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By: Patrick Ferrucci and **Gregory Perreault**

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Local is now national: *The Athletic* as a model for online local news

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Abstract

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Keywords

Ecosystem for news, in-depth interviews, local news, media economics, new media, news deserts

Over the last two decades, as the precarity of the news industry became more salient due to technological disruptions and the significant diminishment of advertising revenue, thousands upon thousands of newspapers have closed in the United States (Abernathy, 2018). Of those that remain, “many have laid off reporters, reduced coverage, and pulled

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back circulation” (Hendrickson, 2019). This crisis in journalism can be most acutely felt in the area of local news, where the elimination and depletion of sometimes century-old local institutions turned numerous areas of the country into news deserts (Abernathy, 2018). In recent years, several different avenues have been explored as potential panacea for the struggling industry, from the expansion of nonprofit news (Konieczna, 2018), to funding from philanthropic foundations (Konieczna, 2022; Scott et al., 2019), to ownership from billionaire moguls such as Amazon’s Jeff Bezos (Kennedy, 2018), to embracing cooperative ownership (Schneider, 2020), to public funding through vouchers from the federal government (Schiffrin, 2021). While all of these avenues provide a potential way forward, they also each come with substantial drawbacks, both intended and unintended. One issue only recently acknowledged in the journalism industry reflects that most of these potential solutions focus on individual news organizations; while a wealthy benefactor such as Bezos, for example, can certainly vastly improve the workings of a large metropolitan news organization such as *The Washington Post* (Kennedy, 2018), fixing local news requires far more intentional attention to the infrastructure needed for a resurgence (Gorman, 2020). In short, when community news flourishes in the twenty-first century, it typically happens due to a confluence of overlapping missions across local institutions (Ferrucci and Alaimo, 2020). This means that fixing local news in the United States necessitates more than simply an organization-by-organization approach, but rather one intent on creating a national ecosystem with an infrastructure where individual newsrooms, or verticals, can thrive.

This article examines the digitally native, venture capital-funded sports journalism organization *The Athletic* as a potential model for a national local news initiative in the United States. Launched in January 2016, *The Athletic* currently employs about 400 journalists (Hirsch et al., 2022). The organization is structured rather unusually for a news organization. Since its launch, *The Athletic*, which began by covering Chicago sports, opened more than 40 verticals in cities across the United States and Canada. For example, *The Athletic Boston* began in April 2018 with less than 10 full-time journalists on staff (Leahy, 2019). Besides each local vertical with journalists covering beats or specific teams in each city or state, *The Athletic* also employs national writers who cover entire sports; for example, Hall of Fame baseball writer Peter Gammons and celebrated professional football journalist Mike Sando write about those sports on a national level. In short, *The Athletic* combines the appeal of local sports coverage with national reporting from well-known writers to create a business recently sold for US\$550 million to *The New York Times* (Hirsch et al., 2022). Through the lens of disruptive innovation theory and utilizing in-depth interviews with employees of *The Athletic*, this article explicates a potential model for local news in the United States.

Literature review

Disruptive innovation theory

Journalism, similar to most industries intimately connected to technology use, could be considered in a constant cycle of innovation (Hepp and Loosen, 2022; Mills and Wagemans, 2021). However, unlike many of these same industries, journalism primarily

utilizes technologies for dissemination purposes, and insiders rarely consider themselves in the technology business (Cagé, 2016; Ferrucci, 2022). Journalism, to many practitioners, is a public service that involves technology only in the service of better fulfilling its mission (Gynnild, 2014). Therefore, despite a consistent and historical connection between journalism and technology, innovation would never be considered a strong suit of the industry (Mari, 2019). This should not be surprising, though, because innovation is problematic for most industries because a “mastery of old technology does not imply a mastery of the new” (Anderson and Tushman, 1991: 28). Innovation, according to Christensen (2003), does not necessarily just mean technology, but rather the “processes by which an organization transforms labor, capital, materials, and information into products and services of greater value” (p. xvii). Therefore, it is not the technology itself that creates innovation, but rather the processes catalyzed by the technologies. Essentially, in the last couple decades when the field of journalism experienced more technological disruptions due to innovations than perhaps at any time in its history, this process never goes smoothly because the industry typically does not employ people fluent in potential new technologies, but rather the ones currently in use (Stinchcombe, 1965). For journalism, innovation typically occurs out of inevitability, out of a demand to adapt to the needs of its audience. However, for journalism, an industry often indisputably married to a series of normative practices and behaviors (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014), individual organizations in the field often fail while attempting to innovate because they are so dependent on historical practices and, therefore, adaptation is often significantly more difficult (Barrett et al., 2015).

To better theorize and understand how various industries and organizations adapt when implementing what he labels disruptive technologies, Christensen (2003) developed the theory of disruptive innovation, which argues that market forces strongly influence innovation, and that more stable fields struggle to adapt. When an industry operates in a similar manner for a long period of time—like journalism in the United States for almost a century leading to the early 2000s—those practices become an essential part of the job, which means those industries are typically not nearly nimble enough to adapt seamlessly (King and Baatartogtokh, 2015). Before Christensen’s theory formally conceptualized this phenomenon, earlier scholars typically labeled this issue the liability of newness, a concept that chiefly asserts that when faced with new disruptive technological implementation, old organizations must essentially become new organizations for successful operation, and, typically, these “new” organizations are not set up to successfully adapt to changes (Stinchcombe, 1965). Journalists tend to be naturally interested in innovation in that they believe the field to be vulnerable, and new technologies could provide the answers to their current problems, something Carey (2008 [1989]) called a “nostalgia for the future” (p. 198). However, this interest tends to be theoretical as when innovation is implemented in journalism, new skills become needed and employees are not necessarily adept at accomplishing those, something seen often in journalism (Ferrucci and Perreault, 2021).

While much literature concerning technology often conceptualizes it in a utopian manner, as something that all industries should not only want but actively seek to adopt (Newman, 2014), the reality is that stable industries, when faced with a disruptive technology, often spend significant economic resources attempting to fend off innovation due to a belief that this disruptive technology is actually a significant threat and not an opportunity (Anderson and Tushman, 1991). This is exactly what happened within the field of

journalism with the arrival of the Internet and a threat to the industry's distribution processes occurred. Since the commercialization and professionalization of journalism in the United States during the late nineteenth century, the industry almost continuously faced technological disruptions that significantly altered how professional journalists perform their job duties (Cagé, 2016; Mari, 2019; Pavlik, 2013).

For an organization to successfully adapt after a disruptive innovation, it must be able to recognize the innovation's effects, comprehend its own core competencies and then move forward by adapting the organization's makeup to account for both historical success and success with the new technology (Barrett et al., 2015). However, in journalism, practitioners' professional identity is often so tied to historical normative ideas that changing processes is beyond difficult; Ryfe (2009) illustrated how if an organization attempts to change journalistic practice in a manner that alters perceived normative behaviors, journalists will revolt. The key takeaway here is that the journalism industry spent most of the last three decades attempting to fend off innovation because said innovation threatened economic viability, but also would not necessarily catalyze news production processes that fit the core competencies of traditional journalists (Sehl and Cornia, 2021). However, the difference between the innovations meant to disrupt traditional journalism practices such as what Ryfe (2009) described and the innovations implemented by *The Athletic* are quite different. *The Athletic*, while making substantial use of digital tools to better serve its audience, is almost outwardly boastful about its adherence to normative journalism practice (Ferrucci, 2021), something that makes its innovations far easier to successfully implement since it does not necessitate the "mastery of the new" warned of by Anderson and Tushman (1991: 28).

Practices of digital local journalism

But while *The Athletic's* innovations in digital technology may not necessitate a reimagining of journalistic norms, digital technologies have indisputably altered journalistic practice significantly, so much so it is "all but impossible to overstate" the significance (Franklin, 2014: 481). Perhaps the most obvious reflection of this is that digital journalism practice has become normalized through journalism to the extent that "there is no such thing as 'digital journalism' anymore to actors within the field; it is simply journalism" (Perreault and Ferrucci, 2020: 1312). Therefore, while it might not happen at *The Athletic*, journalists are often left struggling to align organizationally desired practices with the historic normative values of journalism (Siegelbaum and Thomas, 2016). Saliently, as previously noted, innovation becomes a problem in journalism when it begins to threaten norms.

Part of the challenge prior scholarship has faced when considering innovation within local journalism is in the difficulties of defining what constitutes "local", given that "'local' is conceptually ambiguous" (Usher, 2021: 20). The term "community" faces the same definitional ambiguity as local (Hess and Waller, 2014); therefore, local journalism researchers have argued the best manner to define these terms is by utilizing a "sense of place" standard, which is superior since it "helps to conceptualize individuals' physical, psychological and/or social connections to particular geographic spaces without assuming they are located within such physical spaces" (Hess, 2013: 57). Succinctly, while the

audience for local journalism is now spread beyond geographical borders due to the potential of digital dissemination, said audience still desires journalism tied to geographical borders (Hess and Waller, 2014). Therefore, while most local news organizations are simply community newspapers with an added web presence, *The Athletic* combines that aspect with the added value of national news.

Beyond dissemination, though, digital tools have changed journalistic practices. Indisputably social media platforms present the most obvious examples as they became vital tools across various aspects of local journalism practice. While Twitter serves as clear platform for breaking news across the journalism ecosystem (Franklin, 2014; Vis, 2013), other platforms such as Facebook and Instagram have become essential components for dissemination and, most importantly, engagement for community journalism (Almgren, 2017; Toff and Mathews, 2021). Mobile devices similarly have proven to be a vital tool for digital journalism in local contexts; freeing journalists from newsrooms in ways predicted by Pavlik (2001). Indeed, smartphones “provide the necessary preconditions to make ‘news on the move’ a reality” (Franklin, 2014: 485). Journalists see the use of mobile reporting as essential, even as journalists at times lament that the integration of mobile into their practices is obstructed by management (Perreault and Stanfield, 2019).

One clear disruption across the practice of digital local journalism comes in the form of the many recent hyperlocal “news” organizations run by citizens and specializing in what could be classified as citizen journalism or user-generated content (Singer, 2010). The opening of this type of organization catalyzed new processes within newsrooms, while also upending historical norms in the sense that the prevalence of so much user-generated content, for example, necessitates less breaking news from local journalists, but also more explanatory work concerning the frequent errors consistently inherent in user-generated content (Boberg et al., 2018). In a sense, the prevalence of user-generated content and citizen-led “news” hyperlocals creates a clear gatekeeping problem for professional local journalists as information, both accurate and not, can now make its way to citizens without journalists verifying it (Boberg et al., 2018). This means that, now, “community newspapers are thinking about citizen journalism” in a way they absolutely did not in prior decades (Lewis et al., 2010: 174). While the overall effect of user-generated content or citizen journalism might be overstated (Jönsson and Örnebring, 2011), it no doubt affects how local journalists do their jobs in a myriad of manners. But despite local journalism’s move into a digital space and threats from user-generated information sites, local journalism irrefutably maintained its overall culture by retaining very essential components of its identity related to practice: running obituaries, announcing weddings, announcing births (Hess and Waller, 2016). These components, while seemingly minor, operate as the glue that keep communities together and help members within the community keep tabs on others within it and any successful local news organization would need to include them.

Funding for digital local journalism

Besides an influx over the last two decades of new technologies into the journalism space, the other main reason for changes in journalism practice, both locally and nationally, come from the emergence of new funding models in the industry (Ferrucci, 2019;

Konieczna, 2014). For more than a century, from essentially the professionalization of news in the United States in the late nineteenth century until the early twenty-first century, the overwhelming majority of news organizations in the country had one primary revenue stream, or funding model: advertising (Baldasty, 1992). The 2000s saw the emergence of numerous new market models for journalism, an arguably predictable outcome, given that digital technologies allowed for less expensive dissemination costs. This led to the advent, most notably, of numerous digitally native news nonprofits, news organizations primarily funded through a combination of grants, small and large donations and some advertising (Konieczna, 2018). As the amount of digitally native news nonprofits grew across the country, many other models began attempting to fund themselves using more streamlined versions of the same revenue streams. For example, over time, foundations became a much more prominent funder of the journalism ecosystem with philanthropic foundations such as the Knight Foundation both providing grants for specific journalistic projects, but also funded whole enterprises (Scott et al., 2019). Other digitally native news organizations built their entire models around crowdfunding, or the idea that the audience could almost completely have agency over the news agenda through its ability to fund certain stories, but not others (Aitamurto, 2011). In a similar endeavor, many news organizations implemented membership models, which allow heavily engaged audience members the ability to help fund the organization for a variety of perks (Price, 2020; Wenzel, 2019). The last decade found various billionaires, or “moguls,” investing in news organizations as a form of both public service and, potentially, as a driver of profits (Kennedy, 2018). Many news organizations, both new and old, have primarily or partially funded themselves through the publication of native advertising, or branded content that looks and reads like traditional journalism (Ferrer-Conill et al., 2021; Li, 2022). Finally, as is the case with *The Athletic*, the emergence of venture capital-funded organizations within journalism created newsrooms that both aligned with journalistic norms, but also deviated from them (Usher, 2017).

While this assortment of various funding models in journalism, primarily for digital journalism, changed longtime and historical economic mainstays of the field of journalism, they also significantly affected journalism practice. For example, recent work illustrates how nonprofit journalism organizations tend to gravitate toward more engagement activities, practices that absolutely change not only how journalists define news, but also how incorporated the audience is in newsmaking (Konieczna, 2018). Other work found that nonprofits focus on the type of news they believe essential for democracy, at the expense of some other genres of news (i.e. sports) that traditional organizations produce (Konieczna and Powers, 2017; Powers and Yaros, 2013). In other cases, accepting funds from foundations often shifts the editorial focus in a newsroom, making practitioners focus on certain types of stories or utilizing certain technologies (Scott et al., 2019). The very essence of crowdfunding, also, takes control away from journalists and transplants it to citizens (Aitamurto, 2011). Other models featuring multiple revenue streams can provide various stakeholders such as the audience, advertisers, and more some input on the news agenda, which affects practice. Overall, then, when theorizing any model for journalism, it must be taken into account that since the commercialization of the press more than a century ago, the structure of a funding model will impact how journalists do their jobs.

Method

To understand the market model and journalistic practice at *The Athletic*, researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 49 full-time employees of *The Athletic*. Of those 49, 43 are journalists, while the other 6 work in various business positions within the company, including one founder. This method allows for the ability to better understand participants' perceptions, to more effectively comprehend subjects' "internal experiences" in a way that other methods do not (Weiss, 1994: 1). Fundamentally, the in-depth interview provides researchers the ability to understand the perceptions, reasoning, emotions and motivations undergirding the behaviors and experiences of participants (Spradley, 1979). To conduct in-depth academic interviews, researchers often create a traditional interview protocol, but also leave ample time for follow-up questions (McCracken, 1988). If done properly, the in-depth interview can provide "the reasons why people act in particular ways, by exploring participants' perceptions, experiences and attitudes" (Harvey-Jordan and Long, 2001: 219).

The interviews for this study occurred between May 2020 and May 2021. The journalists represented in this sample came from 27 different geographically determined verticals (i.e. *The Athletic Boston*, *The Athletic Denver*, etc.). The participants cover all 4 traditional major US professional sports (baseball, basketball, football and hockey) and college athletics. Finally, the subjects are predominantly beat reporters for specific teams, but the participants do include 9 journalists covering sports at a national level. The first author conducted all the interviews over Zoom. The first author sent recruiting emails to as many *Athletic* journalists as possible, and asked those journalists for referrals for non-journalism personnel. Finally, the interview with the founder was set up through the company's communication staff. Because the researchers wanted to elicit as much honest information as possible, both favorable and unfavorable, all participants were granted anonymity. To analyze these data, this study's first author transcribed the in-depth interviews, and then employed a qualitative data analysis following the process outlined by Emerson et al. (2011). This procedure includes three steps. First, the memo stage features a close reading of the data, conducting while writing notes concerning all interesting passages or thoughts. Second, the open-coding stage involves a close line-by-line reading of the data in attempt to reveal themes and patterns. The final stage, focus coding, includes reading through the data one more time, this time with themes and patterns in mind, categorizing and beginning a rough draft of the findings section.

Findings

The section below outlines the foundational practices and characteristics of *The Athletic* according to participants' perceptions.

Verticals

The vast majority of *The Athletic*'s editorial staff primarily works for a specific vertical. A vertical is a type of content that appeals to a specific market niche (Nelson, 2020). In the case of *The Athletic*, that means an example of a vertical is *The Athletic Pittsburgh*,

which is targeted toward sports journalism fans in greater Pittsburgh and also fans of Pittsburgh sports spread out across the world. In total, the website boasts almost 50 verticals, which include roughly 40 in the United States and 8 in Canada. Each vertical, on average, employs 5–10 reporters, columnists and editors. Within each of these, specific beat writers/reporters cover specific teams. “It feels like it’s our little newsroom, even though we don’t have a real newsroom, per se,” said one journalist working as a beat reporter for a US vertical:

We don’t actually meet up very often in person, but we all keep in touch and, I think, have a clear idea of what *The Athletic* (city name) wants to accomplish and what our readers kind of want and deserve.

By creating verticals instead of just having bureaus or even just reporters spread across North America, *The Athletic* eschews the cost of renting physical space, but still creates the structure of small organizations, something missing from some larger news organization. “I’ll give you an example,” said one journalist about the benefits of verticals:

At (my last job, a newspaper), it was part of a big chain, right? We had a copy desk not even located (in my city). Some copyediting here (at *The Athletic*) happens nationally, but my editor is here and (they) know the area and the fans. (They) really help me and my copy. That did not happen at (my last job).

In general, *Athletic* journalists consistently and constantly talked about how the structure verticals allowed them “to do their best work” and provided them with the benefits of working at a small news organization while “still working for something huge, and that comes with a lot of great things too.”

National writers

The Athletic is built around its verticals, but also employs dozens of national journalists. These national writers focus on entire sports—such as Major League Baseball writer Ken Rosenthal—or areas such as statistics. There are numerous benefits to having national journalists, according to participants. As one local reporter put it: “I cover the (National Football League) and, yes, a lot of my readers care about (the team I cover). But they also care about football as a whole and they don’t have to go elsewhere to get that content.” Numerous other reporters said similar things. “The days of people only caring about one team are over. Fantasy, legalized gambling, that changed everything,” said a national writer. “People want analysis of sports in general, to go with their great coverage of their team.” Local beat reporters also noted that having national, big-name reporters on staff helps them also. “I can call up or text or email (a national writer) and ask him for a source. I couldn’t do that if I was the only person covering (my league).” Another local reporter echoed that by saying, “Some of my stories and scoops have been aided in so many ways by leaning on a handful of our national people.” In other cases, and as implied in a previous quotation, several reporters, both local and national, noted that *The Athletic*’s business strategy would suffer without national writers. As one employee on the business side of *The Athletic* said,

You know, when other places write about (*The Athletic*), they always seem like they talk about the glory days of sports sections at major metros in the 1980s. But we're more than that. Those kind of failed and you still get local coverage from, say, newspapers or SBNation. But we give subscribers, and I'm biased understandably, great local coverage and great national coverage. Who does that? Nobody, I think. Even (the critically lauded early 1990s national sports newspaper) *The National* didn't have the great local coverage we do. We have all the national, plus the local. And readers get everything.

Local writers familiar with communities

In many cases, especially early on with *The Athletic*, the organization focused its hiring on well-known local journalists. For example, when needing a Red Sox beat writer for the Boston vertical, *The Athletic* did not hire someone unknown in the city and instead hired a journalist well known for their coverage of the team. This was a concerted strategy. "There are two clear advantages to this," said one local journalist about their own hiring. "First, I have a virtual rolodex of sources here and I didn't need any ramp-up time to get going. Second, I have a track record (here) and people trust me to give them good and accurate (information)." For many years, when journalists started at *The Athletic*, they would write a "why I joined" column that both talked about how great working for the company would be, but also as a marketing piece to get local sports fans who knew the journalist's name to join. As one employee on the business side of the organization said,

We couldn't afford to train everyone or wait for everyone to understand (their beat). That wouldn't work. So not only did (this strategy) avoid that, but it also gave us free advertising in some ways. We leverage journalists' names and reputations in a way.

This strategy from *The Athletic* illustrated something many journalists noted: that the organization, in contrast to many news organizations, took the long view. "This industry, man," said one local reporter,

everything is about short-term gains. Nobody thinks about how this will kill us in the long term. Here, hiring people like me cost more than hiring a (some unknown), but I'd like to think my experience and what I bring to the table paid off threefold, or fourfold.

Collaboration

The most noted advantage of having a news organization that employs hundreds of journalists is the potential for collaboration, which comes in many forms at *The Athletic*. Besides leaning on other journalists for sources—which is invaluable, according to participants—local journalists often partner with other local and national journalists on stories. In numerous instances, local reporters talked about collaboration with national reporters on stories. "It makes the story that much better," explained one local journalist in a manner that echoed what dozens of others explained. "I can do a local piece that really works for (my audience), but when I add (a national part), that story becomes important to everyone. And it's just better, honestly." Other reporters emphasized the benefit of having certain types of staff writers on the payroll. For example, numerous

reporters discussed collaborations with data reporters as a way to both make a story better and “find a story.” One reporter recalled,

I had an idea for a piece, but no real idea if it was true, you know? So I (talked to a data reporter) and (they) gave me the numbers I needed to know I was on the right track, and to, ultimately, give the story credibility beyond, “this is what I think.”

Collaboration also occurs at the news organization in another manner: stories that collect views from across the country. “We do a lot of stories,” said one local reporter, “that are really just a collection of thoughts from everyone (covering a certain sport across the country). I think our subscribers like them because they provide the pulse of the league from a bunch of different perspectives.”

Specialties

Beyond just reporters with a particular specialty such as data reporters, the journalists and employees on the business side of *The Athletic* that participated in this study consistently discussed how having a large stable of employees focused on visuals or graphics or technology made the organization more successful than it would be otherwise. “The way I compare us is to those local sports websites that have become commonplace lately,” said one journalist talking about digitally native local sports news sites such as *DK Pittsburgh Sports* or *Boston Sports Journal*, journalist-run websites that are essentially similar to individual verticals at *The Athletic*. “Those sites,” the journalist continued,

do a good job covering sports, but, let’s be real, look like shit. They care about the journalism, but not the presentation. I’ve been told the apps suck too. Really, they cover a couple teams well, but their presentation and user experience is borderline awful. We do all the good of them, but add coverage from everywhere and look great doing it.

Participants commonly expressed this sentiment. They argued that the success of *The Athletic* should be equally shared by the designers and technologists hired by the founders and business side. “They knew a great product is more than just the great journalism we do,” said one reporter. Another noted rhetorically that “besides maybe (*The New York Times*), can you think of any news site that looks better than us? Or has cooler graphics? Stories are better for subscribers when they’re presented well.” Numerous reporters talked about sports specifically as a field of journalism that relies on statistics. “Like it or not, it’s absolutely essential to what we do,” said a local journalist of about statistics. “Most people understand (statistics) much better when they’re displayed visually. Both our site and our app do a great job.” While numerous reporters talked about visuals and the mobile application in the same context, others specifically noted that the user experience on the app was something focused on immediately. “Sports news is consumed on phones,” said one employee, “and we knew our app needed to be great.”

Time

While not overtly part of *The Athletic's* business plan, the extended time provided to journalists working on stories is an integral byproduct of the business model, noted participants. "Because we have a huge staff, if I'm missing from the site for a couple days, not many people notice, unfortunately," laughed one reporter. "Really, no joke though, the huge staff producing (great) pieces of journalism every day gives me and everyone else cover to spend extra time working on (important) stories." Essentially, journalists noted that a major positive consequence of the size of the organization concerns the ability to find and produce stories that take too many resources—both financial and time—for many organizations. "If it's the middle of football season and I'm at my last paper," said one journalist, "I basically have a quota of a couple stories a day. Here, no way. I can actually do some enterprise because I'm (given) the time since the site is always well populated." Fundamentally, while *The Athletic* strives to provide current analysis of all major US sports, generally, and individual teams within those sports, the organization recognizes, according to participants, that doing the journalism of the highest quality involves investigative and enterprise reporting, which necessitates time. "If I'm the only one covering sports (in this city)," said one reporter, "of course I have to produce copy every day. Why would subscribers pay otherwise? I could work on long-term projects, but they would take forever." That reporter and countless others expressed that sacrifice doesn't happen at *The Athletic*, and, they believe, it's a significant part of the organization's success in terms of subscribers. "Nobody else provides (those types of stories) on such a regular basis," said an employee on the business side.

Podcasts

While not a part of *The Athletic's* business model in its early days, over the last 2–3 years, the organization started more than 100 podcasts. According to study participants, there are multiple benefits to these. First, while the organization does not include advertising on its website or mobile application, its podcasts do include advertising. Said one participant on the business side, "We don't want to muck up the user experience with ads on our main product, but podcasts, people are used to ads. It's an extra revenue stream. Really, it's low-hanging fruit in terms of revenue." More than just participants working on the business side of *The Athletic*, but also journalists recognized the need for all journalism organizations to maximize revenue streams. "Look, I wouldn't put ads on the website; that's why people subscribe," said one reporter, echoing many, "but you've got to make money where you can." Beyond the monetary value of the podcasts, reporters wholeheartedly believe they provide real value for audiences. "So many fans want to go in-depth with opinions and analysis," said one reporter, "and the free-flowing nature of podcasts, and the portability of them, are a huge hit. Just look (at Spotify-owned news organization) *The Ringer*. We can do that, and better I think." Besides giving subscribers more in-depth and different types of content, which adds to journalism quality, participants also believe that the podcasts make subscribers even more connected to *The Athletic's* journalists. "People read me and like my stuff," said one journalist. "Podcasts make them really know me, though. It makes a personal connection and, I think, that's invaluable because it makes them read my stuff more too. It's circular in a good way."

Discussion

Before this study delineates how *The Athletic's* market model could succeed as a prototype for a national local news ecosystem in the United States, it is important to discuss caveats, or inherent issues the digitally native sports news organization faced over the years. First, while it boasts more than 1 million subscribers and generates more than US\$77 million in revenue, due to investments over the years, *The Athletic* lost roughly US\$90 million between 2020 and 2021 (Toonkel, 2021). The main catalyst for the loss comes from the significant investments from venture capital firms; however, the organization would become completely profitable if it doubled its revenue, which could happen by effectively doubling its subscriber base (Toonkel, 2021). Whether that is possible or not for *The Athletic* is beside the point. Currently, *The New York Times* boasts more than 8 million subscribers and an annual US\$195 subscription cost. *The Athletic*, however, charges between US\$48 and US\$72 for an annual subscription (or US\$8 a month). This portends that an *Athletic*-like local news organization featuring national news could easily be profitable, even discounting the reality that such an endeavor would necessitate many more journalists. *The New York Times* agrees, as its tentative decision to purchase *The Athletic* was linked to its desire to increase its own subscription base by 2 million (Hirsch et al., 2022). It's also important here to compare the model hypothesized in this article with a relatively recent failed model that shared numerous similarities. Only 2 years after its founding, in 2009, America Online acquired Patch.com and invested more than US\$50 million in building a United States-wide network of local news sites that featured some nationally written lifestyle pieces. Therefore, similar to this article's proposed model, Patch.com combines community journalism with some national coverage. The differences, though, are immense. First, Patch.com's local news coverage lacks quality; second, the collection of sites does not at all focus on relationships with the audience or engagement in general; third, Patch traditionally hires inexpensive and inexperienced reporters; and fourth, the national coverage is not news, but rather lifestyle content such as recipes (St. John et al., 2014). Overwhelmingly, the model proposed here focuses on, above all else, quality, journalistic experience, and audience experience/engagement, which makes it far more likely to succeed than Patch.com.

Through the lens of disruptive innovation, *The Athletic's* model presents a captivating case in that *The Athletic* manages to introduce a model that allowed the local sports subfield to adapt effectively after the disruption. In other words, the innovation proved to not be all that disruptive. This begs the question of why this would be the case. Innovation typically creates a new environment by requesting more of journalists—at least initially, because it takes time for journalists to attain “mastery of the new” (Anderson and Tushman, 1991: 28). In part, this reflects stability of field, given that stable fields are often less heteronomous (Christensen, 2013), which is in part what ensures their stability. But this also means that innovation is typically difficult to implement (Ferrucci and Perreault, 2021). In the case of *The Athletic*, journalists proved able to navigate this for a few reasons:

- Journalists were able to recognize the core competencies that could make *The Athletic* work for sports—the vertical structure, enhancing the sports experience through reporting, and a large staff that granted time for both local and national journalists to be able to do their best work.

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- Journalists were able to adapt the organizational structure in ways that honored the subfield's historical successes (e.g. connection with local sports athletes, local sports fan communities; Usher, 2021) as well as integrated elements that have worked in new technology (e.g. use of podcasts, visuals, graphics, data; Barrett et al., 2015).
 - Journalists recognized the value of the innovation in part because of a shared acknowledgment that alternative models in mainstream media have significant deficiencies both in terms of accomplishing a service to a local community (Franklin, 2014; Hess, 2013) and in terms of financial sustainability (Mari, 2019).

In other words, *The Athletic* demonstrates a model of innovation that eschews disruption—at least in part—because it fits the mold of what journalists already were doing and wanted to be doing.

Implications and avenues for future research

While *The Athletic* is rooted in the sports journalism subfield, it is worth considering that there is nothing that precludes this model being applied throughout journalism more broadly. In politics, for example, the vertical structure would allow locally rooted coverage on issues of democratic self-governance by leveraging writers already rooted in the community (e.g. city council meetings, planning and zoning commission), while also providing an avenue for excellent national level reporting (e.g. presidential campaigns). Furthermore, the large stable of reporters emphasizing visuals, graphics, and data allow for quality presentation of the journalism that connects the content produced by journalists in new ways with the audience.

Certainly, the market supports a much larger local/national news version of *The Athletic*. In contrast to the sports-specific publication which has about 1 million subscribers, subscribers for *The New York Times* top 8 million. The implications of this model—we would propose—have the potential for an even larger userbase, given that it connects the local with the national; therefore, local news combined with the national and international push of an organization such as *The New York Times*. Yet we would propose this with three caveats: (1) that to be truly nationwide, it may be that the publication would need to decide on its topics—it would be impossible to cover every topic after all, and even the most resourced newsrooms have to make strategic decisions about coverage (Edgerly and Vraga, 2020); (2) that to become nationwide and, in particular, to support coverage of critical topics related to democratic self-governance, public safety, and public health, it would be reasonable to suggest that some degree of at least initial government funding would help support this (Schiffrin, 2021); and (3) any national-wide model for local news approximating *The Athletic's* model would more than likely result in extremely negative consequences for existing local news organizations, potentially resulting in the death of many historically significant news organizations, even if those do not still live up to prior standards (George and Waldfoegel, 2006). There are, moreover, clear benefits to an *Athletic*-like model that have become even more obvious since coronavirus disease (COVID)-19. For example, the lack of newsrooms across *The Athletic* could have been seen as controversial pre-pandemic (Usher, 2021). However, many more journalists have

spent the years since the COVID-19 outbreak working remotely and, thus, potentially this could also be seen as less of an innovation or disruption, which makes it easier to implement. And, of course, this lack of resources devoted to the renting or owning of physical space makes a potential organization less expensive to start. However, it should be noted, that one clear and massive barrier to entry when it comes to starting a news organization based around *The Athletic*'s model is the need for so much upfront capital. In the case of *The Athletic*, the organization does not exist without so much seed money from venture capital, a necessary tool to develop needed technologies to deliver the product and hire the expensive veteran journalists needed to produce stellar content and act as trusted sources of information to potential subscribers. This is where, potentially, some degree of government funding could help (Schiffrin, 2021).

All studies have limitations and this study is no different. First, we need to take journalists' accounts at face value based on journalists' narratives yet, as we know, what journalists do is not always what they say they do. And second, interviews took place during a coronavirus pandemic—a time period in which much of US journalism was particularly financially vulnerable—hence, it maybe that some of participants' enthusiasm for *The Athletic* may be attributable to the fact that journalists were to some degree insulated from the financial dangers of that period. That said, *The Athletic* represents a potential model for local journalism with promise for excellent national and local coverage. As one participant posed “who does that? Nobody, I think”, yet as they also indicated—the success of *The Athletic* model need not stop in the sports section.

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