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Article

## Hybrid Engagement: Discourses and Scenarios of Entrepreneurial Journalism

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### Abstract

Although the challenge posed by social media and the participatory turn concerns culture and values at the very heart of journalism, journalists have been reluctant to adopt participatory values and practices. To encourage audience participation and to offer journalism that is both trustworthy and engaging, journalists of the future may embrace a hybrid practice of journalistic objectivity and audience-centred dialogue. As innovative and experimental actors, entrepreneurial journalism outlets can perform as forerunners of such a culture. By analysing discourses in the “About Us” pages of 41 entrepreneurial journalism outlets, the article examines the emerging journalistic ethos of entrepreneurial journalism and its participatory tendencies. The results show a conception of journalism that is a hybrid of the journalistic ideals of dialogue and objectivity. This kind of hybrid journalism and adjacent “hybrid engagement” can offer an answer to the dual challenge of how to make journalism more participation-friendly while at the same time hold on to the defining values and criteria of journalism. Drawing from futures research, the article concludes by sketching four scenarios of how entrepreneurial journalism and participatory hybrid engagement may develop in the future.

### Keywords

affect; discourse analysis; entrepreneurial journalism; futures research; future of journalism; hybrid journalism; participatory journalism; scenarios

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

From the beginning of the millennium media and journalism have increasingly been characterised by a participatory turn. Audiences have in various ways taken a central stage, by both contributing to the production and distribution of journalism and shaping its cultural landscape (Gillmor, 2004; Villi, 2012). Journalists have often been reluctant to embrace the turn as the new audience-centred ideals “do not mesh well with the traditional journalistic culture” (Graham, 2013, p. 116). In the networked era of social platforms, “intimate” mobile tech-

nology and increasingly affective and participatory forms of communication, journalism faces a dual challenge: how to increase audience engagement—broadly defined as a personal connection the audiences have with the news—and participation, while preserving the core criteria and values that define journalism (Beckett & Deuze, 2016). A common argument is that journalism needs to connect with citizens’ lives and identities better than before (Ha et al., 2018; Swart, Peters, & Broersma, 2017).

While participatory journalism is often defined as news content produced by non-professionals (Wall, 2015), this article addresses participatory journalism

more broadly, in terms of emerging journalistic culture, values and actors. The conceptual framework of the article consists of *entrepreneurial journalism* and *hybrid journalism*. We define entrepreneurial journalism as one that 1) is produced by new media outlets established by journalists themselves, 2) reflects the personalities, goals and visions of the founders, 3) seeks to renew journalism by addressing new niches, exploring new styles and formats, and building a new relationship with the audiences, and 4) pursues a sustainable business based on these attributes.

Entrepreneurial journalists pioneer hybrid journalism (see Wagemans, Witschge, & Harbers, 2018), which merges the dialogical and objective traditions of journalism (Soffer, 2009) and is manifested in such “hybrid” genres as participatory journalism. Hybrid journalism offers one solution to the potentially contradicting ideals of engagement and objectivity. It arguably suits social media platforms with their conversational and affective registers better than the traditional, detached type of journalism, and potentially makes journalism more attractive for audience participation.

Hybrid journalism can invoke *hybrid engagement*, which appeals to both rational and affective sentiments in the audience. In the same way as hybrid journalism mixes objective-rational and dialogical-affective aspects in reporting, the invoked hybrid engagement mixes rational and affective aspects of engagement (Kormelink & Meijer, 2015) in a balanced way. Rational engagement is used here to refer to factual information and the feeling of trust it invokes (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2017), and affective engagement refers to a personal, emotional connection with news content.

Content produced by new media players are often affective and seek to engage the user on a personal level (Papacharissi, 2015), which questions traditional normative claims of what journalism should be like and how it should address and appeal to its audiences. According to Singer (2017a, p. 131), entrepreneurial journalists “revisit what often are deeply held views about what journalism is, should be and might become”. Such dissenting approaches place entrepreneurial journalists in a good position to pioneer possible futures of journalism (Ruotsalainen, in press). Participatory and interactive audience relationships are often built-in as a part of entrepreneurial journalism, as entrepreneurs have to know their customers and their needs very closely (Siapera & Papadopoulou, 2016).

According to Singer (2017b), entrepreneurial journalists—their conceptions about journalism as well as the actual journalism they produce—have been studied relatively little. Thus, this article makes a needed contribution to the discussion on what constitutes the ideas, approaches and values of entrepreneurial journalism. Furthermore, entrepreneurial journalism is studied in relation to hybrid journalism, clarifying what hybrid news journalism could be like in practice and how it may evolve in the future. The main research question

in the article concentrates on examining *how the ethos of entrepreneurial journalism reflects hybrid journalism, hybrid engagement, and a more participation-oriented journalistic culture*.

The article analyses discourses in the 41 “About us” pages of entrepreneurial journalism outlets from North America and Europe. Building on the analysis, the article constructs four scenario sketches for the development of entrepreneurial and hybrid journalism. The scenario sketches are not predictions, as the probability of any scenario ever being realized accurately is low (Gordon & Glenn, 2018). Their purpose, instead, is to open up the space of alternative possibilities in the development of entrepreneurial journalism. While Vos and Singer (2016) have analysed discourses of entrepreneurial journalism in trade and popular press, this article analyses the discourses used by entrepreneurial journalism outlets themselves.

The next section addresses and elaborates on the trend towards hybridity in journalism, analyses some future-shaping trends related to audience engagement, and presents entrepreneurial journalists as pioneers of hybrid journalism. A short review on entrepreneurial journalism is offered in section 3. Section 4 presents the results from the analysis of the “About us” pages. The results are elaborated as scenario sketches in section 5, and in the conclusions, the idea of hybrid engagement is reflected upon for each scenario.

## 2. The Hybridization of Journalism

The media systems of western democracies have become hybrids of traditional and social media: content on online platforms is collectively produced and shared by journalists, citizens, bloggers, and activists (Chadwick, 2013). As journalism is increasingly distributed on these platforms, the question of how to combine public with personal communication in journalism becomes pivotal—news needs to become more engaging than before. In this article, engagement is defined as affectual, personal and social experiences the audience has with a publication and its contents (Mersey, Malthouse, & Calder, 2010).

In such a hybrid system, the rationality of traditional media and the affectuality of social media are blended (Laaksonen, 2017)—in effect, “dichotomies such as public/private, entertainment/politics, work/leisure become blended, and personal and political become intertwined” (Laaksonen, 2017, p. 12). Affect refers to both subjectively experienced emotion and intersubjective experiences (Papacharissi, 2015). As embodied social meanings, affects constitute a shared life-world that “makes sense” and is experienced as meaningful (Langlois, 2014). A shared life-world between a media outlet and its audience is a crucial prerequisite for audience engagement and participation. In the hybrid media ecology of affective news streams, audiences need to find news content as personally meaningful if they are to consume,

share, and comment on it (Papacharissi, 2015), and so journalism has to find new, affective ways of reporting and connecting with the audiences' identities if it is to stay relevant.

Hybridity reflects a broader socio-political environment in which matters of personal interest related to identity are emphasised in public life—i.e., “identity politics” (Lilla, 2017). Although identity politics cannot be altogether reduced to social media, the heightened role of identity is a structural feature of the current media ecology. Van Dijck and Poell (2013) describe a social media logic that in different ways intensifies and interacts with users' (networked) identities. A person's identity and personal relevance have become core filter mechanisms in news consumption (Eveland & Dunwoody, 2002), and social media also steer political action to identity-driven strategies as they “enable personalized public engagement” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 739). Furthermore, Western societies have for decades already been exhibiting postmaterialist values of intellectual, aesthetic, self-expressive, and humanitarian pursuits (Inglehart, 1977). In a post-materialist world, citizens' identities are increasingly constructed in networked communication instead of economic production (Lash, 1994).

Some other trends, too, hint at new directions for engagement. On social media, audience trust is often determined by who shares the content to them, instead of the news organisation that produced the content (The Media Insight Project, 2017), steering power away from news organisations to audience communities (Villi & Jung, 2015). Moreover, growth in online audience revenue is compensating for the decrease in advertising revenue (WAN-IFRA, 2017). New payment models are often membership-like (Newman et al., 2017), implying a closer relationship between news organisations and their audiences. Finally, “old-fashioned” reporting still engages audiences. In the USA, many of the legacy media, such as the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*, have recently grown their subscription base especially among young consumers (Schwartz, 2017).

These trends imply that an audience-first development of affect, identity, and emotion is emerging as news consumption is shifting to online—while, at the same time, traditional reporting is still regarded as valuable. A key question for the future of journalism is, then, how journalism can re-establish a connection with its audience while also preserving its own autonomy. Benton (2017) believes that in order to recreate their relationship with the audiences, news organisations need to offer a feeling of community and personal connection with them, as well as producing trustworthy, high-quality journalism—in other words: hybrid journalism, arguably enticing rich hybrid engagement.

However, the concept of hybridity can be criticised as being too vague and general. Witschge, Anderson, Domingo and Hermida (2018, p. 2) criticise hybridity as a catch-all term and a shortcut to “denote everything that is complex as hybrid”. They call for next steps in the study

of hybridity to “not only name but also describe and theorize the complexity of the field” (p. 4). Importantly, the implications of hybridity remain under-explored in the field of journalism studies (Baym, 2017, p. 11), and research on hybrid journalism tends to focus on soft-news genres (cf. Bødker, 2017; Hamilton, 2016) such as celebrity journalism (Bulck, Paulussen, & Bels, 2017).

Baym (2017) contributes to the study of hybrid journalism by dividing the concept into three interlinked levels: systemic, discursive, and textual. Systemic hybridity refers to the melding of technological affordances, economic agendas, and structures of media production and distribution. Discursive hybridity refers to the blending of journalistic discourses or “linguistic consciousnesses”. Textual hybridity describes the blending of genres, forms, and styles. In fact, all new journalistic genres, such as participatory journalism, can be defined as hybrid as they mix different elements in a non-binary way (see Witschge et al., 2018).

Through these three levels hybridity can be seen as a future-oriented concept: by adding new segments on top of traditional journalistic values and attributes, different manifestations of hybridity open new paths for the development of journalism (see Wagemans et al., 2018). In order to analyse hybridity in the values of journalists in a more focused way, this article concentrates on discursive hybridity and defines it as the blending of two constitutive journalistic notions—objectivity and dialogue—which have traditionally been thought of as competing and incompatible (Soffer, 2009). According to Soffer (2009), objective journalism observes, gathers information, and objectifies social phenomena while maintaining an external position and avoiding dialogical relationships. Dialogical journalism, in turn, presents a polyphony of views instead of an authoritative monologue, encourages different interpretations instead of a unified, single message, and draws on the subjective, personal styles of individual reporters. The goal of dialogical journalism is to inspire public discourse and political communal life as opposed to simply conveying neutral information to citizens (Carey, 1989).

It may be that in the future participatory approaches steer journalism in the direction of the hybridity of objectivity and dialogue. Beckett and Deuze (2016) call this kind of a new journalistic ideal “affective objectivity”, pioneered by the global journalism startup scene: while retaining its criticality and independence, journalism of affective objectivity advocates more engaged, involved, and emotional approaches. The concept of affective objectivity is close to the concept of hybrid engagement outlined in this article.

### 3. Entrepreneurial Journalists as Change Agents

Entrepreneurial journalism is growing globally (Mathisen, 2017), and is one of the trends shaping the future of journalism (Wagemans et al., 2018). Entrepreneurial journalists are those who have established

their own business, and who not only produce journalism but have a total control over running the enterprise. Casero-Ripollés, Izquierdo-Castillo and Doménech-Fabregat (2016) describe entrepreneurial journalism as having three characteristics: it 1) is produced by small-scale media organisations, or cooperatives, of individual initiatives, 2) involves the creation of a business of one's own—seeking new (business) opportunities and journalistic niches, and 3) encourages people to see the journalist as an entrepreneur, “tearing down the wall that traditionally separated the creation of content from business” (p. 288). The third characteristic also involves new forms of news production, such as the craft production model of journalism that reflects the personality and skills of the entrepreneur (Picard, 2014).

Casero-Ripollés et al. (2016, p. 288) describe innovation and creativity as the core qualities of entrepreneurial journalists, “venturing into new territory and topics, and incorporating new techniques”. Assuming control over the production, entrepreneurial journalists can steer their journalism in directions they find interesting, innovative, and worth exploring (Carlson & Usher, 2016). Free of the path dependencies of traditional newsrooms, new players in the field can challenge established norms and routines and create new journalistic cultures and practices (see Tandoc & Jenkins, 2018). Entrepreneurial journalists, and especially cooperative enterprises, also seek to establish close and collaborative relationships with their audiences, bridging the gap between media outlets and citizens (Siapera & Papadopoulos, 2016).

More loose and inclusive descriptions emphasise an orientation of change as defining entrepreneurial journalism (Compaine & Hoag, 2012). Some authors even count freelancers as entrepreneurial journalists (De Cock & de Smaele, 2016; Holton, 2016) because of their “entrepreneurial soul” (Mathisen, 2017, p. 919). Along these lines, Schultz and Jones (2017, p. 12) emphasise “discovery and exploitation of opportunities” as defining entrepreneurial journalism, accentuating that entrepreneurial journalism does not concern only nascent and small enterprises but businesses of all sizes.

The above review is in line with what Singer (2017a) points out: the concept of entrepreneurial journalism is blurry, more a label than an identifiable practice. According to Vos and Singer (2016, p. 150), entrepreneurial journalism is “as likely...described in terms of an ‘entrepreneurial spirit’ as...a specific practice or set of practices”. Perhaps a criterion that is neither too exclusive nor too inclusive is the following: entrepreneurial journalism involves the discovery of new opportunities and the construction of a business around them. Legacy media can also find and exploit new opportunities, but their business is not dependent on them. Although large, established digital media outlets such as *Buzzfeed* or *Vox* are not strictly entrepreneurial as they are no more extensions of their founders or owned solely by them, their business is based on one defining idea—focusing exclu-

sively on explanatory journalism in the case of *Vox*, or trying to make news viral in the case of *Buzzfeed*.

Finally, it must be emphasised that entrepreneurial journalism is not about ditching the traditions of journalism. New media outlets often uphold the core values of journalism (Tandoc & Jenkins, 2018; Usher, 2017; Wage-mans et al., 2018). For instance, the Dutch startup *De Correspondent* is a hybrid of objective reporting and journalists’ mediating subjectivity (Harbers, 2016). In a similar way, *Buzzfeed* produces rather traditional journalism but emphasises the importance of social and identity-related issues that are of interest to its audiences, as well as drawing on the knowledge of citizen sources (Tandoc, 2018).

#### 4. We the Explorers—Discourses of Entrepreneurial Journalism

##### 4.1. Data and Method

The data for the article is collected from the “About Us” pages of 41 entrepreneurial journalism outlets mainly from the U.S., with individual outlets from Canada, Cuba, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Scotland, Spain and Sweden (see Appendix). The U.S. outlets were chosen from a list of major digital media organisations collected by Pew Research Institute (Jurkowitz, 2014). The list was complemented with smaller entrepreneurial outlets both inside and outside the U.S. The sampling was continued until a sufficiently diverse sample of outlets was covered. Data saturation was reached as all collected data fit in the identified discourses and did not reveal uncovered aspects in them. Perhaps surprisingly, no country or region-specific differences were identified, except for a brief mention about the fight against censorship in the Cuban case. The U.S. pages were collected in spring 2015 for the purposes of another research project (Ruotsalainen, 2016) and the rest in autumn 2017. The non-English pages were translated into English.

Because the purpose of this article is to add to the understanding of the emerging ethos of entrepreneurial journalism, a broad definition of entrepreneurial journalism (Singer, 2017b) was assumed in the collection of the data. The selected outlets include a broad spectrum of large and small entrepreneurial media organisations: startups, non-profits, established outlets and newcomers. For the same reasons, the definition of journalism was kept relatively wide. While most of the organisations in the data are journalistic, there are some, such as the science publication *Aeon* or the technology site *TechCrunch*, which do not publish “news” but, rather, topical articles with a niche interest.

On the “About Us” pages the new digital media outlets describe their journalism, values and visions, thereby opening vistas to possible futures of journalism (Carlson & Usher, 2016). To reveal the shared meanings in the texts, the data was analysed using discourse analysis. Discourse refers to a socially designated and shared way of



thinking expressed through language. Discourses are social boundaries around what can be said about a topic, and how. This way they both limit and enable how a phenomenon or issue can be presented. (Fairclough, 2003.) New, emerging discourses create new social reality and can be used to anticipate emerging social futures (Inayatullah, 1998).

The analysis was initiated by coding different themes found in the data. The actual discourse analysis was conducted by analysing how these themes are represented in the data. Four discourses were identified and analysed: *identity*, *niche*, *network*, and *change* discourse. A rather strong discourse of *traditional journalism* was also identified. This discourse consists of such features and values as factuality, public service and impartiality. Because these features are well-known, the discourse of traditional journalism will not be presented in more detail in this article. The discourse is, however, pivotal as it supports the hypothesis of this article—that the conception of journalism among entrepreneurial journalists is a hybrid of the traditions of objectivity and dialogue.

#### 4.2. Media Outlets as Persons—The Identity Discourse

In the *identity discourse* the media signify themselves as human-like individuals with their own identity and personality. This is done in five ways. First, the media ascribe themselves different characteristics and describe their “emotions”. *Politico*, for instance, is “proud” and it has “passion”, *Zetland* has written journalism as its “original passion”, and *Quartz* is “nerdy” and defined by its “obsessions”. Second, the media describe themselves as value-driven and ethical—how they believe in what they are doing. *Investigative Reporting Project Italy*, for instance, “believes journalism should be a watchdog of democracy” and *Krautreporter* describes its “principles”. Twelve of the media write how “dedicated” and “committed” they are to their journalism, connoting they care about their journalism on a “personal” level. Third, the media construct identities by identifying with their audience. *Mic* for instance writes how its editors and writers share attributes with its readers, and *The Ferret* seeks to build a community of like-minded people. Fourth, the media highlight their individual reporters and founders. This can be interpreted as a way to brand their journalists (Molyneux, 2015), associate the organisation with real humans and thus to construct an authentic identity. *The Rumpus* for instance mentions the “overtly personal” newsletter of its editor-in-chief, and *Mic* was created by “two long-time friends”. Fifth, the subjectivity and personal voice of the journalists are highlighted. This is demonstrated by *De Correspondent*, whose “authors are no objective automatons...; rather, they are subjective beings, rooted in and motivated by ideas and ideals”.

The identity discourse presents news selection and journalism as something reporters personally care about. This is well exemplified by *Krautreporter*: “Our authors decide for themselves what they are going to report on”.

However, the focus is still on the news, on matters of public interest, and the discourse reflects a hybrid of the ideals of objectivity and dialogue. *El Diario* manifests this by emphasising that its defining values are subordinate to traditional journalistic ideals: “But all our values are subject to a fundamental one in journalistic terms: respect for the truth”.

#### 4.3. Going Deeper—The Niche Discourse

In the *niche discourse*, the media emphasise how they concentrate and specialise—an often-recurring word in the discourse is “focus”. The subjects on which the media claim to concentrate on are, however, quite general, such as politics and business trends. Only a few media indicate clearly defined and narrow niches, such as *The Marshall Project*, which writes about the American criminal justice system.

In other words, the media claim to focus on rather traditional areas of journalism—“niche” refers to their specific journalistic approaches and voices rather than narrow topics. The outlets often assert to have some distinct feature that separates their news from “traditional” news. *Buzzfeed* does not produce only news but “the most shareable news”. *Discourse Media* is “focused on matters of public importance” and includes topics such as gender and indigenous issues among those themes.

Many of the media manifest their journalism as “deep”, as going or looking deeper than the surface of daily events: “dive deep” (*ProPublica*), “delve deeper” (*Vox*), “to uncover, explain and highlight deep-lying structures” (*De Correspondent*). Many of the analysed media thus claim their niche as something more comprehensive and more steeped-in than day-to-day reporting. In the words of *Zetland*, its “mission is not to make news—it is to make sense”.

Niche discourse rhetorically highlights how entrepreneurial media differentiate themselves from general-purpose mass media and build their distinctive identity. This kind of journalistic ideal is not about providing “just the facts”, but to assist with sense-making, a core tenet of dialogical journalism. However, the niche discourse does not question the objectivity ideal of general interest journalism.

#### 4.4. Rhizomatic Media—The Network Discourse

The *network discourse* signifies media as nodes in networks. *The Marshall Project*, for instance, describes its web page as a “dynamic hub”, and *FlavorWire* defines itself as “a network of culturally connected people”. The network discourse marks a departure from legacy media, which often draw clear lines to separate them from both the audience and other organisations and institutions.

In the network discourse, the media seek to network and establish a personal relationship with their audience. The network discourse hence allows media to embody its audience’s tastes and values. The *New Inquiry* seeks

to “connect directly with our audience” and *Quartz* calls readers to share its “passions”. A personal and direct relationship with the audiences is manifested in how the media present themselves as communities: the word “community” appears in the data 15 times (see Malmelin & Villi, 2016).

The production of journalism is described as a networked process. The media often mention their freelance network and how they cooperate with other organisations. *Discourse Media* writes how media should “work together” more, and how it “collaborates with our colleagues to pool resources, build capacity and maximize our collective impact”. *ProPublica* not only publishes pieces by other outlets but also annotates them and does follow-ups. This way the network discourse relies on the collective intelligence enhanced by the Internet.

In the network discourse, hybridity is expressed both as a cooperative production of (objective) journalism and as a dialogue between media and their audiences. The discourse can also be interpreted to incorporate people’s intimate life spheres into journalism—a core characteristic of dialogical journalism.

#### 4.5. The Reformists—The Change Discourse

In the *change discourse*, the media present themselves as change actors: as reformers of media, journalism, and society. *First Look Media* “seeks to improve society through journalism and technology”, and *Zetland* participates “in the much-needed reinvention of Danish quality journalism”. Traditional journalism is displayed in the discourse as being too passive. *Mic* states how “news organizations can do more to empower our generation”. *ProPublica*, in turn, criticises traditional investigative journalism for its “past failings” and touts how it will persistently hold the powerful accountable “until change comes about”.

Some media highlight narrative journalism, as opposed to fact-reporting, as being the tool to make such change happen. According to *The Marshall Project* “storytelling can be a powerful agent of social change”. *Mic*, in turn, believes that “stories...shape the world, especially when they challenge traditional narratives”. Here, “traditional narratives” can be interpreted as referring to legacy media, as *Mic* notes how the perspectives of young people are often “left out of the media’s narrative”.

In the change discourse, traditional journalism is portrayed as too dull and uniform. *Politico* claims that “traditional journalistic conventions...make stories dull, predictable and often unreadable”. Implicitly criticising homogenous traditional media, *The Awl* argues that readers are “poorly served by being delivered those same stories in numbing repetition”. Similar views are presented also by *Gawker*, *Mic*, *El Diario*, *De Correspondent* and *Marshall Report*.

In the change discourse, traditional journalism of the objective tradition is posed to be renewed by shaping

journalism as more socially active and less dull and homogenous. The discourse implicitly encourages the injection of journalism with the diversity and “activism” of dialogical styles.

### 5. Sketching Scenarios for the Future of Entrepreneurial Journalism

The future of entrepreneurial journalism—as with journalism in general—remains fundamentally open. Alternative futures of entrepreneurial journalism can be explored—and long-term ideas, policies, strategies, and plans formulated—by constructing scenarios. A scenario is a vivid, information-rich description of a certain topic in a certain time in the future, with key trends, decisions, and events depicting how the present situation has led to a particular future (Glenn, 2009; Ralston & Wilson, 2006). It needs to be highlighted that scenarios are not predictions: by studying potential at the present time, scenarios anticipate plausible futures instead of predicting probable ones.

This section presents four scenario sketches of entrepreneurial, hybrid journalism in the year 2030. The scenarios presented are called “sketches” as they lack a full narrative of how a certain future could have been reached—instead, they are more snapshot-like views into the future. The year 2030 is chosen because a little over ten years is a sufficient time for entrepreneurial journalism to evolve and establish itself in the field of journalism. Each scenario sketch ends with an interpretation, in which manifestations of hybridity and possible outcomes of the scenario are assessed.

The scenarios were constructed by first selecting core elements from each of the four discourses and placing them into a table. Then thematically similar elements were coded to form initial scenario categories. Finally, to make the categories concise they were condensed so that each scenario had only one or two elements from each discourse (see Table 1). The table was then elaborated and expanded as short scenario narratives.

#### 5.1. Scenario Sketch 1: Elitist-Individualists

Entrepreneurial journalists offer their journalism to educated “elite” audiences. Their value proposition is based on very narrow—and thus highly monetizable—niches: they provide high-quality, specialised and backstage information the audiences cannot find elsewhere. Quality journalism has become a way to make social distinctions, and an outlet’s distinctive identity entices (elite) audience engagement.

The audiences expect individuality, character and integrity from their preferred media. Hence the media’s identities reflect their founders’ personality, voices and passions. As “individualists” entrepreneurial journalists often avoid having too close a relationship with their audiences. As such they can remain true to themselves, a principle appreciated by their audiences. However, the

**Table 1.** Scenario sketches of entrepreneurial hybrid journalism in 2030.

Scenarios	Elements from the discourses			
	Identity Discourse	Niche Discourse	Network Discourse	Change Discourse
<b>1. Elitist-Individualists</b>	Identity based on the founders' personality, voices, passions and opinions.	Narrow niches (such as the judiciary system), often on topics outside the daily news grind.	Networked with other, similar media outlets.	A pioneer spirit emphasizing the cutting-edge, the alternative, and the experimental.
<b>2. Communalists</b>	Identity based on the audience and its passions.	Relatively broad topic areas (such as technology), but audience members provide highly specialised knowledge.	Networked with the audience. Audience members as reporters.	The audience members as change agents in society.
<b>3. Public Service</b>	Identity based on a dedication to the "common good".	General news "with a twist" (such as explainers and interpretations).	Utilising the collective intelligence of the public.	Seeking to renew society.
<b>4. Identity Media</b>	Identity based on the reporters' personality and "obsessions".	Eclectic niches reflecting the interest areas of reporters. Partisan journalism with strong opinions.	Networked, distributed "newsrooms" and freelance networks.	Catering to new, emerging needs and offering highly novel content.

media often cooperate with other high-minded media outlets, as well as high-profile or insider audience members. Together this vanguard bunch relentlessly seeks the cutting-edge and is prone to experimentation.

Interpretation: Prototypes for this kind of a future are such outlets as the *Politico* or the *Quartz*. Dialogue in journalism is expressed by the subjective voices of the entrepreneurs rather than a polyphony of views. If a focus on elite niches became more common, it would, on the one hand, indicate a journalism that is more in-the-know, resourceful, and deep. On the other hand, though, it would imply a retreat from the public sphere and large-scale audience participation. A crucial question is whether legacy media would go this direction too, or whether they would seek to fulfil the function of public service.

In this scenario, entrepreneurial journalism would probably rely strongly on audience payments, be they by subscription, membership fees or single payments. This would further risk widening the gap between the information-haves and have-nots, the well-off and the deprived.

### 5.2. Scenario Sketch 2: Communalists

Entrepreneurial journalism outlets are built around audience communities (see Malmelin & Villi, 2016). Audience members are closely involved and often become reporters too. In a highly fragmented culture and public sphere, citizens seek existential security and a sense of purpose from different communities—audience communities among them.

Journalists specialise to offer content that their audience finds interesting. The media's niche areas and personality reflect the interests and identities of their audience. Many of the audience communities are oriented towards public matters. However, entrepreneurial outlets can nurture communities also for those audience segments unacquainted with current events. This fosters engagement in matters of public interest, and audience members often become influential change agents in society.

Interpretation: The scenario posits that audience communities and affiliated hybrid journalism could act as bridges between private and public motives and interests, in effect creating a new, hybrid social and societal entity. The "dialogue" in this scenario is a balanced mix of subjective styles and different points of view.

The scenario is inclusive and participation-positive and does not suggest the prospect of rising information-inequality. However, the risk is that journalism may lose its autonomy: journalists may have to submit to the audiences in order to stay relevant. All in all, this scenario promises a major opportunity for entrepreneurial media outlets, assuming they are much more proficient in nurturing audience communities than rigid legacy media (see Villi & Jung, 2015).

### 5.3. Scenario Sketch 3: Public Service

Entrepreneurial journalists offer their products to the general public. They report on the matters of public interest, but in new ways—for example, through news ex-



plainers. Many entrepreneurial news outlets also specialise in covering journalistic blind spots.

Entrepreneurial journalists construct their identities through a dedication to the common good. Still, they are not as passive in regards to promoting change as legacy media but seek to renew society and right wrongs. The polarisation and decentralisation of societies has been reversed through state interventions, active social policy, and civic-minded journalism. Citizens are to a large extent committed to acting in the benefit of the broader society. Entrepreneurial journalists are networked with citizens, and can thus efficiently utilise the collective intelligence of the public.

Interpretation: This scenario could be driven by a broad awakening to the threat of widening social gaps and deepening inequalities in the society. A general sentiment towards public-mindedness would encourage entrepreneurial journalists to embrace traditional virtues of journalism with an activist streak, competing in the same field with legacy media but seeking to outperform them in terms of social impact.

In this scenario, entrepreneurial journalists pioneer a new kind of “institutionalised” public or citizen journalism, one that has the prowess to respond to the perceived shortcomings of mainstream media. Journalism leans toward an objective style of delivery with an emphasis on underserved voices.

#### 5.4. Scenario Sketch 4: Identity Media

Entrepreneurial journalism outlets focus on helping audiences construct their identities. Identity politics have escalated. The world is changing faster than expected, and people cherish and protect their identities almost neurotically. Media outlets base their identities on their reporters’ “obsessions”.

The niche areas entrepreneurial media focus on are eclectic, reflecting the personal interests of both the reporters and the audiences. Journalism is often hyper-partisan with strong, albeit well-argued, opinions and views. Still, people are curious about the world and constantly seek new material to construct their identity. Newsrooms are highly networked, often free of physical spaces. Freelance networks and audience participants provide reporting and ideas to meet extremely diverse demands. Entrepreneurial journalism caters to new, emerging needs, tastes and topics, offering highly novel content.

Interpretation: In this scenario, hybrid journalism is perhaps most dominated by dialogue and especially its use of literary techniques. With narrow audience segments and their own journalistic voices, this scenario reflects what Nechushtai (2018) describes as an emerging news system category of “polarized liberal”.

With the focus on idiosyncrasy and identity, the scenario runs the risk of severing cultural and ideological polarization. On the other hand, in this scenario media are the most pluralistic and diverse, and audiences highly

engaged to participate in the production of journalism. Hence, perhaps paradoxically, there is also a potentially heightened interest in public affairs.

## 6. Conclusions

In a possible future, journalistic media outlets will continue to lose their relevance, interest and engagement among audiences, to the advantage of other content producers who engage more participatory forms of communication on social platforms. The solution outlined in this article to avoid such a future is a hybrid of the ideals of objectivity and dialogue in journalism—arguably well-fitting to the participatory social media. This type of journalism has the potential to invoke “hybrid engagement”, which draws on both affect and reason and potentially encourages behavioural engagement as well—i.e., audience participation.

The assumption that an ideal of hybrid journalism and hybrid engagement is spearheaded by entrepreneurial journalists was tested in the analysis of the “About us” pages of 41 entrepreneurial journalism outlets. The article found that the discourses—emphasising distinctive identity, niche approaches, networks, change-oriented culture, and traditional journalistic values—indeed display hybrid notions of journalism and engagement. In the words of *Zetland*, journalism should “engage the heart as well as the mind”.

Elaborating the discourses, this article presented four scenario sketches of entrepreneurial hybrid journalism. In the “Elitist-individualists” scenario, hybrid engagement is based on the mix of premium and trustworthy quality as well as the distinctive, highbrow sensibilities of the media outlets. Audience participation is relatively low as media outlets and audiences alike appreciate the uncompromised autonomy of journalism. In the “Communalists” scenario, the media and their audiences live in an almost symbiotic relationship, on which participation and engagement are built on. Audiences assume journalistic ideals and norms, which set them apart from, e.g., independent bloggers. The “Public service” scenario, comes closest to traditional journalism, as entrepreneurial journalists offer their journalism first and foremost for the general public. However, they engage audiences by an active stance towards social change and by embracing a wide range of citizen contributions, setting them apart from legacy media. In the “Identity Media” scenario, audiences are engaged by the outlets’ idiosyncratic identities and contents, which help them construct their identities, as well as by the accurate but opinionated reporting. Audience contributions are needed to meet the immensely diverse and swiftly changing tastes and demands.

Entrepreneurial journalists offer a testbed to experiment with new approaches in journalism. The scenarios presented here show different approaches how entrepreneurial journalists can renew journalism and how hybrid journalism can manifest and evolve in practice. In

each of the scenarios, the outlets interact closely with their audiences and consequently know their intricate needs and tastes in detail. This kind of sensibility is something that bigger news organisations may find hard to establish—but which is increasingly crucial in a media environment where the provision of facts alone is insufficient and needs to be spiced up with affective and participatory approaches. The “audience-first sensibility” is—or should be—closely connected to the audience-first strategies of media outlets, as they seek to compensate for diminishing advertising revenue with gaining and retaining loyal paying consumers (Villi & Picard, in press).

Further studies could build on, elaborate, broaden and challenge the scenarios, and compare if and how empirical analyses of entrepreneurial journalism—not just conceptions of journalism—match the findings of this article. Studies could also advance the study of both concepts by anticipating what different outcomes entrepreneurial journalism and hybrid journalism may have in the future, for which scenarios are only one tool. Journalism studies is already a strongly future-focused discipline (Broersma & Peters, 2017), and assuming concepts and methods of futures research could help clarify the academic discussion on the possible, desirable, and undesirable futures of journalism (see Ruotsalainen, in press).

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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## Appendix

The studied entrepreneurial journalism outlets and the URLs of their “About Us” pages.

**14ymedio** (<http://www.14ymedio.com/quienes-somos.html>),  
**Aeon** (<http://aeon.co/magazine/about>),  
**All Things Digital** (<http://allthingsd.com/about/site>),  
**Blank Spot** (<https://www.blankspot.se/in-english>),  
**Bleacher Report** (<http://bleacherreport.com/about>),  
**Business Insider** (<http://businessinsider.com/about>),  
**Buzzfeed** (<http://www.buzzfeed.com/about>),  
**De Correspondent** (<https://decorrespondent.nl/en>),  
**Discourse Media** (<http://discoursemedia.org/about>),  
**eldiario.es** ([http://www.eldiario.es/que\\_es](http://www.eldiario.es/que_es)),  
**The Ferret** (<https://theferret.scot/about-us>),  
**First Look Media** (<https://firstlook.org/about>),  
**Flavorwire** (<http://flavorwire.com/about>),  
**Gawker** ([gawker.com/about](http://gawker.com/about)),  
**Gigaom** ([about.gigaom.com](http://about.gigaom.com)),  
**GlobalPost** (<http://www.globalpost.com/content/about>),  
**Investigative Reporting Project Italy** (<https://irpi.eu/en/about-us>),  
**Krautreporter** ([https://krautreporter.de/pages/ueber\\_uns](https://krautreporter.de/pages/ueber_uns)),  
**Mashable** (<http://mashable.com/about>),  
**Mediapart** (<https://blogs.mediapart.fr/la-redaction-de-mediapart/blog/290910/about-mediapart>),  
**Mic** (<http://mic.com/about>),  
**MinnPost** (<http://www.minnpost.com/about>),  
**News Deeply** (<http://www.newsdeeply.com/overview/>),  
**OZY** (<http://www.ozy.com/about>),  
**Politico** (<http://www.politico.com/about/our-story>),  
**ProPublica** (<http://www.propublica.org/about>),  
**Quartz** (<http://qz.com/about/welcome-to-quartz>),  
**Re/code** (<http://recode.net/about>),  
**Salon** (<http://www.salon.com/about>),  
**Talking Points Memo** (<http://talkingpointsmemo.com/about>),  
**TechCrunch** (<http://techcrunch.com/about>),  
**The Awl** (<http://www.theawl.com/about>),  
**The Daily Beast** (<http://www.thedailybeast.com/company/about-us.html>),  
**The Daily Caller** (<http://dailycaller.com/about-us>),  
**The Marshall Project** (<https://www.themarshallproject.org/about>),  
**The New Inquiry** (<http://thenewinquiry.com/about>),  
**The Texas Tribune** (<http://www.texastribune.org/about>),  
**The Verge** (<http://www.theverge.com/about-the-verge>),  
**The Rumpus** (<http://therumpus.net/about/>),  
**Vox** (<http://www.voxmedia.com/brands/vox>),  
**Zetland** (<https://www.zetland.dk/aboutzetland>).