity refers to the practice of conveying news in terms of a series of discrete facts: names, dates, locations, statistics, and the like. The style will be recognizable to anyone familiar with professional news writing. Here is one example, pulled randomly from a front page of Joseph Pulitzer's *The New York World*, one of the progenitors of modern commercial news.

Oakland, Cal., July 19—The works of the Western Fuse and Explosive Company were blown up by Goon Chung, a Chinese murderer, at 5:20 this morning. Five deputy sheriffs and constables, who were trying to arrest the murderer, and one woman were killed.

A list of the dead, and a series of quotes from the sheriff, followed. The story consists of a series of discrete facts: the “works” of a company was blown up, by a man named Goon Chung, at precisely 5:20 in the morning. Exactly five deputy sheriffs and constables arrived at the scene, and so on. The language of the story is to the point, and written in a plain, matter-of-fact style, without ornamentation or ostentation. This fact-centered style is characteristic of commercial news generally.

Many scholars observe that “just the facts” reporting is intrinsic to modern news (e.g., Mindich 1998). For instance, it lies at the heart of the professional convention of objectivity (e.g., Schudson 2001). But, as Sommerville shows, facticity has a much longer lineage, stretching back to the beginnings of commercial news. For commercial news producers, the practice has several purposes. For one thing, it allows them to simplify the reporting process. In this mode, it is not necessary for them to explain events; doing so can be difficult and time-consuming. Instead, all that is necessary is to collect a discrete set of facts, and to do so repeatedly. At the same time, as Sommerville (1996, 8) writes, tissues of facts lend news stories the “superficial appearance of completeness, of narrative closure.” Facticity, in other words, allows each story to stand on its own, and brings some coherence to the day's news. Facticity also creates a particular relationship between news producers and the audiences: the practice invites audiences to generate the meaning of the day's news. “Here are the facts,” the news producer may proclaim. “You decide what they mean.” Facticity therefore flatters the audience (e.g., Brownlee 2017). Finally, facticity gives audiences a reason to return routinely to keep abreast of the most up-to-date news. All of these purposes are connected to the underlying goal of commercial news, which is to make a profit from the sale of information.

Commercialism is associated with a second cluster of news practices centered around efficiency. Commercial news producers have an obvious incentive to reduce the fixed costs associated with its production. Doing so requires them to gather the most facts at the cheapest cost. Put another way, it requires them to rationalize the news production process. The particular way in which this is done has changed over time, but the underlying imperative drives a host of commercial news practices.

Beat reporting is one of the most obvious and visible manifestations of efficiency in news production. A “beat” is an institution (e.g., city hall), issue (e.g., politics) or region (e.g., a city or county) that a reporter regularly covers. On a beat, a reporter will discover

events and sources that reliably and predictably provide a stable supply of daily news. Already in the earliest days of modern news, manuscript newsletter writers made a routine of walking the area around St. Paul's Cathedral to hear the day's news (e.g., Clark 1994, 91–94). By the 1850s, this practice evolved into a “beat system” which had reporters making routine visits to official institutions (e.g., Cook 1998, 45–46). And, by the 1890s, the beat system had been firmly established in commercial news organizations. It has been a constituent feature of commercial journalism ever since.

Beats increase the efficiency of news production in several ways. First, the beat system allows news producers to use their own initiative to quickly obtain a supply of information to transform into news. At the same time, beats do not require news producers to deploy large numbers of reporters across a city in the hope of catching newsworthy information (which would be unduly expensive). Instead, they can place a smaller number of reporters at key institutions where newsworthy events are nearly guaranteed to happen. Indeed, partially in response to beat coverage, public officials began to hold *pre-planned events* that were specifically designed to be newsworthy, and to coordinate with reporters to ensure that they were in attendance. News production does not get much more efficient than that!

A third set of commercial news practices is associated with exclusivity. As a commodity, information may be exchanged for such things as access, status, and money. This is true, however, only to the extent that information can be controlled. Out of this logic has come a variety of practices in which news producers seek to control access to information. Perhaps the oldest of these practices is that of trading information. Manuscript newsletter writers of the early seventeenth century already engaged in the practice of exchanging information with sources (e.g., Cust 1986; Sommerville 1996). A modern version of this practice is the “negotiation of newsworthiness,” as Cook (1998) calls it, that characterizes interactions between reporters and sources (e.g., Sigal 1973). Within commercial journalism, the more information reporters have to trade, the more they might obtain from their sources. The same logic permeates relationships between journalists. For instance, it is a common practice for journalists to hoard information in newsrooms, and use this cache as leverage in their interactions with editors.

The logic of exclusivity extends even to competition between news organizations. Consider, for instance, the practice of “scooping” the competition. It emerged in the 1830s and 1840s in larger cities where many daily newspapers competed for audiences. At this time, news organizations began to demand that their reporters get and publish stories before reporters working with other newspapers; to “scoop” the competition. Scoops were so important that editors often paid bonuses to journalists who could provide them. Editors were even willing, Wiener notes (2011, 161), to overlook inaccuracies in reports if it meant that they could run the story first. Conversely, being scooped by one's competitors was often grounds for being fired. As Frederic Hudson, managing editor of the *Herald* in the mid-nineteenth century, put it to a reporter, “Bear in mind that the *Herald* must never be beaten” (quoted in Weiner 2007, 51). Ever since, the ability to produce stories before the competition has been viewed as a constituent element of being a “good” reporter, and news organizations have competed to “scoop” one another.

The logic of exclusivity can be subverted, of course. Writing of his short journalistic career in the early 1960s, Darnton (1975, 184–185) recalls reporters in the city hall

pressroom working together to mute competition. Interacting mostly with one another, these reporters developed a sense of us vs. them in which “us” were the men of the pressroom, and “them” were their editors back in the newsroom. “Under those conditions,” Darnton writes, among these journalists “the failure to share information is such a crime that some reporters leak ‘exclusives’ to colleagues on their own paper so that the story can seem to come from ‘them.’” Violating the shared agreement not to scoop one another could bring harsh condemnation from one’s pressroom colleagues. “Nothing could be less competitive,” Darnton concludes, “than a group of reporters on the same story.”

Darnton’s reflections are no doubt accurate. But what are we to make of this fact? On a rule-based conception of practice, we might conclude that exclusivity cannot be a news practice if, as in this example, a group of journalists is so intent on violating its logic. The reporters of Darnton’s press room do not seem to adhere to the rule of exclusivity. Therefore, it cannot be a rule of journalism. However, a schema-based conception of practice leads to a different conclusion. It is clear that reporters in this pressroom know that they are supposed to compete with one another for exclusives. Editors back in the newsroom expect them to do so. As a cultural schema, this knowledge organizes their behavior without demanding that they take any particular action. As Darnton shows, reporters in the pressroom are quite inventive in thinking up ways to subvert the practice: they share information with other reporters; they have one of their own gather the facts of a story, and then require this person to share these facts with the other reporters so that they can write their own version; they leak information to peers back in the newsroom so that “exclusives” will not be seen to come from them; they work together to file variants of the same lead. This invention is meaningful, however, only in the context of exclusivity. It shows that actors may reproduce the logic of practice by engaging in acts of resistance.

The same argument holds true for the way in which exclusivity shapes stories that ultimately appear in the news. As we have noted, news organizations compete for “exclusive” stories. Not surprisingly, all things being equal, such stories are more likely to appear in the news than not. As Allern (2002, 144) writes, “News organizations compete by developing stories on their own, and they will often ignore a story that many other media already have covered or are covering.” But this logic also holds in reverse. If another news organization has an exclusive, its competitors may work to ensure that it does not remain an exclusive for long. As White (1950, 389) observed long ago about “Mr. Gates:”

Can a wire editor refuse to play a story “up” when his counterpart in the local radio station is playing it to the hilt? Likewise, can a wire editor play down a story a story when he sees competing papers ... playing [it] up?

Paradoxically, the logic of exclusivity can, and often does, result in homogeneous news coverage (e.g., Boczkowski 2010).

We might discuss other news practices associated with commercialism. For example, we have not considered the array of news practices associated with speed. Commercial journalism has always focused on delivering news ever more quickly. This obsession has informed a host of news practices. However, I think the point has been made. Economic considerations have informed a great variety of news practices, and they have done

so since the emergence of modern news. The influence of these considerations is not exogenous to journalism, but rather arises within the strips of activity—the doings and sayings—that constitute news production. It is here, in such practices, that one finds their influence. In response to local situations, journalists take up particular practices. In so doing, they naturally reproduce the economic considerations that inform those practices. Indeed, it is only to the extent that journalists take up these practices that we may say economic considerations “structure” news production.

To see this point in another way, let me conclude this essay with a brief consideration of what happens when the profit-motive is taken out of journalism.

Non-Profit News

My example is nonprofit journalism, which has existed at least since the creation of the Associated Press in 1846, but has exploded in recent years (e.g., Birnbauer 2018). For instance, the Institute for Nonprofit News (INN) began in 2009 with just 27 members. Today, it boasts a membership of over 200 organizations. Nonprofit news has grown in part due to the travails of commercial journalism. However, being nonprofit does not mean these organizations produce news for free. Nonprofits are still businesses that must generate revenue. They are simply faced with different economic considerations than commercial news. As such, they represent an excellent opportunity to test our thesis. We should expect nonprofits to change their news practices as the economic context in which they operate changes.

This is precisely what we find. To demonstrate as much, I borrow from a growing literature on nonprofit news (e.g., Birnbauer 2018; Konieczna 2018). In addition, I draw on data from a small sample of 20 nonprofits. I have gathered this dataset through a random sampling of INN members (see the Appendix for a list of these organizations). I include this small data set not to be conclusive, but rather as illustrations of the points I wish to make. Though the patterns I observe in these data are clear, the sample size is not sufficient to draw conclusions about broader trends. That said, these patterns are supported by the broader literature, whose conclusions are based on a much wider canvas of nonprofit journalism. Together, the evidence I present indicates that practices associated with nonprofit news vary in significant ways from commercially-driven news. Moreover, they vary in ways one might expect based upon the economic context in which they operate.

Nonprofit news organizations generate revenue from donations, gifts, memberships, and grants from foundations. In a review, Nisbet, Kristiansen, and Bajak (2018, 12) find that, of these sources, foundation grants account for most of the revenue received by nonprofit news. **Indeed, as Konieczna (2018, 40) argues, it is fair to say that news nonprofits have succeeded in replacing advertising revenue with foundation revenue.** For our purposes, what is most important is that, by definition, nonprofit news organization are no longer in the business of selling news to audiences, or selling audiences to advertisers. This has obvious consequences for the way they produce news.

For example, compared to commercial news, periodicity plays a far less prominent role in nonprofit news. Of the 20 news sites in my sample, 14 do not publish news on a regular basis (e.g., periodically). Instead, they publish news when it is available. On 25 August 2020, for instance, I reviewed stories that appeared on the websites of the 20 nonprofits in my sample. Borderless, a non-profit news site that focuses on the US-Mexican border, is

one of those sites. On that date, the most recent story on its front page had a dateline of 18 July 2020. On the same day, the most recent story on The Lens, a news site based in New Orleans, was dated 21 August 2020. News distribution for most of the other sites in my sample follows a similar pattern. The most recent story published by the San Antonio Heron was dated 21 August; the East Lansing info had two stories on its front page with a dateline of 25 August, but the next most recent story was published three days prior. The lack of periodicity is not universal among nonprofits. A few sites in my sample publish daily news. Lkldnow, a news site based in Lakeland, Florida, publishes at least 2–3 news stories every day. Similarly, the Honolulu Civil Beat, offers readers daily news coverage, as does VTDigger. But the point is truer than not. For the most part, nonprofit news sites do not publish news on a regular, that is, periodical, basis.

Recall that periodicity is connected to two economic considerations: contractual relationships with advertisers and aggregation of a mass audience. Nonprofits face neither of these considerations. Instead, they mostly subsidize their work via foundation grants. To a great extent, therefore, their economic success requires satisfying the demands of the officers of these foundations who make decisions about resource allocation. This is a key economic consideration for nonprofit news. This is to say, the question posed to them is not how to satisfy advertisers, or how to gather a mass audience, but what kind of news will satisfy foundation officers?

The extant research is clear on the answer to this question: foundation officers want to fund journalism that has impact. As Birnbauer (2018, 80–81) reports, foundation officers invest in journalism because they see it as a way of making a positive impact on local democracy. This explains foundations' special interest in public service, and particularly investigative, journalism. According to Nisbet, Kristiansen, and Bajak (2018, 39), public service and investigative journalism accounts for 40% of foundation funding for news nonprofits, with another 15% devoted to "subject-specific" reporting on issues like the environment or poverty, and 14% given to foreign/international coverage. Only 8% of foundation funds have been provided to support daily news reporting.

In my own sample, most of the sites advertise themselves in precisely these terms, as offering "in-depth" or "investigative journalism." For example, on its "About Us" page, Wyofile, a nonprofit news site based in Wyoming, describes itself as offering "better in-depth and investigative news coverage." Similarly, VTDigger describes itself as publishing "daily ... stories with an emphasis on investigative reporting" As one nonprofit news editor put it to another researcher, "in the nonprofit circles there does tend to be more open discussion around impact ... for us, our funders ... want to see value for their money they're spending ... in terms of impact" (Konieczna and Powers 2017, 1553). Producing high-impact journalism requires many things, but one thing it does not require is periodicity. Therefore, nonprofits are moving away from this practice.

They are also moving away from the bundle of practices associated with exclusivity. Because impact, rather than profit, is the primary goal of journalism, nonprofit journalists have a natural incentive to collaborate with one another. After all, it is difficult to make an impact if one's reporting has not reached the right people at the right time. One way to reach more people is to collaborate with other journalists. As Konieczna (2018, 122) writes, while journalists have always collaborated with one another, nonprofit news organizations have made it something of a specialty. "Sharing," she writes, "is built into [the] DNA" of nonprofit news.

What does the practice of collaboration look like for these organizations? It may involve a simple agreement to mention, or cross-promote, stories across platforms. This seems to be the upshot of partnerships established by The Beacon. “The Beacon,” its proprietors write, “is a member of a local media collaborative with colleagues from StartlandNews, Shawnee Mission Post, Northeast News, Jackson County Advocate, KLC Journal, KCUR, The Kansas City Star, The Columbia Missourian ... and the Kansas Press Association.” It might extend to sharing stories, as when the Honolulu Civil Beat produces stories and makes them available to other news outlets, or when Orb, an international nonprofit that focuses on environmental issues, shares its reporting with a large network of media partners. Nonprofits may also work together, and with members of their communities to produce stories. For instance, the City Bureau in Chicago, trains community members to produce news stories, which are then shared across a network of other Chicago news platforms. Whatever form it takes, it is clear that nonprofits are moving toward collaborative news practices.

In the literature on nonprofit news, most scholars have been impressed with how little distance these organizations have been able to put between themselves and the broader commercial news system. Benson (2018, 1073), for instance, concludes that nonprofit news organizations are “deeply incorporated into the U.S. hyper-commercialized system of news production and circulation ...” Similarly, Browne (2010, 891) observes that nonprofit news “raises some of the same problems as commercial journalism.” However, as I have shown, differences between the two forms of journalism are equally impressive. These differences have arisen quickly—most of the organizations in my sample have existed for less than 10 years—despite the fact that most of the journalists working in these environments have had long careers in commercial journalism. These differences, in other words, are likely to become more pronounced as the nonprofit news sector matures. This dynamic is driven by the fact that these news organizations operate in different economic contexts.

Conclusion

Economics shapes news production. So much is agreed upon. To journalists, this influence often appears as an exogenous pressure on their practices. This is why they have built a metaphorical “wall” separating the business of news from its production. To them, decisions about how to produce news should not be influenced by economic considerations. This understanding has had consequences. For one thing, it has left many professional journalists unable and/or unwilling to reflect deeply on the role economics plays in how they produce the news. Strangely, if anything, academics have reinforced this conceptual division. A long line of studies argues that news production is a product mostly of organizational and/or occupational culture (e.g., Anderson 2013; Gans 1979; Ryfe 2012; Tuchman 1978), which is to say, of the norms and conventions, identities and practices, that circulate among journalists. At the same time, media economists examine the business of news largely absent a substantive discussion of how it is produced (e.g., Chyi 2013; Hamilton 2016). Little effort has been made to connect the economics of news to the actual things that journalists do and say.

Practice theory offers a way beyond this divide. From a practice perspective, economics shapes news production not by bearing down on news practices from the outside. Rather,

its influence emerges precisely within practices of news production, practices like beat reporting, hoarding information, and the effort to “scoop” competition. As journalists take up these practices, they reproduce the considerations—including the economic considerations—that inform those practices. Which is to say that they reproduce the structure of news production. Given the importance of economics to news production, it is utterly predictable that when the economic logic of journalism changes, journalists will gravitate to new practices. This is precisely what we see in nonprofit news.

Which brings me back to my original point. It is unlikely, if not impossible, to change the business model of news and leave the practice of news production the same. Any claim that journalism needs a new business model also, if only implicitly, is an argument that the way news is produced should change as well. Practice theory helps us to make this argument explicit, and to tease out its implications for new ventures in journalism.

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Appendix

Nonprofit News Organizations

1. BenitoLink, <https://benitolink.com/>
2. Borderless, <https://borderlessmag.org/>
3. CanopyAtlanta, <https://canopyatlanta.org/>
4. City Bureau, <https://www.citybureau.org/>
5. Colorado Independent, <https://www.coloradoindependent.com/>
6. Delaware Currents, <https://delawarecurrents.org/>
7. East Lansing Info, <https://eastlansinginfo.news/>
8. Flint Beat, <https://flintbeat.com/>
9. Honolulu Civil Beat, <https://www.civilbeat.org/>
10. Hoptown Chronicle, <https://hoptownchronicle.org/>

11. Lkldnow, <https://www.lkldnow.com/>
12. MoJo Mountain Journal, <https://mountainjournal.org/>
13. Nancy on Norwalk, <https://www.nancyonnorwalk.com/>
14. Orb, <https://orb-media.org/>
15. San Antonio Heron, <https://saheron.com/>
16. The Beacon, <https://www.thebeacon.media/>
17. The Lens, <https://thelensnola.org/>
18. Voice of OC, <https://voiceofoc.org/>
19. VTDigger, <https://vtdigger.org/>
20. WyoFile, <https://www.wyofile.com/>