

Reengineering Journalism: Product Manager as News Industry Institutional Entrepreneur

An article in media trade publication Digiday claimed, “Product managers have become the must-have new hire for publishers” (Willens, 2018). The article focuses on an increasingly popular role in newsrooms across the globe responsible for developing and assessing new content and revenue opportunities ranging the gamut from newsletters, to mobile apps, to membership programs, to specific components of a company’s website. See, for example, how quickly major news organizations turned out standalone coronavirus products such as New York Times’s interactive product tracking global virus and vaccine development¹ or Propublica’s various coronavirus news apps.² Other examples of news products include BBC’s chatbots,³ newsletters, and standalone websites. Today’s digital and mobile-first media environment demands a continuous stream of products ready to meet audience needs, and the product manager serves to prioritize them by providing a holistic perspective on an organization’s goals and strategies.

In striving to meet the news industry’s business imperative of recognizing new approaches to identifying and understanding audience needs, product managers reframe news as an array of digital products and work across silos to bring new skillsets into the newsroom (Royal et al., 2020). According to New York Times CEO Mark Thompson, “the single biggest reason” for the company’s recent financial success—in 2019, they generated more than \$800 million in digital revenue, surpassing one of their corporate goals set four years prior—was the increasing control given to digital product managers (Scire, 2020). Product managers are an emergent role for newsrooms, introducing new expertise that helps bridge the divide, and

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/world/coronavirus-maps.html>

² <https://www.propublica.org/newsapps>

³ <https://bbcnewslabs.co.uk/projects/bots/>

coordinate and align the priorities among the differing operating logics of editorial, business, and technology departments. As technological developments, coupled with associated economic realities and social changes, continue to disrupt the established practices of the news industry, the emergence and popularity of the product manager across news organizations serves as a prime example of the reengineering of longstanding journalism institutions (Aaronson, 2018).

While there is a long history of scholarship explaining how journalism's institutions come into being, remain stable, and/or evolve with regard to digital transformation (Ananny & Crawford, 2015; Lowrey, 2012), few have focused on the specific impact to the business of news (Nielsen, 2018) and on the role of actors as embedded in the institutional field, yet still responsible for institutional change (for several notable exceptions, see Ananny & Crawford, 2015; Hermida & Young, 2019; Kosterich, 2020; Usher, 2016). Following Hardy and Maguire (2008) who question how actors can promote new practices if they are subject to institutional pressures, this research draws on the scholarship on institutional entrepreneurs to analyze product managers in news.

Institutional entrepreneurship refers to actors who have an interest in particular institutional arrangements and the ability to garner resources to change them (Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004) by creating new systems of meaning that connect disparate forms together (Garud, Jain, & Kumaraswamy, 2002). Institutional entrepreneurship is thus a framework that reintroduces agency into institutional analyses of organizations and enables an attending to the ways in which actors strategize to influence their institutional contexts (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). It is an apt lens through which to analyze the rise of journalism's product managers and the reengineering of journalism's institutionalized boundaries through their backgrounds, experiences, and skillsets.

In following calls to interrogate careers in media (Deuze, 2011), the people who do the work (Kreiss & Saffer, 2017), and the differences among them (Kosterich & Ziek, 2020), this research examines journalism's product managers as institutional entrepreneurs by systematically analyzing their hiring patterns, and the enabling conditions of educational training background, professionalization degree, and organizational field structure. This paper does so with a case study of product managers from news organizations in both the US and UK while also explaining the differences among these conditions between the two countries. Analyses are conducted on a unique dataset of product manager employment histories and contribute to scholarly conversations by: (1) mapping the emergence, growth, and impact of product managers within the broader news industry; (2) investigating the reengineering of institutionalized professional boundaries in journalism; (3) providing a cross-national comparison. In sum, this paper draws on institutional entrepreneur theory to explore journalism's product managers as change agents in response to digitization, but also as a nascent reengineering of the relationship among the editorial, technology, and business silos of a news organization.

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