CHAPTER 6

The Conversation Canada: Not-for-Profit Journalism in a Time of Commercial Media Decline

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Abstract

This chapter tackles two pressing gaps in the journalism studies literature on the business of news in Canada: analysis of digital born journalism organizations and early implications of not-for-profit journalism. We use a case study approach to assess the launch and growth of The Conversation Canada, a national journalism organization that launched in 2017, and is one of eight affiliates of the global not-for-profit Conversation network of journalism sites. This case study is timely as Canada is seeing a growth in digital-born journalism organizations, which are often seen as innovators and saviours compared to legacy media. At the same time, not-for-profit and publicly funded journalism organizations are increasingly considered an antidote to commercial journalism decline. We find The Conversation Canada contributing to journalism and innovating in its reach to traditional and non-elite audiences, its experimentation with not-for-profit democratic organizational models, and its access to non-traditional revenue sources in the form of university membership fees and competitive research funding.

This chapter tackles two pressing gaps in the journalism studies literature on the business of news in Canada: analysis of digital-born journalism organizations and early implications of not-for-profit journalism (Nielsen, 2019). We use a case study approach to assess the launch and growth of The Conversation Canada,[1] one of eight affiliates of the global not-for-profit The Conversation network of journalism sites. The journalism model of The Conversation is novel as it pairs academics and experienced journalist editors to create evidence-based explanatory journalism and commentary, distributing it for free to anyone to republish under a Creative Commons licence. We focus on a single case study of The Conversation Canada in its first few years of operation for three reasons.

First, Canada is seeing a growth in digital-born journalism organizations with approximately 70 journalism start-ups launching since 2000 (Hermida & Young, 2019a). Second, start-ups are often seen as saviours, "better able to embrace … innovation" than legacy journalism organizations (Deuze, 2017, p. 10). And third, not-for-profit and publicly funded journalism organizations are increasingly being seen as an antidote to a decline in commercial journalism (Pickard, 2017).

We also have unique access to the organization. We co-founded The Conversation Canada in 2017. We are current directors on the board of the not-for-profit organization that operates the site, the Academic Journalism Society. As a result, we approach this topic as both participant-observers and "reflective practitioners" (Iacono et al., 2009, p. 39). We find this stance an appropriate way to examine fast-changing and emergent industries such as the contemporary context for journalism (Iacono et al., 2009). In order to mitigate bias, we have built on an unpublished study of not-for-profit journalism start-ups by Taylor Owen (2017), and research on local news outlets by April Lindgren (2019). We also integrate other national comparison data to assess The Conversation Canada in its early development stage, as well as to locate it within larger changes in the journalism landscape (Hermida & Young, 2019b). Our goal in being transparent is to support knowledge generation and capacity building in this space. We do not work for, consult, or receive any revenue from our participation in The Conversation Canada or any related organization that would benefit from this article.

Similar to other media systems that have been well studied (Cagé, 2016; Deuze, 2017; Edge, 2016; Nielsen, 2019), the media system in Canada is seeing decline in some commercial journalism organizations, job loss in legacy media, and growth in digital-born journalism organizations, along with evidence of a shifting regulatory and policy climate toward government funding of the media (Edge, 2016; Owen, 2017; Public Policy Forum [PPF], 2017, 2018). The economic context is considered so dire for commercial journalism that the Canadian government has created a financial subsidy package for journalism organizations, beyond existing forms of financial support for the media sector and despite long-standing opposition to this policy approach. This funding includes more than $600 million to support journalism in the form of tax credits for labour and reader subscriptions, as well as an extension of the definition of charity to include journalism organizations. The Conversation Canada, along with some of the other digital-born journalism start-ups, as well as players in legacy media, stand to benefit from some of these policy changes.

We approach innovation and change in the journalism sector drawing from other studies that have examined a wide array of practices and forms as representative of "innovation" in journalism. These include: increases in creation and dissemination of online news (Boczkowski, 2009); newer forms of journalism (Zeller & Hermida, 2015); new business models (Nielsen, 2016); and newer roles, identities, and genres, along with shifting boundary work, in relation to who is a professional journalist and what they could and should do in relation to multiple and participatory publics (Lewis, 2012). Digital media and journalism organizations (such as The Conversation Canada) are also increasingly a vehicle through which citizens engage within a globally networked and "contested" public sphere (Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2017, p. 743). According to Wahl-Jorgensen et al., "We are now living in a society whose discussion about itself no longer takes place primarily in and through conventional mainstream news media, such as newspapers, television, and radio, but is increasingly diverse, variegated, and fragmented through social media, blogs, and other platforms" (p. 743).

In this vein, we find evidence of innovation in the model of The Conversation Canada in three ways. First, The Conversation Canada has been able to increase global and non-elite dissemination of its journalism (through dissemination by global actors as well as peripheral journalism actors) in what has been considered a parochial national journalism landscape (Gasher, 2007; Hermida & Young, 2019b). Second, it has been able to experiment with not-for-profit democratic organizational models, which is an addition to the Canadian commercial journalism landscape. And third, its governance structure, along with its relationship to the higher education sector, has supported access to non-traditional seed capital and revenue sources in the form of university membership fees and competitive research funding. (Other digital-born journalism organizations in Canada have also been successful in the research funding space.) Long-term funding, however, remains a key goal, highlighting the challenges faced by early stage digital-born journalism organizations in similar media markets. This evidence of The Conversation Canada's impact is relevant to citizenship in a digital context, as it suggests that, at least in the digital-born journalism space in Canada, digital technologies are expanding the nature of identities vis-à-vis their analogue legacy media peers, as well as potentially offering research-driven journalism as a remedy to mis- and disinformation concerns in a contested digital ecosystem.

Not-for-Profit Journalism Models

Two emergent areas of investigation from journalism studies and the business of journalism are relevant to our research. They address questions that include: (1) whether not-for-profit and foundation-funded journalism models can and are living up to their potential to affect change, innovate in, and (by extension) "repair" or "reform" journalism (Benson, 2017; Cagé, 2016; Coates Nee, 2014; Graves & Konieczna, 2015); and (2) whether and how digital-born journalism start-ups and journalism organizations, specifically not-for-profit ones, are financially viable (Bruno & Nielson, 2012; Cagé, 2016; Deuze, 2017; Naldi & Picard, 2012; Nielsen, 2019).

A number of scholars have approached the first question from a variety of perspectives. One of the most provocative approaches that addresses largely commercial media systems, such as Canada's, is Julia Cagé's 2016 book *Saving the Media*. Cagé locates many of the problems of twentieth-century journalism in capitalism and in media ownership by the wealthy or by publicly traded companies. She argues that, as a result, the only way to save journalism is by shifting from a largely commercial governance model to a novel and hybrid not-for-profit democratic governance and revenue model that incorporates crowd funding.

At the same time, scholars have tried to assess whether not-for-profits and foundation-funded journalism organizations are part of a conscious effort to address, by repair or reform, some of the challenges and losses associated with twentieth century for-profit journalism models, drawing from economics (Cagé, 2016), from field studies (Benson, 2017; Graves & Konieczna, 2015), and from social responsibility theory (Coates Nee, 2014). For example, in their study of news sharing at US fact-checking organizations and investigative not-for-profits, Lucas Graves and Magda Konieczna (2015) find examples of field repair in which actors are uncoupling historic cultural and economic capital orientations as they "seek to legitimize new approaches and new ways of thinking about their work, as necessary to protect the autonomy and integrity of the field as a whole" (p. 1979).

The notion of whether not-for-profit news can save journalism has been addressed by other scholars largely through an examination of various funding models and their efficacy. Rodney Benson (2017) examined three types of news organizations—board membership, (US) foundation, and not-for-profit—to see if they are capable of reforming the field in an article titled: "Can foundations solve the journalism crisis?" The study surfaced concerns about funding bias, "media capture," and short-term funding cycles oriented around seed capital that prevented these organizations from reaching their potential. As a result, he argues that not-for-profit and philanthropic journalism "supplements and increasingly cooperates" with legacy journalism norms, practices, and models (2017, p. 4). He also argues that, similar to other studies, such journalism is more focused on repairing the current system than reforming it (2017, p. 4). For Benson, reform would require "fundamental changes in foundation operations and budgeting (e.g., more long-term, non-project-based, no-strings-attached funding), greater recourse to small donor 'crowd-funding' linked to more dispersed, democratic ownership power (Cagé, 2016), and more effective development of modes of distribution that reach beyond elite and partisan silos" (2017, p. 16).

Other studies have focused on the impact of various financial models, largely in the US or largely in a commercial context (or both), and their impact on success. In one of the few studies of not-for-profit journalism organization financing, Coates Nee (2014) interviewed ten US journalism leaders about the relationship between government funding and financial sustainability. Specifically, she was interested in whether increased government funding of news organizations is needed to respond to the industry's financial crisis. She found that access to diverse revenue streams is difficult, and relying on philanthropy is "tenuous" (Coates Nee, 2014, p. 338). She also found an aversion to government funding. She noted, however, that a number of the organizations she studied use space at public universities and benefit from partnerships with other not-for-profits that may receive government subsidies. She concludes that, despite tax uncertainties for not-for-profits and the precedence for government loans to media in other national contexts, "Funding of independent community news startups will continue to be left to the marketplace, the benevolence of philanthropists, and the hope for voluntary public support" (p. 339).

Growing Digital Born Start-up Landscape in Canada

For this chapter, we completed an initial analysis of the digital-born journalism landscape and found that more than 70 media organizations (both for-profit and not-for-profit) have launched in Canada since 2000 (Hermida & Young, 2019a). This research builds on Owen's unpublished 2017 study of not-for-profit and philanthropic journalism organizations, which found 14 distinct organizations in this space in Canada, including foundations. April Lindgren's (2019) research on local news found that 51 new local news outlets have opened in Canada since 2008, some due to mergers and launches of affiliates within existing organizations. Her study counts new outlets as part of existing chains; our count focuses on wholly new entities. Our research advances the literature on the business of journalism in Canada, as previous studies of the Canadian media landscape have tended to focus on commercial and publicly held companies, such as Canwest Global and regional newspaper groups (Edge, 2001, 2016), and market-level analyses of media competition and concentration (Edge, 2016; Winseck, 2010).

The more than 70 start-ups (compared to the United States, which has more than 230 members in the Institute for Nonprofit News) identified in total include a range of commercial, not-for-profit,[2] and charitable organizations, which are the three main vehicles (business corporation, not-for-profit organization, and registered charity) available for journalism organizations in Canada according to tax regulations (Manwaring & Valentine, 2010). Prominent commercial examples include Vancouver-based *National Observer*, which is owned and operated by the privately held

Observer Media Group, and The Tyee, launched in 2003. Foundation-funded outlets include *Hakai Magazine*, which is operated by the Tula Foundation. Not-for-profits include early digital-born entrants, such as Rabble.ca (founded in 2001) and funded through a mix of advertising and reader donations, as well as university-affiliated think tanks, such as the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI).

Included in this list is The Conversation Canada, an independent not-for-profit which launched in June 2017, with five journalist-editors in two newsrooms located at the University of Toronto and University of British Columbia. It is affiliated with the Melbourne-based The Conversation Media Group, which runs operations in Australia and New Zealand. There are six other independent organizations in the The Conversation's network (Africa, France, Indonesia, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States). The Conversation network started in Australia, in 2011. A French-language site, La Conversation Canada, was launched in December 2018, with the newsroom based in Montréal. For the purposes of this chapter, we focus on the English-language site as we do not address the Francophone media environment in Canada.

To start with a brief background on the development of The Conversation Canada: we approached The Conversation Australia founder Andrew Jaspan toward the end of 2014 about the possibility of piloting a Canadian version. We received a small competitive federal research grant to start to explore its viability (see also Young & Hermida, 2017, in which we wrote about the launch process). We applied successfully for a larger competitive research grant (almost $200,000) in 2016 to pilot the site, and to develop the financial and organizational infrastructures for launch. In 2017, the not-for-profit society was incorporated with four founding board members. The board hired Scott White, a veteran journalist with an extensive leadership career in legacy media—largely with Canadian Press, the national wire service—as founding editor. The funding model (similar to the rest of The Conversation network of sites), included a combination of university membership fees (17 university members at launch and 27 by year two, out of the country's 94 universities, as identified by Universities Canada), foundation contributions, and government research funds.

As an affiliate of the global network, The Conversation Canada has a licence agreement with the Australia-based The Conversation Media Group. This agreement enabled the organization to offset significant technology infrastructure and start-up costs by accessing the existing network content management system, data analytics, and technology infrastructure for an annual fee. The agreement outlined costs for operational technology that were less than the percentage costs allocated by other digital-born journalism not-for-profits for which information is available. For example, Rabble.ca lists technology and server fees as 21 percent of overall operational costs in its 2016 reporting period, whereas the fees for The Conversation Canada have averaged less than 10 percent (between 7.5 percent and 9 percent) of operational costs.

Two years after launching in June 2019, The Conversation Canada was reaching approximately 1.5 million page views monthly, and a total of 31 million page views over 24 months of operation. These page views are both direct to the website and through the republishing of The Conversation articles on third-party publications in Canada and globally. In terms of on-site traffic, The Conversation Canada website had a total of 8 million unique visitors since launch in 2017, with 3 million in the first year and 5 million in the second. Republishers include a combination of legacy and non-traditional, non-elite outlets. The legacy journalism organizations include the *National Post*, *Maclean's*, *The Washington Post*, CNN, and the *Daily Mail*. Canadian outlets tend to access The Conversation content through the organization's relationship with Canadian Press, which shares its stories on the news wire. Among the non-traditional and non-elite outlets are Sci Fi Generation, IFLScience, Raw Story, and The Weather Network (Canada), which is the largest republisher in terms of reach. Overall, articles have found a significant reach outside of Canada, with the United States accounting for one third of page views. While page views are a widely used measure in the media industry, we are cognizant of their limitations, noting how they can be biased by automated bots and a small number of users who may be responsible for a number of page views.

These figures compare favourably with the average monthly page views, using data publicly reported by the organizations themselves, of two of the largest and most successful national digital-born journalism organizations since 2000. Rabble.ca, launched in 2001, reported 1.3 million unique users and more than 4 million page views in its 2018 annual report, with 87 percent of its readers from Canada and 14 percent [*sic*] from the States (Rabble.ca, 2018). The Observer Media Group, which launched its national site, *National Observer*, in

2015, had 500,000 average monthly page views (National Observer, n.d.). Other digital-born players are largely regional operations. The Tyee, one of the early digital-born journalism entrants in 2003, reports 500,000 to 1 million page views a month and between 300,000 and 400,000 unique visitors per month (The Tyee, n.d.). In the context of the larger media environment, the 2017 Public Policy Forum report on the state of the news media in Canada makes the point that the reach of digital-born organizations is still developing compared to their paid subscription-based commercial competitors such as *The Globe and Mail*, which had 7.4 million monthly unique visitors in 2019 (*The Globe and Mail*, 2019).

Beyond Elite Journalism Organizations

In terms of its early funding, The Conversation Canada is comparable with other digital-born organizations—not-for-profit and commercial—where there are figures available. Similar to the rest of The Conversation's network, the organization launched with almost \$1.5 million in start-up funds over three years, and a funding model that combined university membership fees, government research funds, and philanthropy. Launch funding for The Conversation Canada compares favourably to examples of start-up funding for US journalism. Naldi and Picard (2012, p. 72) describe the not-for-profit MinnPost, which launched with more than US\$1 million in foundation funding and grants, as "one of the most well-funded start-ups" in the United States.

A closer comparison to The Conversation Canada's not-for-profit structure in Canada is Rabble.ca, which launched in 2001 with \$200,000 in funding—\$120,000 of its start-up funds originating from one foundation (Kuitenbrouwer, 2001). Rabble.ca's 2018 annual report online indicates that its operating budget for 2018 was \$350,408. The bulk of its funding originated from sustaining partners (largely labour organizations) at 49.8 percent and individual donations at 34.79 percent. Special events accounted for 0.01 percent, grants and sponsorship for 14.11 percent, and advertising for 0.57 percent (Rabble.ca, 2018). As a comparison for this level of funding, though not a digital-born venture, *The Walrus* magazine has been one of the most sustainably funded journalism charitable organizations in Canada in the not-for-profit space, with a \$5 million endowment.

Similar to the findings of Deuze's 2017 global study of start-ups, The Conversation Canada's main funding sources were non-journalistic (as stated above, a combination of the higher education sector, government research funding, and a small amount from foundations). Its range of sources is distinct compared to those listed in the data from the Institute for Nonprofit News in the United States, which identifies four main revenue streams of its members: foundations (43 percent), individuals (39 percent), earned sources such as ads and events (12 percent), and other charitable sources (6 percent) (McLellan & Holcomb, 2020).

The Conversation Canada was perceived as an attractive opportunity to the higher education sector because of The Conversation Canada's growing commitment to knowledge mobilization and exchange, and its interest in gaining a competitive advantage globally, while filling a news gap for research-based commentary and analysis. This attractiveness was evident by the uptake of university membership growth, with 12 of the 15 U15 university members signing up by the end of The Conversation Canada's second year in operation (14 by the end of year three). The U15, according to its website, is a "collective of some of Canada's most research-intensive universities" (U15 Group, n.d., para. 1). Other evidence includes the launch of its French-language site in late 2018. In part as a result of the membership growth, The Conversation Canada had adequate capital for the first three years, which is considered a milestone in start-ups as the literature suggests that many fail during that time (Usher and Kammer (2019). In addition, it was digitally born and part of a global network with high-cost technology infrastructures already in place that limited the need for significant seed capital related to technology development.

An additional factor in its early success was the ability to defray other costs normally associated with starting up a new journalistic enterprise. For example, one of the most prominent recent US start-ups, The Correspondent, secured US$1.8 million in runway funds to support the development and fundraising for the English-language version of its Dutch counterpart, De Correspondent (Pfauth, 2018). At The Correspondent, 50 percent of its pre-launch budget covered management and legal and technology costs associated with starting a digital-born journalism organization. In the case of The Conversation Canada, these costs were non-existent or decreased because of support from the University of British Columbia. Additionally, as tenured professors at the University of British Columbia, we did not have to draw on any organizational funds for time spent on developing and launching The Conversation Canada.

The Public Policy Forum, the main federal journalism organization doing research on digital journalism and policy, recognized The Conversation Canada in its 2018 report on the state of the industry for its ability to "highlight the opportunity to tap into post-secondary institutions and recent graduates as part of strengthening the media system" (PPF, 2018, p. 12). The report goes on to suggest that part of its success—as well as the impact of other journalism organizations operating out of universities—is that foundations are able to give tax-free funds to universities as registered charities. At the same time, there has been some critique. Some prominent journalists and journalism educators have questioned whether the *Conversation* model fits within a traditional definition of journalism. Some of these questions relate to the independence of the organization from its university funders and whether its content could be considered as university communications (PPF, 2017).

Conclusion: Looking Ahead

To summarize, two years after launch, The Conversation Canada had accumulated significant financial resources in a nascent and underfunded digital media ecosystem (PPF, 2017). It has generated year-over-year growth in audience reach, accessing a significant proportion of its audience outside of Canada largely due to its republication strategy. Its strategic audience development has been supported by decline in the wider journalism sector and demand for free high-quality journalism content, against a background of continued concerns about mis- and disinformation in the media. The Conversation Canada is still a work in progress, and our conclusions are therefore early findings and assessments of a start-up's development in its first 24 months of operation. With this caveat, however, we find The Conversation Canada one of a growing number of not-for-profit start-ups in Canada that shows signs of innovation in journalism. As other studies of start-ups in this space have shown, long-term sustainable funding needs to remain a key focus and concern moving forward. The business model is largely based on an annual membership renewal model, which has sustainability challenges embedded in it.

The business model also has similarities to the conditions identified by Lucia Naldi and Robert Picard for a not-for-profit to have the "highest level of initial success" (p. 90) and "highest probability of survival" (2012, p. 91). Considering these conditions, The Conversation Canada met its initial objectives, maintained a flexible business plan that allowed room for adaptation, and "had a small but steady flow of capital from outside sources" (Naldi & Picard, 2012, p. 91). The successful not-for-profit identified by Naldi and Picard further outpaced one of its commercial competitors in that, they found, it along with another start-up studied had, "the greatest potential for long-term growth" (p. 91).

As co-founders, we had a number of experimental questions and commitments going into this project alongside initial goals of economic survival and sustainability, including: capacity building in journalism innovation and academic explanatory journalism within the national journalism ecosystem; experimentation with democratic not-for-profit governance models for journalism organizations; and commitments to an inclusive and equitable labour context. Looking forward, our research examines whether the model of The Conversation advances journalism epistemology through scholarly research (Hermida & Young, 2019b), and whether it can participate in repair and reform in the journalism ecosystem in Canada, and more broadly, within conversations about the emerging role of journalism in a networked and increasingly contested space for citizenship in a digital context.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and by The Conversation Media Group. The authors would like to sincerely thank the reviewers and book editors for their valuable comments.

Notes

1. See: https://theconversation.com/ca.
2. The Canada Revenue Agency defines a non-profit organization as a "club, society, or association that's organized and operated solely for social welfare, civic improvement, pleasure or recreation, [or] any other purpose except profit" (Canada Revenue Agency, 2019). The benefit of a not-for-profit structure includes greater flexibility in allowable purposes

for incorporation with less onerous regulatory filing requirements compared to a registered charity. A charity in Canada, for example, must meet objective requirements that include a focus on a few domains of charitable activities defined as "relief of poverty," "advancement of education," religion, or other purposes beneficial to the whole community (Kitching, 2006, p. 2), in addition to public financial filings. Manwaring and Valentine (2010) suggest that not-for-profit status is appropriate for organizations that among other things can "rely on member fees … to accomplish social goals" (p. 402).

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