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# Practical, Not Radical: Examining Innovative Learning Culture in a Public Service Media Organization

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## ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship has argued for media organizations' need to radically innovate to ensure their survival in the future. This study deploys the innovative learning culture (ILC) framework to qualitatively study innovation and learning in a legacy public service media organization. While innovation and learning are linked, the learning processes of professional journalists have received only little attention. Through an analysis of a development network operating in a public service media organization, we identify characteristics of ILC in the network and how those characteristics manifest in practice, as well as examine contextual factors that shape ILC. Our findings indicate that innovation and learning processes in the network are shaped by journalistic practice, technology and platforms, and organizational strategy. Importantly, the organization's technological environment is seen to encourage mimicry in learning and innovation processes, leading to exploitative rather than explorative innovation. The study contributes theoretically to ILC by providing an organizationally situated understanding of the framework that accounts for institutional tendencies in media innovation.

## KEYWORDS

Innovative learning culture; media innovation; public service media; legacy media; newsroom culture; ethnography

## Introduction

In March 2020, Robin Kwong, newsroom innovation chief at the Wall Street Journal, wrote in his Medium blog:

Where does innovation come from? At the Wall Street Journal, we believe that while new ideas can come from anywhere, those most likely to be implemented and to add value come from people who are working daily on our core product. In other words, the reporters, editors, producers, developers and designers who make up our newsroom. (Kwong 2020)

Kwong sees innovation as something that is driven by the media organization's key stakeholders rather than outside players such as technology companies – a tendency that has been recognized by recent scholarship on media innovation (e.g., Posetti 2018; Bell and Owen 2017). Kwong's views reflect those of many, both in the field of journalism

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and in academic research: media organizations need to tap into the intrinsic creativity of their employees to survive in the future (Fortunati and O'Sullivan 2019; Küng 2015).

In scholarly work on media innovation, there is much talk about media organizations needing to innovate to stay afloat (Belair-Gagnon and Steinke 2020; Deuze 2019). Evans (2018) describes innovation speech as “rampant” in the field of journalism and argues that it is turning into a problem as many organizations may strive for innovation without reflecting what the term means to them. This narrative is motivated by changes in media organizations’ social, economic, and technological environments, which have made their overall strategic circumstances increasingly difficult (Küng 2017; Picard 2014). In this environment, innovation tasks fall to the hands of journalists whose “creative energies,” however, are more or less spent on daily journalistic production (Porcu, Hermans, and Broersma 2020; Küng 2015; O'Reilly and Tushman 2013). Amid these strategic pressures, media organizations tend to focus on day-to-day news production and short-term development instead of aiming for long-term explorative innovation that could help renew and sustain their business in the long run (Järventie-Thesleff, Moisander, and Villi 2014; Steensen 2009). This, in turn, calls for an examination of how new, possibly explorative, ideas emerge and are developed among professional journalists, i.e., what are the cultural conditions for explorative innovation in newsrooms.

Theoretically, newsroom innovation has been studied using a variety of perspectives (for an overview, see Belair-Gagnon and Steinke 2020), such as diffusion of innovation theory (Holman and Perreault 2022), actor-network theory (Domingo 2008; Anderson 2013), and digital convergence of newswork as a stage for innovation (Singer 2004). In this study, we explore innovation in the newsroom from the perspective of organizational learning culture. Learning is essential for innovation as it allows a media organization to obtain advantages over their competitors (Yolles 2009) and to survive disruptions in the media landscape in the long run (March 1991; O'Reilly and Tushman 2013). Past research has, however, focused mainly on students of journalism in higher education settings (Salzmann, Guribye, and Gynnild 2021) rather than journalists working in newsrooms. Hence, we employ the innovative learning culture (ILC) (Porcu 2020; Porcu, Hermans, and Broersma 2020) framework to qualitatively study innovation and learning in a Nordic public service media (PSM) organization. Broadly defined, ILC is a “learning culture that triggers and fosters innovation” in legacy media organizations (Porcu 2020, 1556). The framework aims to shed light on learning processes among professional journalists and help identify the cultural conditions for explorative innovation in newsrooms. Through an analysis of ethnographic data from a network-type development team situated in the PSM, we pinpoint characteristics of ILC and their occurrence in the network's working practices as well as identify contextual factors that shape the emergence of ILC in the network.

This study contributes to the innovative learning culture framework by (1) applying it qualitatively—something its developers call for (Porcu, Hermans, and Broersma 2020, 15)—and (2) analyzing contextual factors that shape ILC in a media organization. Through an analysis of the contextual factors shaping ILC, this study highlights an opportunity for advancement of the framework by accounting for institutional tendencies in media innovation processes. Essentially, we argue that the framework currently lacks an understanding of macro-level influences on innovation and learning processes in newsrooms. Our analysis of the contextual factors shaping ILC in a newsroom provides

a more organizationally situated and holistic understanding of the framework and thus offers more basis for future qualitative and quantitative studies wishing to adopt the framework. The findings also yield practical implications for media organizations aiming for better innovation processes by suggesting possible modes of organizing around innovation work.

## Literature Review

### *Media Innovation as a Balancing act*

In journalism, innovation is about change and adaptation to a new strategic environment (Küng 2017) through the implementation of ideas that will transform into revenues, cost savings or new market opportunities (Lehtisaari et al. 2018). Media innovation can come in many different shapes and sizes with different degrees of novelty and entail product, process, position, paradigmatic, genre and social innovation (Krumsvik et al. 2019). Combinations of these are also possible in the form of storytelling innovation (Evans 2018). García-Avilés et al. (2018) define media innovation as a media organization's

capacity to react to changes in both products, processes and services through the use of creative skills that allow a problem or a need to be identified, and to solve it through a solution that results in the introduction of something new that adds value to the customers or the media organization. (3)

In tandem with previous research (e.g., Paulussen 2016), media innovation is conceptualized as a dynamic process that is shaped by the cultural, technological, and organizational contexts the media organization is embedded in.

Most innovations in the media industry are considered sustaining or incremental innovations which only include small changes in products and processes and are aimed at sustaining media organizations economically (Krumsvik et al. 2019; Koivula, Villi, and Sivunen 2020). These types of innovations are exploitative in nature in that they often copy or mimic the features of previous successes. Moreover, exploitative innovation is often concerned with short-term success rather than long-term sustainability (March 1991; O'Reilly and Tushman 2013). Explorative, radical, or disruptive innovations, on the other hand, are often the result of "out of the box" ideas. These types of ideas are needed for media organizations to be able to create their own innovation opportunities instead of just copying or adapting to others (Küng 2017; Westlund and Lewis 2014).

Exploitative and explorative innovations are part of the literature on organizational ambidexterity. Ambidextrous organizations are able to balance short-term activities, such as daily news work, with long-term exploration, such as developing new products and services that allow the organization to respond to changes in its business environment (O'Reilly and Tushman 2013). For media organizations, ambidexterity has proven difficult since due to changes in their economic circumstances less time can be devoted to long-term development projects and more is spent on surviving the day-to-day demands of content production (Bygdås, Clegg, and Hagen 2019; Järventie-Thesleff, Moisander, and Villi 2014).

In the light of the challenges posed by organizational ambidexterity, we are interested in the extent to which the cultural prerequisites for media innovation are present in media

organizations and whether there is room for new, possibly explorative ideas to emerge and be developed. The study approaches media innovation qualitatively through the general lens of newsroom culture and the particular view offered by the ILC framework, both of which are explored in the following sections.

### ***Media Innovation and Newsroom Culture***

The relevance of newsroom culture for media innovation has been a point of discussion among journalism scholars especially since the emergence of the Internet and the overall digitalization of media production. In 2005, Boczkowski argued that newsrooms “appropriated new technologies with a somewhat conservative mindset, thus acting more slowly and less creatively than competitors less tied to traditional media” (Boczkowski 2005, 52). Later studies have made a similar argument: journalism is slow to change and newsrooms even reluctant to innovate (e.g., Ryfe 2009, 2012; Tameling and Broersma 2013; Usher 2014; Ekdale et al. 2015; Larrondo et al. 2016). Importantly, however, Paulussen (2016) points out that even if media organizations have been slow to react, their incremental evolution over several years has been significant due to the digital shift.

The lack of innovation in newsrooms has been seen to rise out of organizational isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), a type of mimicry where media organizations set up innovation labs or projects to stay relevant and remain competitive in the market but lack a consistent organizational strategy for innovation (Lowrey 2011, 2012; Villi et al. 2020). In doing so, newsrooms chase the latest technological novelties without reflection on what innovation means to them (Posetti 2018; Evans 2018) and end up reacting to outside stimulus rather than innovating independently (Küng 2017; Westlund and Lewis 2014). Organizational isomorphism is likely, according to Lowrey (2011), when uncertainty about markets and new technologies is high. This leads to a paradoxical situation: while the competitive setting calls for (explorative and radical) innovation, the contextual setting pushes organizations to resemble their competitors (also DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

Cultural change in the newsroom is also about journalistic values and practice. Gade (2004; see also Gade and Perry 2003) showed that management’s change initiatives in newsrooms are generally met with skepticism by rank-and-file journalists, and later studies have illustrated the importance of alignment between business and journalistic values for cultural change to become accepted in the newsroom (Tameling and Broersma 2013; Ryfe 2009, 2012). Ryfe (2009), for example, found that when an editor tried to change the ways reporters covered their beats, his suggestions were met with confusion and resentment because they challenged the way journalists conceptualized “good journalism”. Similarly, Ekdale et al. (2015) found that the diffusion of technological and relational innovations was more easily accomplished compared to cultural innovation in the newsroom: resistance to cultural change stemmed from the journalists’ view that the changes promoted by the CEO were not in line with the production of quality journalism.

Furthermore, literature also notes the braking effect of journalistic practice and routines on innovation. Routines are often deeply ingrained in the day-to-day work of journalists, and they become so taken-for-granted that journalists find it hard to imagine other ways to do their job (Paulussen 2016). Routines are ingrained into journalists

through the process of socialization where entrants to the field learn the unwritten rules of how news are collected and disseminated to the audience (Ryfe 2012). Despite the seemingly negative influence of journalistic values and practice on media innovation, journalists have also reported feeling inspired and motivated by innovation (Malmelin and Virta 2016) provided they “have a feeling that changes are somehow beneficial to them” (Deuze 2004, 145).

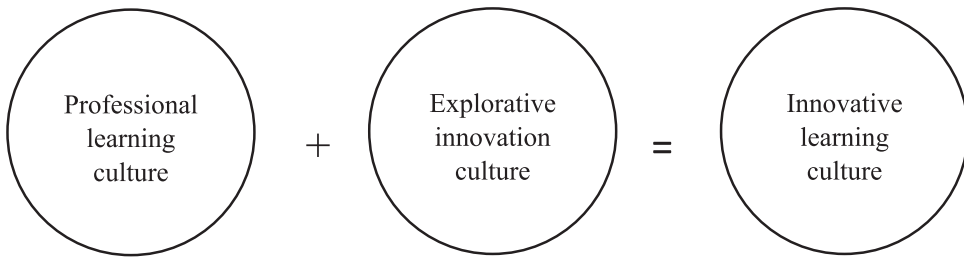
The studies reviewed above reflect a broader trend in media innovation research: the success and failure of change and innovation projects has been treated mostly as a management issue to be dealt with on the organizational level (Lowrey 2012; Paulussen 2016). Management’s role in advocating and instilling cultural change in the newsroom cannot be denied, however, viewing innovation solely as a managerial issue fails to account for the roles of the multitude of newsroom actors (e.g., rank-and-file journalists, technologists, marketers) and their potential influence on change and innovation processes (Westlund, Krumsvik, and Lewis 2021; Westlund and Lewis 2014). Hence, a more holistic approach to viewing innovation and newsroom culture is needed.

### ***Innovative Learning Culture in the Newsroom***

As argued above, media organizations tend to be more focused on daily news production and short-term development than long-term explorative innovation (Järventie-Thesleff, Moisander, and Villi 2014; Steensen 2009). Consequently, it is important to explore the newsroom conditions in which media professionals are expected to innovate. To this aim, Porcu (2020) and Porcu, Hermans, and Broersma (2020) argue that for explorative innovation to take place in a legacy media organization, an innovative learning culture is necessary. As a framework, ILC highlights learning processes in the newsroom and asks, what are the cultural prerequisites for innovation in the newsroom and how professional journalists learn and innovate in it. The framework aims to help in identifying cultural drivers and obstacles of innovation processes in the newsroom. Thus, the framework builds on a normative assumption that considers innovation necessary for media organizations. ILC is mainly interested in what happens in the newsroom with respect to what *precedes* an innovation and if there is room for ideas to emerge. Porcu (2020) lists the characteristics of innovative learning culture as follows:

Innovative learning culture is a social climate that stimulates people to work and learn together, to grow as an individual and as a group (team, organization), and that provides people with the autonomy needed to be flexible, to experiment, to be creative, and to investigate radical possibilities in order for the organization to have better chances for survival in the long run. (1559)

In the framework, organizational culture is defined as the collection of assumptions, norms, and values of the organization’s members, dynamically shaped and constructed in social interaction and resulting in expressions or artifacts (Porcu 2020, 1560). The definition builds on social constructivist views to organizational culture that assume that organizational culture is rooted in language, stories, and rituals (Schein 1985; Smircich 1983) and reflected in the behavior of organizational members (Alvesson and Svingsson 2008). Changing culture could thus be achieved by negotiating and renegotiating the daily practices of different newsroom actors (Domingo 2008; see also Paulussen 2016). Following this literature, we consider organizational culture as a socially



**Figure 1.** Innovative learning culture presented as the conceptual sum of professional learning culture and explorative innovation culture following Porcu (2020, 1560).

constructed dynamic phenomenon, which cannot be directly managed, but management practices can nevertheless influence the organizational culture through processes of communication and symbolizing that support sensemaking in the organization (see e.g., Porcu 2020; Fitzgerald 1988; Alvesson and Sveningsson 2008). Such change processes, however, are multifaceted and complex. It needs to be acknowledged that organizations do not have a single shared culture but rather competing subcultures across units and teams (Martin and Siehl 1983).

Innovative learning culture is the conceptual sum of two components: professional learning culture (PLC) and explorative innovation culture (EIC) (see Figure 1). Professional learning culture is derived from educational sciences literature and defined as “a social climate in which all members of a newsroom learn by working together to reflect, to research and to professionalize” (Porcu 2020, 1562). PLC is foremost a collective learning culture and not so much about individual learning, i.e., it emphasizes informal learning from peers, participative leadership, and collaboration among organization’s members (Porcu 2020). Explorative innovation culture (EIC) is rooted in innovation literature and defined as a “social climate in which people are supported to (relatively) autonomously investigate, experiment, be flexible and learn to develop creative new and/or radical ideas, products, services or ways of working that ultimately will improve the news organization’s market position and increase its chances of survival in the long run” (Porcu 2020, 1563). Explorative innovation is important for news organizations’ long-term survival as it informs their ability to reinvent themselves (Küng 2017). From PLC and EIC, Porcu (2020) derives the seven characteristics of innovative learning culture, which can be found in Table 1.

While the ILC framework is aimed at analyzing market-oriented newspaper organizations, we utilize it to examine a legacy public service media organization. The reasons are following: First, similarly to newspapers, which have had to move from a print production to a multimedia production logic, PSM organizations too have faced the pressures

**Table 1.** Characteristics of ILC and their brief definitions following Porcu (2020).

1. Learning from each other	learning from others in the workplace community
2. (Re)search/investigation	investigation aimed at improving (one’s) work
3. Experimental	trying out new possibilities with insecure outcomes
4. Autonomous	agency to make decisions about (one’s own) work
5. Creative	inspiring the development of new ideas
6. Radical	stimulating all that is very different from the usual
7. Flexible	capacity of people to easily adjust, switch or change



of transforming their broadcast-based production to fit the current digital media landscape (e.g., Larrondo et al. 2016). Second, PSM organizations also face pressures to innovate as they compete for audiences' time and attention with market-driven media organizations, social media platforms, and other media offerings (Sehl, Cornia, and Nielsen 2016). Staying relevant for their national audience is key to maintaining their legitimacy in a democratic society and justifying their tax or permit-based funding model (Enli 2008). Finally, due to their funding model, PSM organizations might be better equipped to innovate compared to their commercial counterparts as they are generally seen to have more funds to allocate to development work and less pressure to produce innovations that would result in more revenue (Sehl, Cornia, and Nielsen 2016). The Nordic context of the current study further emphasizes the possibility for PSM to allocate people and resources for innovation work, as the Nordic countries, in a way, represent the "media welfare state" where PSM is rather generously supported (Lindell, Jakobsson, and Stiernstedt 2021).

Drawing on the literature outlined above relating to media innovation and newsroom culture as well as the framework of innovative learning culture, we ask the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What characteristics of innovative learning culture can be identified in a development network operating in a public service media organization, and how do the characteristics manifest in the network's working practices?

**RQ2:** What are the contextual factors that shape innovative learning culture in the network?

## Data and Method

### *Research Setting*

The empirical data for this study were collected from a Nordic public service media company. The company produces news and other journalistic content for television, radio, and online. Data were collected from a network-type team that focuses on development work specifically in relation to social media. As a PSM organization, the company's strategy is guided by the values of public service broadcasting (see e.g., EBU 2012). For our current examination, three specific goals stated in the company's strategy are especially salient in relation to innovation and learning. First, the company emphasizes reaching teenagers and young adults, which suggests it needs to find innovative ways to reach its target audience. Second, this is to be done on both the organization's own and third-party social media platforms. Hence, the organization must find novel ways to produce content interesting enough for its target audience. And finally, the company also wishes to be at the forefront of media innovation, which implies that on the organizational level, the need for innovation is pervasive (Küng 2017). The development network studied here was partly an attempt to reach these strategic goals.

The network was open to all organization members interested in social media even though the most active members were pronouncedly from units producing lots of social media content and with heavy leanings toward young audiences. Nevertheless, members came from, for example, breaking news, youth radio, and the archive units. The network was led by the organization's head of social media and included weekly meetings and

digital discussion channels. In the weekly meetings, network members could come share their experiences regarding social media or they could invite outside speakers to teach them about, for example, new platforms. There were 180 organization members on the meetings' invitation list but usually only about 20 participated in each meeting. Participation was possible either face-to-face or remotely through Google Hangouts. Additionally, there were two types of chat groups for network members and an intranet platform. The first one, a Hangouts group chat, was open to everyone in the organization and was used for asking for help and giving advice on social media related work. The second was a more private WhatsApp group chat where social media managers discussed daily issues relating to social media. Intranet was used for sharing updates and materials from the meetings and other interesting social media related news. In sum, the development network had weekly meetings centered around different topics and its members communicated with each other about social media related issues on digital platforms.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

We collected data in three ways: We observed team meetings, conducted qualitative, thematic interviews with active members of the network, and exported chat data from two platforms (WhatsApp and intranet). Combining multiple types of data allows us to view innovation and learning in the organization from multiple viewpoints and create a detailed picture of how the characteristics of ILC are present in the network (Tracy 2020). Observations of the network's weekly meetings were conducted during a six-month period between February and June of 2019 as part of a larger research project examining innovation and technology-mediated work in media organizations. We observed a total of eight meetings which were all composed of two sections: First, a network member or an invited guest would give a presentation and, second, a discussion would follow. Examples of topics included an introduction to TikTok by an outside expert, a lecture on the use of biometric data in storytelling from the company's R&D department, and experiences from a conference trip to the US by two journalists. These data consist of approximately 20 h of observations and 46 single-spaced pages of field notes.

Second, we conducted interviews with ten active members of the network. Snowball sampling originating from the company's head of social media was used to identify potential interviewees. Interviewees were selected based on their activity participating in the network, i.e., we utilized purposeful sampling (Tracy 2020) in selecting interviewees who had relevant experiences regarding the topic of our study. Interviews were semi-structured in nature to allow room for questions and discussions outside the interview guide. The interviews dealt with, for example, the role of social media in the participants' work and how, in their view, the organization has been trying to adopt social media as part of its journalistic practice, examples of innovation efforts in the organization, and if and how the network had influenced those efforts. Interviews were conducted between May and August of 2019 and their average length was 56 min. Eight of the interviewees were female, and two were male. The interviewees had experience in the field of journalism from five to thirty years and their working titles included, but were not limited to, executive web producer, social media manager, reporter, community manager and digital strategist. To protect our participants' privacy, they are given pseudonyms in the findings section.

Finally, we retrieved chat data from two different platforms. First, we used the social media managers' internal WhatsApp group chat which contained 823 lines of plain text, 32 images and three videos sent between August 2018 and September 2019. The time period includes the whole message history of the WhatsApp group from its origination to the point of data collection. Second, we used a set of screenshots from the development network's intranet community. All data were accessed with a permission from the network leader and the presence of a researcher was made clear for all participants both in the digital channels and the observed meetings.

The analysis process was iterative and reflexive. We utilized Tracy's (2020) iterative approach where the researcher moves abductively between inductive data analysis and deductive considerations of existing theory (Huffman, Tracy, and Bisel 2019). First phase of the analysis process was guided by a tentative research question asking how journalists define and describe media innovation in the context of their daily work. This preliminary question arose from the themes of the larger research project examining innovation and technology-mediated work practices in media organizations. First, all three datasets were read through by the first author and coded on a descriptive level to present *what* was present in the data. During this phase, the focus was on, for example, how journalists talked of media innovation in their daily work, how they defined innovation, described successful and unsuccessful innovation projects, and measured them. At this point, the supportive role of culture emerged as salient for the network's working practices. Hence, as we moved between data analysis and reading of literature, ILC was chosen as a framework to aid in our analysis since it provided analytical tools to examine the role of newsroom culture in innovation and learning processes in the newsroom. During the second round of coding, the data were combed through with an emphasis on the characteristics of ILC (Porcu 2020, 1564) (see Table 1). Out of the seven characteristics, five (learning from each other, research/investigation, experimental, creative, and radical) emerged as salient for our case study, while the two remaining (autonomy, flexibility) only rarely came up. Special attention was paid to the observation data as it enables the studying of culture through people's actions. After this phase, we had a structured view to the data based on the characteristics of innovative learning culture (see Table 1).

Next, in order to answer RQ2, we read through our material one ILC characteristic at a time and extracted features that support or hinder the observed manifestations of ILC. These factors were then mapped and connected using mind maps and discussed together by all three authors. Through these discussions and mapping exercises we aimed to identify the key factors shaping ILC in the network by comparing and contrasting both the ILC characteristics as well as the emerging themes coded by the first author. The main aim was to identify top-level factors that would group the data in a meaningful way. We now turn to the findings of our analysis.

## Findings

### *Characteristics of Innovative Learning Culture in the Network*

In response to the first research question, five characteristics of innovative learning culture were identified in the network's culture: learning from each other, (re)search/investigation, experimentality, creativity, and radicality.

Learning from each other, as in “learning from others in the workplace community” (Porcu 2020, 1564), was facilitated by the network. The network’s purpose was to promote knowledge sharing between different departments in the organization, help ideas spread across different units, and give participants an avenue to discuss social media related topics with other interested members. Knowledge sharing had tangible advantages, according to the network leader: “When people know more, they can do product development better” (*Nora*; names are pseudonyms). In practice, learning from peers was achieved both through the weekly meetings and on digital channels. In the meetings, network members could share their experiences to a collegial audience. Many of the presentations observed during data collection were given by network members on topics they were experts in. Members of the company’s R&D department gave a presentation on the use of biometric data in storytelling, two journalists who had participated in a training on Facebook groups shared their insights, and the writers of a satirical news show explained how they use Instagram stories to invite audiences behind the scenes. The presentations were often followed by a discussion on best practices, which we will cover later in relation to the second research question.

Similarly to learning from one’s colleagues, the characteristics of (re)search/investigation and creativity were also made possible by the specific working practices of the network. In addition to coming to the weekly meetings to learn about new developments in social media, “investigation aimed at improving one’s work” (Porcu 2020, 1564) could be achieved by accessing the network’s intranet area or, to some of the members, by using the WhatsApp group. On these platforms, members asked for help and shared information on, for example, platform features and analytics. The following discussion from the WhatsApp group illustrates how members share and seek information about how well content has performed.

*Aline:* We had some pretty crazy numbers in our IGTV videos last week! They [Instagram] are clearly pushing them. And an observation about data, horizontal versus vertical video: if a video is not vertical its traction is 1–2%, when in vertical it is 15–19%. Kind of obvious but surprisingly visible in the data. So, they [users] rather skip [a video] than turn their phone

*Tom:* Interesting, thanks! [thumbs up emoji]

*Layla:* [thumbs up emoji] – how much do you post on IG TV? It would be interesting to hear about the ratio of content too – do you advertise TV content in story too?

*Aline:* We post about 2-3- IG TV videos per week

*Aline:* E-sports is a good example, they post one long interview per week.

Creativity, as in “inspiring the development of new ideas” (Porcu 2020, 1564), could be observed specifically in the weekly meeting discussions. The participants were eager to ask questions from the presenters, particularly in the sense of how to adopt presented ideas into their own projects. In these situations discussions often sprawled, and many participants provided examples from their own work. Ideation, however, was often driven by new technologies or online platforms releasing new functionalities. In a meeting about the social media production of the satirical news show, one topic of discussion was the popularity and reach of Instagram Stories. It spurred a conversation that led to multiple participants sharing their ideas and thoughts on how to best utilize Stories for storytelling [*field note by second author, February 13, 2019*].

The characteristic of experimentality, as in “trying out new possibilities with insecure outcomes” (Porcu 2020, 1564) presents an interesting conflict between what the network members think of media innovation and what happens in the network in practice. When talking of media innovation in the interviews, participants used phrases such as “trial and error”, “playfulness” and “ripples in the waterglass.” They thought of media innovation as something that, in regard to size, fit the framework of their daily tasks (“It doesn’t need to be big, you don’t need to get an innovation award for it,” as Camilla put it) and was attainable in terms of resources. Interviewees felt that testing out different things was encouraged in the network. The following examples illustrate how interviewees talk of innovation as experimentation.

That [innovation] is a funny word, you know, – I think about my daily work and mundane experiments, and then observing afterwards that ah, it worked. I mean, in social media work you never know what works and how, [but] then you can just be happy about some things afterward because they went well. [Layla]

It is kinda like you notice that this, for example, way of talking or something goes through to the audience better. Not just by copying others but you go out there yourself and go see your results and notice that gee, maybe you should do it this way and then it works better. [Camilla]

In practice, this experimental mindset is contrasted with the realities of journalistic production where “insecure outcomes” are not always encouraged. However, even if the experimental attitude was only visible in the research interviews, it speaks to the network’s culture that experimenting is seen as necessary for success. Similarly, the characteristic of radicality, as in “stimulating all that is very different from the usual” (Porcu 2020, 1564) manifested mostly as aspirational talk rather than actual working practices. This tension became visible specifically in a continuous negotiation process about the network’s purpose and working practices. In one of the meetings we observed, participants pondered over future presentations and how they “should be concrete since people often struggle with concrete things in their work. Otherwise, it will be hard to find time for participation in the middle of the day. No abstract discussions.” [Field note by second author, February 13, 2019.] Soon, however, participants were in the middle of a discussion about the effects of data gathering on people’s everyday lives—and talk of actually practicing journalism was forgotten. Paradoxically, even if the network was established to foster the exchange of ideas and thus help the organization innovate better, the ideas network members shared were not radical.

### **Factors Shaping Innovative Learning Culture**

The second research question focused on contextual factors shaping innovative learning culture in the network. We identified three overarching themes: *journalistic practice*, *technology and platforms*, and *organizational strategy*.

**Journalistic practice.** A key notion from our data is how journalistic practice and aspirational talk of media innovation collide and how practice pushes aspirational talk to the sidelines. As described above, network members were enthusiastic about experimentation and described it as something that was emphasized in the network. However,

our observations of the weekly meetings showed that in practice explorative innovation was rarely achieved. Specifically, learning from one's colleagues could be seen as hampering explorative innovation as network members often seemed to be more interested in how to apply existing solutions to their own projects rather than developing novel ones. The following vignette is from a meeting centering around TikTok and provides a glimpse into the discussions the network members had in the meetings.

We are sitting in a conference room. There are around fifteen people present including several network members, the head of social media, the presenter and me. The topic of the day is TikTok and the presenter, who is a TikTok creator herself, has hooked up her phone to the computer and the screen is projected onto the wall behind her. She scrolls through the feed and demonstrates how the app works. Audience questions are frequent: A guy who produces content for teenagers asks the presenter for tips on organizing live streams and follows up with questions on technical aspects. A news journalist asks about monetization on the platform. Most questions seem to deal with best practices, audiences, and technical stuff. [Fieldnote by first author, March 27, 2019]

Rather than supporting experimentation and radical innovation, presentations and audience questions were oriented toward sharing *how* to produce journalism for social media. A narrative of "how to do social media right" was present both in presentations and audience questions. Notably, the network's ability to facilitate learning in the workplace community could be a part of why explorative innovation was difficult to achieve: Sharing successes keeps members' thinking "inside the box" and encourages them to mimic past successes. This is also tied to mastering the technical aspects of new technologies and platforms, to which we focus next.

**Technology and platforms.** Our analysis showed that technology shapes innovative learning culture in the network in three ways. First, network members highlighted the mastery of the technical aspects of social media as a prerequisite for experimenting with it. Second, ideation and content production were often prompted by platforms releasing new features. And third, confirmation for a successful media innovation came from data and analytics. Hence, the network members' working practices could be described as platform-centric and technically-oriented while data and analytics often functioned as measures of innovative behavior.

The need to master the technical aspects of social media was especially visible in the observed meetings. As described in the previous section, network members often inquired the presenters in the meetings about how to technically execute future projects or how past successes were achieved. For example, in a meeting titled "How to harness the power of online communities," network members asked detailed questions about privacy settings and requirements set for new Facebook group members [*field note by first author, June 12, 2019*]. This tendency to search for the correct way of doing social media points to a view of media innovation where some information and skills relating to technology and social media are deemed necessary for innovation, which contrasts with the experimental mindset found in the interviews.

Technology also shaped ideation and content production in the network. In the weekly meetings, network members often presented new ideas that were tightly interwoven with platforms and their functionalities and surfaced especially when a platform released a new feature. Similarly, technology and platforms also shaped what type of content the

network members produced: A producer told us that he was trying to change how video was edited in his team because young audiences were acquainted with the YouTube format instead of traditional TV. This is an example of organizational isomorphism, where social media platforms have the power to influence how journalism is done in news organizations.

Finally, technology's shaping of ILC was also visible in the journalists' talk of data and analytics. Journalists saw analytics as providing insights into user needs and as downright justification for media innovation. This type of narrative was abundant in all three data sets. As one network member put it, "analytics confirm a hypothesis of interesting content. So you can first think of a super good idea and topic, but only when you see the analytics, then it is true" (*Aline*). The motivation for utilizing analytics varied as some used data to develop their content published on social media and others as insights into what type of content they should produce for their own site. In both cases, however, analytics were seen to provide valuable information on audience preferences and used as a tool to improve work. Ultimately, data was seen as the best way to measure success.

**Organizational strategy.** The final contextual factor we identified in our analysis was strategy. As described earlier, strategy-wise our case is a typical PSM organization as its operations are guided by the values of public service broadcasting (EBU 2012). Salient for our examination are the three strategic goals that are highlighted in the operations of the development network. First, the organization had a goal of reaching more teenagers and young adults. Serving young audiences came up often in all data sets. Second, the organization wished to focus more on digital publishing and thus, serve audiences both on their own platforms as well as on third-party platforms to reach as large an audience as possible. And finally, the strategy also stated that the organization wished to develop and try out next generation media innovations and be at the forefront of utilizing new technologies.

All these goals were pursued in the development network, but the two goals of reaching young audiences on different platforms were emphasized more compared to the rather abstract objective of being at the forefront of new technologies and media innovation. Reaching young audiences is in itself more actionable than being a forerunner in media innovation. However, serving young audiences is pronouncedly a short-term goal, even if it contributes to long-term survival through targeting and finding new audience segments. In practice, these strategic goals are intertwined with the findings on journalistic practice and platform technology. As described in the previous sections, many presentations discussed platforms and their functionalities in detail, and similar information was also shared on the network's digital channels. Presenters gave out advice that was targeted towards mastering platforms technically and how to succeed in the footsteps of those who had gathered massive online followings. This type of work again emphasizes short-term goals. This overarching tension between strategic goals is well shown in the following excerpt from a slideshow presentation that gives out advice on how to create content for YouTube.

The presenter has a slideshow with one point on each slide. She makes comments and gives suggestions. "Slide #2. Benchmark. What type of content are others producing? What does the audience want? What's missing?" a. It takes too much effort to come up with a

concept that's going to blow up [on the platform], you should rather think about ideas you can use again and again. In YouTube/social media you don't own concepts as such, trending things just spread. b. Note that national creators use content from international competitors so competition is harder! [Field note by second author, April 3, 2019]

In sum, the network's conflicting strategic goals pushed working practices into different directions and as a result exploitation often trumped exploration.

## Discussion

This study examined innovative learning culture (Porcu 2020; Porcu, Hermans, and Broersma 2020) in a Nordic public service media organization. Our empirical investigation concentrated on a development network focusing on social media and consisting of members from different parts of the organization. We asked two research questions: (1) What characteristics of innovative learning culture can be identified in the network, and how do the characteristics manifest in the network's practices, and (2) what contextual factors shape innovative learning culture in the network? Regarding the first research question, five characteristics of ILC were especially salient for our case: learning from each other, experimentality, (re)search/investigation, creativity and (the lack of) radicality. In ILC terms, there was room for new ideas to emerge and be developed in the network (Porcu 2020; Porcu, Hermans, and Broersma 2020), but those ideas were often exploitative rather than explorative in nature (see also Koivula, Villi, and Sivunen 2020).

In response to the second research question, we found that ILC is shaped by journalistic practice, technologies and platforms, and organizational strategy. Our findings align with previous research on innovation efforts in newsrooms in that they highlight the braking effect of journalistic practice on innovation (Ryfe 2009, 2012; Tameling and Broersma 2013; Ekdale et al. 2015) while also reporting the network members' positive attitudes toward innovation and change (Malmelin and Virta 2016; Deuze 2004). Hence, while some characteristics of ILC were present in our case, those characteristics and associated working practices did not instigate explorative innovation, contrary to what the ILC framework suggests. Our analysis indicates that this is due to organizational isomorphism rising out of the technological environment the public service media organization is embedded in (cf. Lowrey 2011, 2012), including the technology-oriented long-term goals stated in the PSM's strategy. As we outlined in the Findings section, technologies and platforms shaped how network members thought of the skills needed for media innovation, what types of ideas were presented, and eventually how success in innovation was measured. These practices answer to the organization's overall strategy of reaching young audiences on different platforms but disregard long-term development work. A contributing factor could be the ILC characteristic of learning from one's colleagues. As the network facilitated learning among organizational members, it also enhanced mimicry. Network members were prone to copying the actions of their peers as well as eager to find a recipe for doing social media "right", which reduces possibilities for exploration.

Thus, we argue that even if the innovative learning culture framework can be a useful tool in assessing the conditions for explorative innovation in legacy media newsrooms on the individual and organizational levels, the institutional setting that shapes innovation processes in media organizations is presently overlooked in the framework. Currently,



the framework does not account for macro-level, institutional tendencies in media innovation processes that, according to our analysis as well as literature on organizational isomorphism, shape innovation processes heavily. In doing so, the framework falls somewhat short on its promises of delivering “a more nuanced picture of newsroom innovation processes” (Porcu 2020, 1557) and mimics previous media innovation research in focusing on individual and organizational perspectives over macro-level viewpoints (Dogruel 2015). Consequently, the framework would benefit from a more integrated view of the factors at play in the media innovation process by including macro-level considerations. This could lead to more holistic analyses of media innovation in the future (cf. Westlund and Lewis 2014).

Moreover, theoretically, the framework aims to de-emphasize the role of technology in the media innovation process and consider “people first, then technology” (Porcu 2020, 1567). However, the current study as well as trends in media and journalism research indicate that technology plays a large role in contemporary journalism (e.g., Küng 2020): The need for innovation is largely motivated by media organizations’ challenges in going digital—something that is inherently about technology. Rather than arguing for the centrality of people over technology, the ILC framework could be more useful to scholars if it considered newsroom workers and technologies as equally important factors in media innovation processes (Westlund and Lewis 2014). Moreover, highlighting one over another seems redundant in an age where, for example, intelligent technologies such as social bots are becoming an integral part of organizational life (Laitinen, Laaksonen, and Koivula 2021).

In our empirical case, while radical innovations were hard to achieve, the development network did manage to facilitate the flow of information, ideas, and skills between departments in the organization, allowed members to learn on the job, and, at least in theory, encouraged experimentation. The network’s main mission was to enable its members to do better journalism on social media platforms, which partly explains why we did not find much overall resistance to change (cf. Ryfe 2009; Taming and Broersma 2013). Our findings indicate that a media organization might benefit from adopting a network-like structure in regard to development projects and instilling a sense of ILC in it. This type of organizing for innovation work could be more fruitful than, for example, separate innovation labs which have been seen to lead to the isolation of innovation (Boyles 2016). Furthermore, it should be noted that management can have an organizational hand in encouraging all ILC characteristics. In our case organization, for example, management’s role in providing time and space for development work was key as the network was spearheaded by the organization’s head of social media (cf. Küng 2020). However, as Hatch and Schultz (1997) remind, social constructivist views on organizational culture acknowledge the inherent paradox of managing and influencing organizational culture as the managers themselves are always part of the same culture. Therefore, in order to better understand the complex relationship between organizational and institutional factors and media innovation, we encourage future studies on media innovation to embrace qualitative and constructivist approaches in addition to the somewhat structuralist and normative views present in many current studies. This notion applies to the ILC framework (Porcu 2020) as well: it claims to adopt a social constructivist approach to organizational culture while also having the goal of making media innovation efforts more tangible in newsrooms.

Finally, this study is not without its limitations. We acknowledge that by building on the ILC framework our view to media innovation and learning cultures adopts a normative stance towards the necessity of innovation in media organizations, including the specific language related to innovation discourse. A more critical approach towards, for example, the ways in which our informants discuss media innovation, could shed further light to the contextual constraints identified in this study. Furthermore, in this study we have focused specifically on the process of innovation and learning as it unfolds in organizational life, but we recognize that media innovation scholarship would also benefit from studies that explicitly measure learning outcomes in relation to ILC. Additionally, management's role in instituting ILC in an organization warrants more examination as overlooking it misses the basic finding in media innovation research in terms of why journalists have resisted innovation: it has been predominantly a top-down management decision (e.g., Sylvie and Gade 2009). Hence, exploring how management can better facilitate learning and innovation through ILC would provide important insights for both researchers and practitioners. Finally, future studies could also take the values of public service broadcasting as their starting point and examine their effects on innovation and development work. Such an approach could result in valuable understandings of how the strategic goals of PSM organizations can contribute to learning and innovation in media organizations.

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