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European French-Speaking Local Media's Relationship with Audiences. A Strategic Challenge between Diluted and Integrated Organizational Modalities

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ABSTRACT
This article studies local news media's relationship with audiences from an organizational perspective. It is based on 45 semi-structured interviews conducted in eleven local news organizations in European French-speaking countries (France, Switzerland and Belgium), that explored the implementation of actions aiming at revitalizing the link with audiences, the role of the hierarchy and the allocation of human and material resources to this end. Findings reveal two organizational modalities that characterize how the issue of audiences is taken into account in local news media. A proactive and integrated modality describes news media that tend to include the issue of audiences in the internal organization in a tangible, visible and structured way. A reactive and diluted modality describes news media that tend to favor a more variable and opportunistic approach to audience relations. This typology, built empirically from our data, does not claim to situate a news outlet in a definitive manner, but rather suggests a reading grid for questioning the degree of formalization of the issue of audiences within the organizational process of local news media.

KEYWORDS
Audiences; engagement; local media; France; Belgium; Switzerland; newsrooms organization

Introduction

The digital shift in media production and consumption practices raises informational, economic and organizational issues regarding local news media's relationship with audiences. In this article, we seek to understand how local news media deal with this changing relationship from an intra-organizational perspective. Despite frequent calls for understanding how digital media impacts strategizing activities, work processes and management (Horst and Murschetz 2019), the implementation of digital tools and technologies in the pre-existing organizational fabric and the conditions in which they are integrated into the organizational constraints of (small) news outlets remain less often studied. The need for a deeper consideration of the role that organizational

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structures play in the adoption of new practices, technologies and injunctions has already been stressed (Boyles 2016). Our research studies specifically this context of transformation in the intra-organizational fabric of local news media through a crucial and strategic issue, that is, the relationships with their audiences. In this regard, local news media form a particular sub-market: their presence in a specific territory implies a strong inclination to have a close relationship with their audiences (Gulyas and Baines 2020; Hess and Waller 2017).

Literature Review

Aware of citizens' increased capacity to act in a context of more expressed and visible distrust, many news organizations try to rebuild more harmonious and horizontal ties to audiences through initiatives aiming audience participation (Barnes 2016; Borger, Van Hoof, and Sanders 2016). Although the technical possibilities afforded by digital technologies have raised promises, even hopes, of paradigm shifts in the journalistic ecosystem, the evolution of the various forms of engagement, inclusion and participation of audiences proved to be less successful than initially expected (Singer et al. 2011; Costera Meijer 2020). At the same time, developments in digital media and tools provide newsrooms with analytics and metrics with the promise of better understanding audience behavior and adjusting editorial production. The question of the quality and frequency of the links between journalists and their audiences remains thus a strategic concern of local news organizations.

The evolution of news media towards a digital-centered production environment is also changing the economic landscape. Nowadays, for many news companies, the ratio between revenues from advertising and from paid circulation has progressively shifted and they depend much more than before on news consumers' revenues (Green and Jenkins 2014; Newman et al. 2019). Some media are also experimenting with new business models geared towards an active and engaged audience, notably membership (Hansen and Goligoski 2018; Lawrence, Radcliffe, and Schmidt 2018; Jenkins and Nielsen 2020).

Osty, Sainsaulieu, and Uhalde (2007) develop two models of companies allowing to situate organizational changes in news media in a specific analytical framework that resonate with the current context. First, the model of the *company in crisis* is based on the fundamental uncertainty of a company's future and the place of each individual in it. "Most of the companies in this model have experienced a turning point in the recent past" (Osty, Sainsaulieu, and Uhalde 2007, 213). Organizational and managerial changes "profoundly affect the structure of power relations, multiplying the positioning of actors and bringing out more individual, unstable and defensive games for most actors" (Osty, Sainsaulieu, and Uhalde 2007, 229). Bunce (2019), echoing this, notes that "organizational approaches to media studies often depict journalists as a fairly homogeneous group, who are socialized into the values and routines of daily journalism (…). We must pay attention to the important differences between journalists as well" (p. 902). Secondly, *modernized companies* are also confronted with a historical context that has been disrupted, particularly by new technologies and the challenges of flexibility and profitability. The most relevant characteristic of such

companies consists in accompanying the dissemination of new knowledge linked to the repositioning of professions. That said, the integration of innovation in the organizational context newsrooms is far from being guaranteed: it depends on many factors, such as the level of newsroom leadership over the availability and allocation of human and financial resources, or journalists' professional attitudes towards innovation (Lamot and Paulussen, 2020, 359).

While these two models, as well as many studies, point towards the normality and the speed of change in media and journalism, Horst, Järventie-Thesleff, and Baumann (2019, 203) stress that "we have very limited knowledge about how, in fact, media managers can strategize for such continuous change and emergent organizational realities". Understanding the complexity of the day-to-day management of the transforming of media companies asks for qualitative approaches that shed light on various intra-organizational phenomena. Tensions between need for stability and necessary innovation (Achtenhagen and Raviola, 2009; Horst and Moisander 2015), the (un) effective power of middle and top managers (Boyles 2016; Küng, 2017a) or the (lack of) willingness to embrace new routines and tools reflect a context of high uncertainty, which echoes the "messy world of observable organizational decision making" (Cohen, March, and Olsen 2012, 24). Far from the stereotypical vision of companies planning, controlling and mastering all aspects of their business through competent management, the question remains how do organizations balance exploration of the new and exploitation of what is known.

Specific features of media companies also raise organizational issues. Boyles (2016, 230) emphasizes the fact that "managerial power has been historically fractured between two executives, the editor-in-chief and the publisher, leading to divergent visions of the organization". Historically, audiences are schematically understood in a dual way: as a source of revenue (a "subscriber", a "buyer", a "prospect") or as an individual to be informed, entertained or advised (a "citizen", a "reader", a "local resident"). The demarcation between the editorial and commercial poles is historically entrenched: "During the golden age of journalism, the wall exemplified the organizational division between the editorial and commercial operations of news media" (Ferrer-Conill and Karlsson 2018, 463).

The process of digitalization does not fundamentally change the separate identification of actors. What is rather questioned is the type of collaborations between them in dealing with the relationship with audiences. Cornia, Sehl, and Nielsen (2020, 175) highlight that "editorial–business integration processes have been accelerated in response to structural changes", while creating some unresolved difficulties in terms of negotiation between editorial and commercial goals. They identify a new discursive positioning of editors and managers through the norm of *integration*, "based on combining established editorial values with values such as collaboration, adaptation, and business thinking" (Cornia, Sehl, and Nielsen 2020, 173). Although the need to make a clear distinction between commercial and editorial concerns remains a clear powerful line in many normative discourses on journalism (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; Standaert, Hanitzsch, and Dedonder 2021), the metaphor of the "wall" become discursively challenged by new ones, more oriented towards the notions of collaboration and evolution (Artemas, Vos, and Duffy 2018; Raviola 2012). In local news organizations in particular, the strong demarcation between the editorial and commercial poles has

progressively cracked due to the weight of the economic constraints (Bousquet and Amiel, 2021). Borrowing Coddington's (2015) expression, "the wall becomes a curtain".

Digitalization also contributes to the evolution of the internal organization of news media and questions the boundaries between these different poles. Certain positions, such as the "social media editor" or the "community manager" (Bakker 2014), or even the much less widespread "readers' engagement manager" (Schmelck, 2021), are developing and gaining importance in the management of the relationship with audiences. The main role of some of these positions consists in analyzing audience metrics and to a lesser extent in maintaining relationships with audiences in a conversational approach (Ferrer-Conill and Tandoc 2018; Pignard-Cheynel and Amigo 2019). Such positions can be seen as translating an interest in audiences that is part of a rather global movement within the media industry sometimes called "audience turn" (Costera Meijer 2020). This movement builds on the development of digital technology and practices based on audience monitoring and the monetisation of their data. The existence of such roles or positions within news organizations also translate broader organizational changes likely to modify the balance and the negotiations between journalists and other departments within the news media, such as technologists or business people (Küng 2017a; Westlund, Krumsvik, and Lewis 2021).

This study builds on Küng's research, who claims that many media organizations "have abandoned classic strategic planning in favour of a series of opportunistic, tactical moves, often focused around innovation projects" (2017b: 19). It adopts the theoretical framework grounded in processual studies of organizations (Langley et al. 2013) and practice-theoretical descriptions of emergent strategies (Burgelman et al. 2018) as applied and developed by Horst, Järventie-Thesleff, and Baumann (2019). Acknowledging the fact that "rationalist strategic approaches" are "hard to apply in the industry's dynamic and volatile environment", this body of literature considers the strategy work as "opportunistic and piecemeal, defined (…) by firefighting in response to specific challenges and (…) by a large number of individual strategic projects that only, if at all, coalesce into a coherent strategy in retrospect" (Küng, 2017b: 107). In this regard, Horst, Järventie-Thesleff, and Baumann (2019, 203) suggest that "strategy is something that people in organizations *do*, as compared to something that an organization *has*. It shifts our focus towards the actions, constellations and local mechanisms through which people strategize". This processual approach is rooted in Henri Mintzberg's (1978) seminal distinction between deliberate strategy and emergent strategy. A strategic achievement, or *realized strategy*, defined as a pattern in an organization's actions over time, "is not simply the (…) planned activity, termed *deliberate strategy*. Rather, realized strategy also includes patterned action that does not derive from the intentions of top management. This portion of realized strategy is termed *emergent strategy*" (Mirabeau and Maguire 2014:1204). This last orientation involves analyzing the discourse from journalists and their various supervisors, but also, when necessary, broadening the scope and interviewing people working in other departments (Swart et al. 2022). It shifts the focus on local actions of media practitioners (individual practices, decision-making processes, team developments or learning) coping with unfolding and "emerging strategic realities" (Mirabeau and Maguire 2014). Horst et al. suggest that "working with an emergent future becomes possible through the practice of "shared inquiry". This practice is constituted through "adaptive

and recursive actions of the workers (searching and learning, facilitating and questioning, guiding and reflecting) that lead to "responsive coping" and create the conditions to manage for strategy emergence on an aggregate level (Horst, Järventie-Thesleff, and Baumann 2019, 217).

We believe this framework is useful in the context of the turmoil and uncertainty of the digital era. Following Küng, who predicted that "the ascendency of technology will have knock-on effects on the shape of organisations [and] on content creation processes" (2017 b: 309), researchers need concepts for understanding the management of such radical changes as a process involving a particular context, a set of resources and more and more actors, since news media constantly incorporate new types of skills and expertise. In such context, the question of the relationship with audiences must therefore be studied as a continuous and variable process, involving, at least potentially, various kinds of actors with their respective views on how audiences must be considered.

Our research question is based on these observations: **in a context of transformation of editorial and business models, how does the organizational structure of local news media influence the maintaining and developing of relationships with audiences as a strategic issue?** We break down this question into three areas of analysis that concern:

- What human resources are specifically allocated to the relationships with audiences (RQ1)?
- What are the logistical and financial resources allocated to these relationships (RQ2)?
- and, finally, how are relationships with audiences thought of jointly in commercial and editorial perspectives (RQ3)?

Based on these three areas of analysis, this work aims to identify the extent to which the transformations due to the digital shift favor (or not) the emergence of new organizational modalities regarding the relationship with audiences in local news media.

Methodology

The starting point of this study is a database created by the LINC (*local, innovation, news, community*) research project. This project looks at how local news outlets dealing with their digital transformation rethink (or not) their links with audiences in three geographical areas of French-speaking Europe: France, Wallonia (Belgium) and French-speaking Switzerland. Between December 2018 and December 2020, the research team listed 550 news media's "initiatives". An initiative is an action launched by a news organization with the aim of strengthening the bond with audiences by inviting them to participate in an activity of variable duration in a physical and/or digital space (Pignard-Cheynel and Amigo 2023). The analysis of these initiatives showed that almost 75% of them are based on the inclusion of audiences in the news-making process (ranging from the most passive inclusion to the most fully integrated one: observation, dialogue, contribution, consultation and coproduction).

The majority of these initiatives make use of digital tools and platforms. They include a form of participatory journalism relying on user generated content or other contributions of audiences (votes in polls, reactions to messages, etc.).

This study provides a complementary perspective to the analysis of the initiatives, based on 45 semi-structured interviews conducted within eleven French-speaking local news organizations (five in France, three in Switzerland and three in Belgium). These news outlets were chosen according to the following criteria: 1) they have launched various initiatives aiming audiences, which led us to think they were rather actively seeking to strengthen their links with their audiences; 2) a proportional breakdown between countries; 3) the consideration of different types of media (print press, audiovisual media and digital-only outlets); 4) a variety of statuses and business models (private *versus* public; mainly paid *versus* mainly free content).

Interviews were conducted between September 2019 and August 2020. They systematically addressed the following themes: the origin, organization and evaluation of initiatives; the role of digital tools in managing the relationship with audiences; the internal organization in relation to audiences; the news outlet's history regarding its relationships with audiences and the perspectives of development concerning this topic. All interviews were fully transcribed and anonymized by the LINC project researchers.

Interviews were analyzed based on an inductive content methodology allowing to situate, by a progressive rise in abstraction, each news organization in relation to the research question (Schwartz et al. 1999). This progressive description of management modalities of the relationship with audiences allowed, in a second step, a comparison between the media of the sample. Interviewees were professionals in the news organization, whether journalists or not, so as to gain a broad understanding of how the relationship with audiences was taken into consideration. Whenever it was possible, for each of the eleven media selected, we met with the editorial director of the newsroom as well as with a manager and the journalist(s) in charge of the initiatives (and if relevant, other people involved). In case such a position was duly identified, the people specifically responsible for the relationship with audiences were also interviewed. Table A1 (see appendix) summarizes the interviews conducted and the news media selected.

As is often the case when discussing the organization of work, resources and professional practices, the researchers' questions are only partially reflected in the mirror held up to them by the respondents during interviews – an exercise very familiar to journalists (Standaert 2015). The material collected mixes many other issues and topics that situate each interviewee in a particular relationship with his or her employer, adding to the issue of audiences those, among others, of editorial orientations, socio-economic challenges and technological developments affecting both the news outlet being studied but also, more broadly, the market and the professional group. These data gravitating around our research question in no way disturb the understanding of the functioning of newsrooms: on the contrary, they are an indispensable material to situate how the specific question of the audience is impacted by interrelated challenges. Finally, these data allow us to grasp the way in which different initiatives, practices and organisational realities are understood, justified and perceived by the interviewees, among others their strategic dimension. Such practices

and organisational realities, as they are concretely deployed in newsrooms, may therefore potentially differ from what we were told, despite the care we took to verify the facts reported in the interviews and their overall consistency.

Findings

The Distribution of Human Resources: A Fragmented Organizational Issue (RQ1)

Interviews show that in the pre-digital era, the allocation of human resources specifically dedicated to audiences remained rare in all their aspects: commercial (advertising and subscriptions), promotional, administrative, and also journalistic. There is no need to recall how vital audience retention is for the vast majority of news media. The erosion of advertising revenues, especially on the web, is increasingly steering them towards a revenue model where subscriptions have gained strategic importance. Paradoxically, this aspect of a media company's activity is not systematically visible in the organizational structure. Except for very specific cases, such as those in charge of subscriptions or (possible) mediation services ensuring the communication between readers/subscribers and editorial staff (for example in case of a grievance or complaint), it is far from obvious to identify the people who specifically manage the contact with readers or subscribers. As a journalist from a Belgian daily newspaper states: *"We often have readers who come to the office and ask to talk to us. We are a major actor in the city and people come in to chat, complain, or insist on talking to a reporter. Usually, we send the person who wrote the article or who covers the topic. But when he or she is not there, we work it out, and I* [local editor] *often do it. It depends on the type of request, of course. But we can't ignore those requests".*

In most newsrooms, it is not clear that any one person is specifically responsible for entertaining the relationship with audiences, not even from a hierarchical point of view. A case-by-case logic seems to be the preferred management norm, in a context where the majority of interviewees report a structurally high workload, which does not favor the availability of journalists to respond to all the requests they receive. More fundamentally, interviewees claim that newsroom staff is little involved in initiatives aiming to revitalize the bond with audiences (this is also thought of staff working on the web edition even if they are supposed to be more in tune with these approaches).

The main exception to these forms of dilution of the tasks and functions regarding audiences lies in the positions associated with social media management. It exists in an identified and distinct way in a minority of the media studied. Literature showed that people with this type of position have a wide range of tasks, at the intersection of commercial, participatory and editorial logics (Pignard-Cheynel and Amigo 2019). Sometimes this position is attached to the editorial office (*Le Nouvelliste, La Voix du Nord*, *La Tribune de Genève*) while in other cases it is removed from the competencies of editorial staff to be transferred to another department (*L'Avenir*). When no one is specifically appointed to this position, the relationship with audiences by using social media is often managed collectively, and sometimes even at the intersection of editorial and marketing (*Léman Bleu, MaTélé*).

A few media stand out in our corpus by the creation of positions with a strategic focus on audience relations. *Médiacités* recruited a journalist responsible for "readers' commitment" in 2018, a recruitment all the more significant as the team of this local pure player is very limited. This specialized profile thinks about how to consider relations with audiences collectively with the business model of a digital-centered media. The scope of such a position, in addition to the personal experience of the person who occupies it, goes far beyond the traditional remit of the community manager, and reflects a vision of journalism focused, among other things, on different forms of audience engagement. One of the challenges of *Médiacités*, in this perspective, is to raise this objective to an organizational level that can mobilize the entire network of collaborators, spread over four major French cities, while leading the entire structure towards profitability. For its part, the newspaper *La Montagne* (owned by Centre France group) hired a deputy editor-in-chief "in charge of audience engagement". His role is to coordinate initiatives including audiences in the news-making process and to instil editorial guidelines that claim to be "engaged journalism".

When it comes to the role of hierarchies in the organization of the initiatives listed by the LINC project, things are more often bottom-up than top-down. The TV station *Léman Bleu* is a particular case in this regard. There, the role of impulsion and coordination of the director is clearly claimed by a member of the hierarchy: "*It often starts with me and then I start supervising things (…) We have in general one or another journalist who is really going to be the referent of the initiative, who takes in hand the project and who makes sure of the exchanges with our communities of listeners (…). The impetus comes rather from me, as a driving force*". The majority of the initiatives discussed with respondents of other news media only manage to punctually mobilize hierarchical relays. When they succeed, internal resources are mobilized for a limited period of time, and, most often, without the willingness to make things permanent or to implement them in organizational routines.

Interviews show that most initiatives undertaken by news organizations are launched by small groups or individuals. They are sometimes carried out during private time, in a haphazard way, without an editorial framework. In line with this, the editorial director of a local Swiss newspaper admits: "*There are things that emerge due to initiatives launched by different people, but to be quite honest, these initiatives are not totally conceived and thought-out strategies*". One of the difficulties underlined by respondents is the sustainability of these "bottom-up" initiatives: if the person at the origin of the action leaves or wishes to stop, the whole project is called into question because of the lack of integration in the overall strategy of the media.

The Allocation of Resources: A Variable under Constant Pressure (RQ2)

In addition to the interest in understanding who launches and nurtures these initiatives, there is the question of *how*, i.e., the means. The second issue addressed in this article concerns the allocation of logistical, material, and financial resources to the initiatives listed in the LINC project inventory. This is partially concomitant with the question of human resources.

Interviews show that when it comes to initiatives led by members of the editorial staff, there is no systematic support provided to journalists. Also, the majority of interviews emphasize the dynamic of just-in-time and pressure affecting editorial teams. The daily press, in this respect, is exemplary of this feeling of little room for maneuver. As a journalist of a French daily newspaper claims: *"We are supposed to be able to launch projects and initiatives, and to be followed to implement them. It's actually complicated because we all have a lot of work, the editors in chief don't have that much time to follow up on stuff. It hasn't really worked out."* Many interviews point out this recurring availability problem related to a decreasing number of news media's employees, which is partially compensated for by freelancers, exposed to exactly the same phenomenon of workload and variable availability. Another interviewee from a French news outlet sums it up this way: *"Everything is done on a shoestring"*.

Other factors may also potentially reduce the room for maneuver in terms of resources allocated to managing the relationship with audiences through the implementation of initiatives. First, the traditional definition of jobs and tasks remains an obstacle to internal mobility. However, an initiative often requires putting people with complementary skills around the same table, but who do not always work in the same department. Second, the organization of work (e.g., schedules, staff shifts, tasks designation) as well as budgetary imperatives sometimes make it difficult to focus specifically on the issue of the relationship with audiences. Interviewees mention difficulties in mobilizing other resources (logistics, marketing) and in convincing hierarchical relays when they seek to implement an initiative. The general context of digital transformation, which is sometimes touted as a unique opportunity to connect with audiences, is nonetheless a cumbersome, long, costly and demanding process for the global organizational balance of news media. As a manager of a Belgian daily press group points out, "*if we make a mistake in our investments, we make a mistake for a long time. For example, the implementation of a new software for putting print and web content online together requires a very important budget and months of work, particularly in training our employees. We can't spend these resources and the time elsewhere*". Hence, the digital era is not systematically perceived as a more favorable period in the relationship between media and audiences, precisely because of the means available.

One of local media's historical ways of creating or reinforcing the links with audiences (or more specifically, the inhabitants of their area of diffusion) is the organization of large public events in a marketing and advertising logic. These event-based initiatives, however, tend to decrease. For some newsrooms, events with a large audience and generous contributions from advertisers are simply no longer feasible, because they are no longer sufficiently profitable, as pointed out by a manager of a Swiss newspaper: "*Just a few years ago, newspapers were still organizing many sports events like races. The newspapers were present at all the fairs, all the important cultural events and then all that, it kind of fell apart, probably for economic reasons or maybe a loss of awareness of that connection {with audiences}*". The question that arises, then, concerns the capacity of news organizations to find and allocate resources specifically to proactively creating and maintaining links with audiences. This is all the more difficult at a time when local news media are pushed to change their traditional business model, being confronted with fundamental changes in the news ecosystem due to

the bursting of the internet bubble in the early 2000s, as well as several crises since the beginning of the century such as, the financial and economic crisis from 2008 or the Covid-19 health crisis in 2020.

While such observations seem to be obvious to most of the respondents, this doesn't mean that nothing is happening. What this context of pressure on resources reveals is rather the generalization of a flexible logic in the follow-up of initiatives. It depends on various and unpredictable impulses that are assessed on a case-by-case basis, according to a set of parameters such as the enthusiasm of the journalist(s) carrying out the initiative. It is a fully opportunistic logic with variable concretization, in a global context of pressure on human and material resources: "*The initiatives come from the editorial staff and then we receive logistical support for some of them, for the organization, the contacts with the guests, the promotion, two or three tasks carried by marketing*" (journalist from a French newspaper).

Editorial and Commercial Synergies: A Matter to Be Rethought beyond (Old) Metaphors (RQ3)

Local media's commercial strategies seek to create a relationship with audiences with the aim to generate revenue. These strategies translate into various actions ranging from events to sales promotions, audience-monitoring activities, marketing-based initiatives, among others. Marketing plays a central role in a news organization's commercial strategy as it aims to promote its services and products as well as to increase brand awareness and organizational growth (Geana 2009).

A noticeable result of our study is that overall, the news organizations studied do not show a very advanced or systematic integration of commercial and journalistic teams, instead collaboration between them casts in one or another established procedure. The approach of audience relations is done on a mainly *ad hoc* basis, with objectives that, while sometimes converging, are nonetheless limited in time. In other words, at the intra-organizational level, the lines of demarcation still remain between audiences apprehended from an editorial point of view and audiences approached in commercial terms.

Beyond this main trend, looking closely at routines and daily journalistic work quickly undermines the normative vision that claims a clear and impermeable separation between editorial and commercial work. The question of collaboration between the two poles is most often raised openly by people with hierarchical responsibilities, probably because they are the ones who have the most frequent contact with other services and departments, which gives them access to strategic information such as audience and sales figures.

First, the administration of reader surveys and the regular consultation of audience metrics (e.g., traffic, engagement, conversions, "hot" topics) have been implemented by senior management – although this is not always followed by journalists in all the news organizations of our sample. Journalists have access to audience data, both quantitative (e.g., statistics) and qualitative (e.g., panels, interviews) data. Accessing such information can lead to the redirection of some journalists to sectors that are not covered enough, or to reinforce the coverage of the most profitable bastions

from the point of view of content monetization. It is mainly through the hierarchy, and rarely the idea of journalists, that a more integrated coordination of the approach to audiences is deployed. From time to time, this goes hand in hand with initiatives launched by the marketing department, for which the newsroom contributes to a certain extent. Schematically, the progressive implementation of tools allowing to measure and to know the audience is the subject to a gradual and more or less proactive appropriation by journalists, depending on whether the hierarchy coordinates and promotes these practices.

When a journalist launches an initiative targeting audiences, the project, regardless of how it is viewed within the news organization, can quickly run out of steam if it doesn't have the support of commercial services, especially in terms of external communication. Some journalists seem to be well aware that setting up an initiative takes them outside their usual scope of action. They pinpoint the danger that the impact of their efforts will be diminished by a lack of logistical or communication support. In this context, it is interesting to note that they sometimes invest themselves to publicize an initiative: they use resources such as their own mailing lists and social media, even if, as shown in the following excerpt from a Belgian newspaper, a person from the sales department is duly identified as "responsible" for promoting news-production based initiatives: *"The person from the marketing department comes in to give a hand and to echo the project, but this is really launched and managed by editorial staff. We don't launch a marketing campaign afterwards (…). But we work a lot with e-mails. We have our own list of subscribers and we work with emails. Computers make things easier, that's clear, we can send targeted emails to subscribers and not just a letter. With e-mail, things can move very fast and you can quickly see the follow-up. It takes a lot of the technical work out of it."*

This example shows an important element with respect to the organization of work: a certain porosity exists between the goals, skills and tools of journalists and their colleagues in commercial-oriented teams. The previous excerpt suggests that the agility offered by digital tools allows journalists to act on their own and to set more "commercial" goals: to reach and target audiences, to create awareness and commitment through an initiative, to generate traffic, to mix editorial and marketing tools such as metrics analysis. This assumption of a more pronounced porosity between the commercial and editorial realms is not particularly surprising in a context of hybridization of profiles and practices in editorial offices (Hamilton 2016). In this case, we see a form of hybridization of journalistic skills towards different forms of engagement and activation of audiences. In contrast to discursive postures insisting on the necessary distinction between newsrooms and other departments in a news organization, such practices do not seem to pose any identity or normative dilemma. The interest in appropriating the aforementioned tools and practices is explained, among other things, by their ability to renew the forms of dialogue between journalists and their audiences. This outlines the identification of common interests between these two historically distinct approaches to audiences – the editorial and the commercial one.

These results invite to rethink the issue of collaborations or separations between editorial and commercial entities as they are frequently discussed (Cornia, Sehl, and Nielsen 2020; Artemas, Vos, and Duffy 2018; Boyles 2016). It is just as possible to

point to evidence that the metaphor of the wall remains relevant as it is to show that we are gradually moving toward the metaphor of the curtain (Coddington 2015), with more integrated practices and guidelines. In the context of digitalization, what should be rather questioned are the conditions under which developments at this level are enabled or hindered. When considering the issue of the integration of commercial and editorial purposes, we must consider the interaction between *a)* the specific (economic) context to each news organization, *b)* the decision-making processes and the intra-organizational structure and *c)* the individual and bottom-up capacity to launch initiatives linked to audiences (see Küng, 2017b: 316).

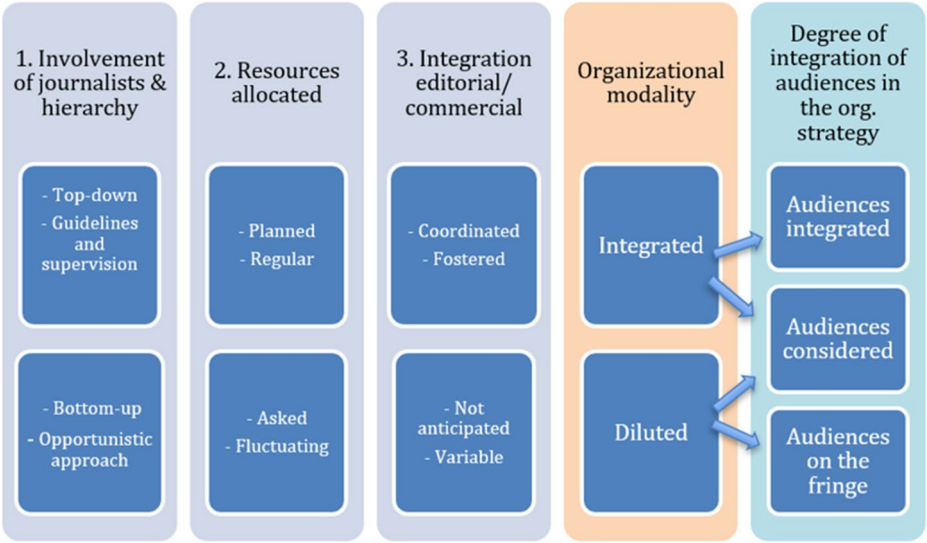
A Strategic Challenge between Diluted and Integrated Organizational Modalities

Finally, our results suggest that the internal organization of newsrooms in creating and maintaining relations with audiences can be categorized schematically according to the three axes of analysis detailed above: the genesis and the management of initiatives, the resources allocated and the collaboration between editorial and commercial employees. These three variables are divided into two types of modalities that express how audiences are embodied in the organizational strategy.

One is a *proactive* and *integrated modality* that tends to include the issue of audiences in the internal organization in a tangible, visible and structured way. In this case, the approach to audiences is rather "top-down" and translates in a global strategy that integrates and even sets the relationship with audiences as a development axis. Only a minority of the media of our sample correspond to the first type of modality. One of them (*Mediacités*) is a local digital-only news outlet that explicitly claims to implement a membership model (regarding the monetization) and the engagement journalism model (for the editorial side). Despite having a small team, a position is dedicated entirely to readers' commitment. Within this news organization there is also a very close collaboration between the editorial staff and the person in charge of marketing thanks, once again, to a small and agile structure where exchanging places and working shifts are very frequent (as in start-ups). The other media belonging to this category media are long-established regional newspapers (*La Voix du Nord* and *La Montagne*) that have each begun a deep process of redefining their positioning, in connection with a CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) approach. In both newspapers, positions are dedicated to audience-oriented relations. Activities, practices and orientations related to these positions are framed by a top-down strategy that reflects the willingness to "integrate" audiences and to position these media in a rather engaged approach towards them.

The second organizational modality is *reactive* and *diluted*, and tends to favor a more variable and opportunistic approach to audiences. This modality reflects more individualistic, bottom-up, situated and not necessarily perennial "tactics". This organizational modality includes many news outlets of our sample which can schematically be divided in two groups. In one group, we find mainly traditional regional newspapers, engaged in the heavy process of digitalization, and for which the inclusion of audiences does not seem central or strategic at this stage. While interviews reveal

Table 1. Local media's organizational modalities regarding the relationship with audience.



strong individual dynamics within newsrooms, they often come up against the organizational inertia of the media as a whole and the pre-existing silos that make cross-functional or collaborative actions complicated. For these news organizations, the integration of audiences into the strategy and the organization is therefore most often "on the fringe". In the other group, we identify smaller news organizations (in particular local television stations or digital-only outlets), which often cover small areas with limited resources. Relationships with audiences are variable, depending on opportunities and means. They are most often created and maintained with the support of the direction, but without making them a central axis of the news organization's development. We refer to these cases as media where audiences are "considered".

This typology, built empirically from our data, does not claim to situate a news outlet in a definitive manner, but rather suggests a reading grid for questioning the degree of formalization of the issue of audience relations within the organizational fabric. The typology of organizational modalities presented in Table 1 does not pretend to include, let al.one erase, internal tensions and divergences of view, nor the varying degrees of investment between certain services, departments or individuals. It allows us to distinguish two intra-organizational modalities of the issue of relationships with audiences.

The community manager function within the news organizations of our sample allows us to illustrate this typology. Some local news media do not have community managers as such and handle some of the usual tasks associated with this position according to specific needs or time available (*Ma Télé, Léman Bleu*). In other news organizations, people in charge of social media have a relatively limited scope of action, applying instructions from marketing or editorial staffs (*L'Avenir, Sudpresse*). Finally, in other media, the tasks of the community manager are included into the core responsibilities of other positions specifically created and dedicated to proactively

creating and maintaining a relationship with audiences (*Médiacités, La Montagne*). Based on this, *Léman Bleu* and *MaTélé* reflect both a diluted organizational approach (there is no specific position dedicated to audience relations) although there is a certain consideration for the stakes linked to audiences (as opposed to other media that do not have a community manager nor anyone *acting* as such). *L'Avenir* and *Sudpresse* are to be situated in an integrated approach to audiences from an organizational perspective (here there is a defined position dedicated to audience relations), similar to *Léman Bleu* and *Ma Télé* in terms of strategic purpose (audiences *considered*). For their part, *Médiacités* and *La Montagne* show an integrated approach to audience relations at the organizational level (they created specific positions dedicated to it), but with a much more ambitious mandate, situating their strategy at the integrated level of the typology.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article leads to three key conclusions. First, our sample fits fairly well with the characteristics of *companies in crisis* (Osty, Sainsaulieu, and Uhalde 2007) in that their management methods are adapting to a paradigm shift, namely the evolution towards an organizational model that is more digital-centered, both in terms of news production practices and commercial operations (advertising and subscriptions). The progressive integration of new knowledge, new positions and new tasks, essentially produced by digital technologies, also brings them closer to the model of *modernized companies*. The weight of this digital shift is relatively palpable and has already been highlighted in the analysis of the 550 initiatives, the majority of which mobilize digital tools and solutions. The question was then to know *via* which organizational modality this adaptation takes place when considering the issue of relationships with audiences. Audiences often gravitate *on the fringe* of the organizational structure of the newsrooms; they are sometimes *considered* through more or less tangible means and actions, and more rarely, they are *integrated* and translated into a strategic process.

In this respect, we observe a processual dynamic, operating on a piecemeal basis, in a logic of iteration and opportunities (Horst, Järventie-Thesleff, and Baumann 2019), much more than a rapid shift, mastered and planned over time. At the organizational level, the management of relations with audiences undoubtedly benefits from digital tools and solutions, but essentially in the sense of a bottom-up logic, translating a kind of individualization of practices and initiatives, one of the key elements of the model of companies in crisis; this happens essentially according to a diluted process, on a case-by-case basis, authorizing both flexibility and experimentation, but largely unable to modify the organization of news media with respect to the three axes analyzed: human resources, material resources and the dynamics between the editorial and commercial poles. The strategic question of audiences remains often diluted in a long, variable and complex iterative process. Such companies evolve in a joint dynamic, sometimes paradoxical, where major changes and a desire to preserve organizational gains unfold among the employees (Horst and Moisander 2015). These two movements are often expressed in the interviews. The discourse on transformation emphasizes novelty, renewal, change and an open future. The one on preservation emphasizes tradition, permanence, stability and the historical roots of the news

organization. Between these two poles, which are both complementary and opposed, the place given to the audience fluctuates according to whether it is called upon to emphasize elements of evolution (*"The audience is changing, so are we"*), or, on the contrary, forms of stability (*"We, the local news media, know our readers better than anyone"*). The negotiation of this organizational tension between old and new (Westlund 2012) reveals a piece of the internal organization of local news media, balancing between diluted and integrated modalities which reflect, in turn, a more strategic understanding of the audiences as much as the limited resources to find a balance between legacy approaches and orientations resulting from the digital shift.

Second, the separation between editorial and commercial activities still remains, without emerging discursive norms that would differ from traditional normative stances. Nonetheless, things are less static at the micro level of analysis, where we observe occasional, fluid, and opportunistic dynamics of collaboration in that some journalists mobilize for their own benefit, and for their own initiatives, tools, habits and practices traditionally belonging to their marketing colleagues (reaching and targeting an audience, creating awareness and engagement through an initiative, generating traffic, analyzing data and feedbacks). These trends, observed thanks to a level of analysis as close as possible to daily practices, echo the emerging strategic realities stressed by Horst, Järventie-Thesleff, and Baumann (2019).

Third, while all news media in our study show a concern for audiences and a willingness to implement initiatives aimed at them, our findings do not point to a widespread "audience turn" (Costera Meijer 2020) characterized by a drastic shift in how local news media engage with audiences. Rather, our results demonstrate that news media develop their relationship with audiences through diverse organizational approaches, revealing gradual levels of consideration of audiences in journalistic practices and media's strategies. While all the news media are experimenting with tools and their organizational implementation at a certain level, from the most diluted to the most integrated, only a minority has taken a step forward by explicitly investing in human and material resources to take charge of the question of audience at a higher organizational level, in order to give it a more strategic place, i.e., giving guidelines, managing day-to-day practices and making decisions for the future. These variations invite us to study the strategy process by grasping its rhythm, its intensity and its linear or, on the contrary, variable and uncertain character. In terms of the pace and intensity of this process, there is no guarantee that those who have opted for an organizational integration will continue to do so indefinitely. Rather, the literature shows a tendency towards frequent repositioning, sometimes contradictory, sometimes consistent over the medium and long term. In practice, the analysis of the relationships of local media with their audiences shows a gradual transition towards digital and technological developments, but in no case is this process implemented in a homogeneous and linear way. This is the whole point of conceptually understanding the strategy of these news media as something that is being done rather than something that they possess.

Finally, our study presents some limitations. First, we have analyzed only a limited number of news organizations that does not form a perfectly representative sample of the diversity of local journalism in France, Belgium and Switzerland. Second, our qualitative focus on how challenges related to audience relations are perceived and discussed would benefit from complementary field observation, closer to the *performed* practices.

Despite these limitations, our findings offer some improvement for the large body of research on the impact of digitalization on journalists' practices and newsrooms' organizations. Following the avenue opened by media management research, embracing the "process emphasis" (Mirabeau and Maguire 2014, 14) from the outset al.lows to better grasp how the complex phenomenon of change is dealt with – in our case the changes in the relationships with audiences –. Indeed, it seems clear that this is far from being "a manageable process of transformation that proceed from one stage to another" (Malmelin, Virta, and Kuismin 2022, 218). As highlighted in this study, the potential of such an approach can be achieved through the analysis of different voices and functions from media organizations (not only middle or top management and not just editorial staff), along three different axes of analysis: the contextual framework, the decision-making process and the initiatives carried out by individuals or small groups. Their joint analysis offers the possibility to assess the extent to which the changes studied are understood as strategic at the intra-organizational level. This approach also has some implications for practitioners: the processual approach and a deeper consideration for acts of "emergent strategy" (Horst, Järventie-Thesleff, and Baumann 2019) may provide guidance to "would-be champions of bottom-up strategy making" (Mirabeau and Maguire 2014, 1227). The many bottom-up initiatives listed in this study and in the LINC project (Pignard-Cheynel and Amigo 2023) show that a bottom-up strategy perspective could be useful to managers in their efforts to make the most of their resources and implement the adaptations induced by the digital transition.

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Appendix

Table A1. Summary of interviews.

News organization	Media type	Country	Ownership and revenue model	Number of interviews
La Marseillaise	Daily newspaper	France	Private – Subscription	Total: 3 1 director 1 editor-in-chief 1 journalist
Médiacités	Digital-only	France	Private – Subscription	Total: 6 1 director 2 editors-in-chief 1 journalist responsible for "readers' commitment" 1 marketing manager 1 web developer
Rue89 Strasbourg	Digital-only	France	Private – Mostly free content	Total: 4 1 director 2 journalists 1 developer
La Voix du Nord	Daily newspaper	France	Private – Subscription	Total: 5 1 director 1 editor-in-chief 1 journalist and community manager 1 director of marketing studies 1 manager of customer relations
La Montagne	Daily newspaper	France	Private – Subscription	Total: 3 1 director 1 editor-in-chief in charge of audience engagement 1 manager of innovation and corporate social responsibility
Le Nouvelliste	Daily newspaper	Switzerland	Private – Subscription	Total: 5 1 director 2 journalists 1 journalist in charge of the web edition 1 community manager
Léman Bleu	TV station	Switzerland	Private - Free content	Total: 4 1 director 1 marketing and communications manager 1 editor-in-chief 1 journalist
Tribune de Genève	Daily newspaper	Switzerland	Private - Subscription	Total: 3 1 editor-in-chief 2 journalists
MaTélé	TV station	Belgium	Public – Free content	Total: 4 1 director 1 editor-in-chief 2 journalists
L'Avenir	Daily newspaper	Belgium	Private - Subscription	Total: 6 1 commercial director 2 editors-in-chief 3 journalists
Sudpresse	Daily newspaper	Belgium	Private - Subscription	Total: 3 1 director and HR manager 1 director of process and development 1 editor-in-chief