Full Length Article

A Trojan Horse for marketing? Solutions journalism in the French regional press

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Abstract

This article examines recent efforts to bring 'solutions journalism' – an approach to news coverage developed in the United States that encourages journalists to propose potential solutions to social problems – to the French regional press. Drawing on interviews and company documents from news organizations, we show that solutions journalism has found support among both management and journalists, though for different reasons. Whereas management see solutions journalism as a way to bolster shrinking audiences, journalists perceive an opportunity to regain relevance in diversified media companies whose emphasis on news has declined over time. Though solutions journalism changes little in terms of journalist's everyday practices, its presence legitimates and valorizes marketing discourses, as journalists use it to describe efforts to grow audiences, boost sales and monetize content. As a result, we suggest that solutions journalism's primary effect on the French regional press may be its operation as a 'Trojan horse' for marketing.

Keywords

France, journalism, journalism models, local/regional media, solutions journalism

Solutions journalism is an approach to news coverage that tasks journalists with identifying potential solutions to the problems their reporting describes (Curry and Hammonds, 2014). Its premise is that news media focus much of their energy on describing social ills. Equivalent energy, proponents suggest, should be dedicated to reporting that accurately

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and dispassionately highlights efforts to address such ills. The approach has percolated within American journalism circles at least since the mid-1990s (Benesh, 1998). While critics worry that it may soften journalism's 'watchdog' role or lead journalists towards advocacy (Hardt, 1999; Tétu, 2008), today, solutions journalism is practised at news organizations around the United States. In 2018, the Solutions Journalism Network – the organizational hub seeking to institutionalize the practice in newsrooms – reported collaborating with 144 news organizations and training more than 10,000 journalists in the principles of solutions journalism (Solutions Journalism Network, 2016).

While solutions journalism began as an American affair, it has also spread to other national settings. In 2004, *Reporters d'Espoirs* (Reporters of Hope) was established in France, and it aimed to introduce solutions journalism to reporters in that country (*Reporters d'Espoirs*, 2016). Beginning in 2007, the organization worked with the national newspaper, *Libération*, to produce a pre-Christmas supplement. More recently, members of the local press in France have implemented their own solutions journalism initiatives. In 2016, *Nice-Matin* created a paid website featuring solutions journalism. That same year, the press group *Centre France* and the daily newspaper *Le Parisien* followed with websites using the solutions journalism paradigm. In 2017, a local weekly in Toulouse announced it would begin a solutions journalism edition that would make it the 'first solutions media in France'. In short, and in relatively short order, an idea that originated in one national context – the United States – has been appropriated in another.

How did French regional journalists come to appropriate solutions journalism? And to what extent has this appropriation transformed the practice of regional journalism in France? Extant scholarship on the appropriation of journalistic ideals and practices offers opposing views on this question. Some see such appropriation as evidence of homogenization, with the uptake of journalism models driving cross-national convergence in journalism practice, a phenomenon often viewed as detrimental to cultural diversity and sometimes seen as the inevitable effect of globalization and technology (Barnhurst and Nerone, 2001; Blanchard, 1986; Chalaby, 1996; Tunstall, 1977). Others argue that appropriation is better understood as a process of adaptation. From this viewpoint, journalism models are integrated in specific settings in ways that contribute to cross-national differences in journalism practice (Haas, 2003; Waisbord, 2000).

This article advances an alternative account to these views on the appropriation of journalistic ideas and practices. Drawing on 28 interviews and company documents from eight French regional news organizations, we show that solutions journalism has been appropriated because it found support among both company management and journalists, though for different reasons. Whereas management saw solutions journalism as a potential way to bolster shrinking audiences, journalists perceived an opportunity to regain relevance in diversified media companies whose emphasis on news had declined over time (Brin et al., 2004). While the implications for cross-national diversity in journalism practice are unclear, we argue that the appropriation of solutions journalism can be viewed as a 'Trojan horse': Its presence legitimates and valorizes marketing discourses among journalists, who use solutions journalism to describe efforts to grow audiences, boost sales and monetize content. Once viewed by French regional journalists as an unethical intrusion of business considerations in newsrooms, such discourses are increasingly seen by journalists as some of the most innovative efforts in the French regional press.

Rather than examine whether journalism models reduce diversity across nations, we suggest that such models can productively be viewed as efforts to reorient how journalists evaluate their work. In fields of cultural production, like journalism, the value of any practice is not fixed, and actors use new ideas partly to legitimate otherwise forbidden or devalued activities. Whether this reorientation succeeds depends not only on whether actors adopt or adapt the practices associated with a model, but also on the balance of power among actors appropriating the model. Where journalists enjoy limited autonomy from external forces, as is the case in French regional journalism, we suggest that they are more likely to embrace new types of valuation that favour marketing and business principles. It is these evaluations, as much as the specific practices advocated by the model, that legitimate new forms of journalistic practice, and which have the potential to alter how journalism is made and evaluated over the long term.

The international appropriation of journalism models

Scholars have long studied the international appropriation of journalistic ideas and practices (Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Tunstall, 1977). This research examines how journalism 'models' – ideas about how journalism ought to be practised – are appropriated in new contexts. Typically, this emphasizes the role played by states, media companies, business consultants and journalism education in both the production and appropriation of models. This research also asks what, if any, effects models have on journalism practice in the appropriating countries. To date, scholars have clustered into one of the two schools of thought in answering these questions.

A first school emphasizes the homogenizing – and, typically, Americanizing – potential of journalism models. On this view, models are promoted by originators and adopted by appropriators, which drives cross-national convergence in journalism practice. Blanchard (1986), for example, documents efforts by the American Society of Newspaper Editors and the U.S. State Department to promote American ideals of press freedom and objectivity in the aftermath of World War II. While specific proposals were occasionally rejected, these efforts led to widespread acceptance of liberal media principles around the globe (p. 402). Relatedly, Barnhurst and Nerone (2001) describe American consultants' efforts to bring modernist design formats – which promised efficient delivery of news and advertising – to Spain. Given increased competition, newspaper companies were eager to redesign in ways that, in their view, 'led to the imposition of U.S.-style cookie-cutter designs' (p. 279). Finally, Tunstall (1977) as well as Hallin and Mancini (2004) highlight the role played by American education in exporting particular ideas about how to practice journalism. Taken together, the diffusion of such practices around the world constitutes what Jean Chalaby (1996) refers to as 'the first manifestation of the hegemony of Anglo-American culture throughout the world' (p. 323).

A second school argues that the international appropriation of journalism models is better conceived as a process of adaptation. These scholars agree that models are exported; however, they emphasize that models are reworked in their new contexts, which generally reinforces cross-national differences in journalism practice. For example, Haas (2003) shows that while Danish newsrooms appropriated the idea of 'public journalism' from the United States, the practice of this idea differed in numerous ways (e.g. Danish journalists

advocated solutions to problems, sought to include marginalized publics, and used experts more sparingly than their American counterparts). He argues that this adaptation stems from a 'tradition of political advocacy' among journalists, as well as growing populism in Danish journalism, which led journalists to include citizen views (p. 97). Similarly, Waisbord (2000) shows that when 'watchdog journalism' appeared in South America in 1980s, its practice differed from the Anglo-American model of 'investigative reporting', as shifting political and commercial dynamics in South America enabled journalists to dedicate time to uncovering corruption and human rights abuses. In these cases, scholars argue that journalistic models are adapted to fit new circumstances, and this adaptation contributes to enduring cross-national differences in journalism practice.

Recently, scholars have begun calling for research that moves beyond the binary conceptions that characterize the current debate. In an article reviewing a decade of internationally oriented journalism research, Hallin and Mancini (2017) note ample evidence suggesting a combination of homogenizing and adaptive tendencies in journalism practice. They note that journalism in Western Europe has adopted many of the professional conventions associated with North American models of journalism, including reporting that aims to be 'informational, politically non-aligned, dramatized' (p. 162). At the same time, they acknowledge a growing body of research that documents the 'persistence of important differences among Western media' (p. 163). As a result, they suggest that rather than debunk adoption or adaptation views, 'it is time to move on to more sophisticated hypotheses about media system change' (Hallin and Mancini, 2017). This call dovetails with scholarly exhortations to move beyond 'overly polarized' debates about the nature of media system transformations (Flew and Waisbord, 2015, p. 625), and instead capture the 'hybrid' or 'mediatized' nature of contemporary journalism (Mellado et al., 2017; Peruško et al., 2017; see also Hanusch and Hanitzsch, 2017).

We use the case of solutions journalism in the French regional press to develop one such hypothesis about media system change. Rather than ask whether new models produce cross-national convergence, we examine the process by which a new model is appropriated and examine its implications for journalistic autonomy. Like other cultural producers, journalists have a series of routines, norms and typifications – that is, practical categories that guide actions and help journalists accomplish everyday tasks (Gans, 1979; Neveu, 2001; Tuchman, 1978). Breaking these routines and norms is difficult, in part because journalists remain wedded to pre-existing ways of doing things (Ryfe, 2017). Therefore, the barriers to appropriating new journalism models tend to be high. This is likely to be especially true in settings where journalists are secure in their employment, and recognized by peers, employers, sources and audiences for their work (i.e. when they are autonomous). By contrast, where journalists experience employment insecurity and receive limited recognition for their work (i.e. when they are weakly autonomous), they have greater incentives to consider new models. Thus, we hypothesize that the likelihood of appropriating a new journalism model increases as the overall autonomy of journalists in a given field decreases.

Because the likelihood of appropriating a model increases under conditions of decreased journalistic autonomy, we suggest models are efforts to translate external challenges into the everyday language of journalism. By this, we mean that journalism models do not only provide prescriptions for journalists to follow in their work (e.g. how to

report on a story); they also introduce new ideas about what counts as 'good' journalism. This view builds on the work of Ryfe (2017), Gravengaard (2012) and Kunelius and Ruusunoksa (2008), who argue that journalists are unlikely to address external challenges like business pressures by directly embracing market principles. Instead, journalists engage in the interpretive labour of presenting marketing concerns under the guise of professional renewal. In the United States, for example, Ryfe shows how the language of innovation and entrepreneurialism justify increased focus on audiences as consumers. Using that language, journalists claim they are not merely selling news or boosting profitability; rather, they are being innovative. Importantly for the present case, research identifies such processes specifically among local journalists, who negotiate their evaluations of journalistic excellence in a context that is typically closer to audiences and less professionally autonomous (i.e. less recognized) than journalism practised at agenda-setting national news outlets (Powers et al., 2015; Ruusunoksa, 2006).

Our perspective thus explores how a model of journalism – solutions journalism – can appear as both a source of professional renewal for the journalists who appropriate it and a 'Trojan horse' that legitimates and valorizes marketing discourses among those same journalists. Where convergence and divergence debate cross-national similarities in journalism practice, this perspective examines the use of journalism models to introduce alternative principles for evaluating journalistic work. Solutions journalism, therefore, is not merely an abstract set of ideas about how journalism ought to be practised; it is also an effort to render business challenges in professional terms. The principles that these efforts induce thus constitute one important source of media system change.

Data and methods

This article uses a case study approach (Cresswell, 2013; Yin, 2009) to examine the appropriation of solutions journalism in the French regional press. Such an approach is useful when seeking to develop new hypotheses about theoretically relevant topics, as they allow researchers to identify phenomena not anticipated at the outset of research and thus understudied in larger deductive analyses. Therefore, this approach responds to calls for new and more sophisticated hypotheses about media system change. Through its qualitative, single-nation focus, it also seeks to supplement the large number of quantitative, cross-national studies that examine media system change (Hallin and Mancini, 2017), while contributing to growing scholarship looking at transformations in local journalism through an international or comparative lens (Powers and Vera-Zambrano, 2018).

The appropriation of solutions journalism in the French regional press provides a compelling case study. The media organizations that comprise the French regional press have in recent decades – for reasons we explore below – transformed from 'newspapers' into 'media companies'. Declining revenues from news divisions have led these companies to expand into other areas, including marketing, event services and publishing. This transformation has diminished journalists' autonomy, often leaving many with a sense of irrelevance in their own companies. Recent initiatives to stem the loss of readership have led these media companies to create labs that bring together journalists and marketing professionals to identify potential responses. These labs thus constitute the empirical setting to study how journalists appropriate journalism models.

The main data for this article come from 28 semi-structured interviews with journalists and chief editors working in six local daily newspapers, one local weekly, and one local pure player in France: *Nice-Matin, La Dépêche du Midi, Le Parisien, Centre France, Le Télégramme, Ouest-France, Journal Toulousain* and *Mars Actu*. These interviews were conducted between August 2015 and December 2016 as part of a larger project about the professional identity and practices of local journalists in France. They were done in person at newsrooms in Nice, Marseille, Toulouse, Paris and Nevers or in nearby cafes to provide interviewees the opportunity to speak openly about their work. During these interviews, the concept of solutions journalism arose spontaneously, with numerous journalists talking about this 'new' style of journalism taking hold in the newsroom. Follow-up questions sought to ascertain how this model became appropriated in the French regional press. Given our interest in understanding how journalists evaluate their work and how models impact professional ideals, we only interviewed journalists. While outside the scope of our article, the views of marketing and advertising staff are certainly important for understanding the organizational dynamics shaping appropriation.

To complement these interviews, we sought and obtained internal and external documentation about solutions journalism at three newspapers: *Centre France, Nice-Matin* and *Le Parisien*. A 'road map' produced by the *Centre France* press group detailed the organization's understanding of where solutions journalism came from and how it could be implemented in newsrooms. A newsletter at *Nice-Matin* promoted a solutions journalism website, and numerous press releases from *Le Parisien* announced its own site. We use these data to understand the vocabulary of solutions journalism and to compare organizational discourses with journalistic practices described in interviews. Finally, we complemented these data by searching for all news articles published under the auspices of 'solutions journalism' in the newspapers studied. These data help 'triangulate' what journalists say they do in the interviews with the solutions journalism they actually produce, thus boosting the overall validity of the findings (Cresswell, 2013). Such triangulation is important given prior scholarship suggesting differences in journalists' discourses and the products of their work (Demers et al., 2012).

Interviews and documentation were transcribed and analysed according to the precepts of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 2009). The analysis was iterative. The first elements appearing in the interviews and documentation helped to build and focus the questions asked in subsequent ones. Qualitative analysis software (Sonal) was used to identify factors shaping the appropriation of solutions journalism in the French regional press. In what follows, we explain the process by which solutions journalism was appropriated. Then, we explore the extent to which solutions journalism is altering journalistic practices.

How solutions journalism came to French regional media

According to our journalist interviewees, solutions journalism was promoted for distinct reasons by two different types of actors. Company management saw a possible way to regain audience share, while journalists perceived an opportunity to regain relevance in their own companies. Decades of consolidation and conglomeration formed the background conditions shaping the motivations of both. As the total number of regional media

companies in France has shrunk, those remaining have expanded their business operations to include divisions devoted to events, marketing and advertising. Today, these divisions provide the majority of revenues, while dwindling news readership means that news divisions revenues are declining over time. When companies created 'labs' to brainstorm ways to win back readers, solutions journalism emerged as the preferred model because it satisfied the distinctive concerns of management and journalists.

For the past half century, the regional media sector in France has been characterized by consolidation and conglomeration (Bousquet, 2015; Le Floch, 1997). In 1945, France had 153 regional newspapers; by 2015, that figure had dropped to 67 (Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication [Ministry of Culture and Communication], 2015). This consolidation continues to the present day. In 2015, for example, *La Dépêche du Midi*, a Toulouse daily, bought a local newspaper in Montpellier. During that same time, the remaining newspapers have transformed themselves from 'newspapers' to 'media companies'. These companies have divisions devoted to a range of services including marketing, advertising, events and book publishing. *Nice-Matin*, for example, not only operates three newspapers (*Nice-Matin, Var-Matin* and *Monaco-Matin*), it also runs Nice-Matin Communication, which has divisions devoted to advertising, marketing and event services; Editions Giletta, a book publisher; and SCI Nice-Matin, a real estate service. *Centre France* and *Le Parisien* have a similar range of divisions, as do *La Dépêche du Midi, Ouest-France* and *Le Télégramme*.

Today, the bulk of these companies' revenues come from outside the news division. In 2015, *Centre France* reported 94 million euros in revenues, more than half of which (50 million) came from its advertising division. In that same year, *Le Parisien* generated 206 million euros in total revenues, with advertising accounting for 135 million euros of that figure, and *La Dépêche* took in 80 million euros (out of 133 million total revenues) from its two advertising divisions (Bousquet, 2014). This occurs at the same time as newspaper readership and sales continue declining. Between 2000 and 2014, total annual circulation in the French local press dropped 23.3% (from 2,112,469 copies to 1,619,303 copies), while newspaper sales dropped 16% (from 2,663,794 euros per year to 2,237,803 euros) (Alliance Pour Les Chiffres de la Presse et des Médias [Alliance for Data on the Press and Media], 2016; Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication [Ministry of Culture and Communication], 2015).

One result of media conglomeration and declining readership is a widespread perception among journalists that they are decreasingly relevant in their own companies. One journalist acknowledged that newsrooms are 'not what will make the company live'. Rather, 'it's the continuation of the advertising sales revenue, and [other] new revenues. It could be events organization. We have to find the event which could save us' (*Nice-Matin*, 21 August 2015, personal communication). Another noted that most hiring occurs in divisions (e.g. marketing, events) outside the newsroom, thus leaving journalists with fewer resources, difficult working conditions and low job satisfaction (*Nice-Matin*, 27 August 2015, personal communication). Still another described acts of resistance found at the national level that are impossible to envision at local newspapers. This journalist recalled efforts in 2014 by shareholders at *Libération* to turn the newsroom into a conference venue and cultural centre, and to transition the paper's content to a social media network. The paper's journalists responded to the plans on the front page of the next day's print

newspaper, which read as follows: 'We are a newspaper. Not a restaurant. Not a social network. Not a cultural space. Not a television studio. Not a bar'. Evoking the episode, the journalist suggested that such resistance is difficult to envision at *Nice-Matin*. 'We wouldn't publish a front page [that reads], "We are a newspaper", I think. We would publish a front page [that reads] "We are a media company"' (*Nice-Matin*, 21 August 2015, personal communication). Such a front page acknowledges that journalists play a smaller role in today's 'media company' than they did in yesterday's 'newspaper' business. Several journalists also told us about receiving direct requests by management to 'monetize' their content and attract more readers. All these factors – economic precarity, organizational transformations and the lower status of local journalists – diminish journalists' autonomy and give them incentivizes for exploring new ways of doing journalism.

It is in the context of media conglomeration, dwindling audiences, and diminished recognition for journalists that several media companies created 'labs'. These labs comprised various divisions of the media companies, including news, advertising, information technology, data and marketing. Their task was to brainstorm potential solutions to declining news readerships (*Le Parisien*, 2 December 2015, personal communication). Some, but not all, brought in consultants to help brainstorm ideas. Numerous ideas were proposed: Lab members discussed using quizzes and cartoons to attract readers, developing media content through social media applications like Snapchat and Periscope, and refocusing newsroom efforts to accord with the principles of solutions journalism.

Several journalists explained that solutions journalism quickly emerged as the preferred idea for all lab members. This preference was due in part to familiarity among lab members with the concept. As discussed above, solutions journalism existed at the national level in France for more than a decade, and in more recent years, Reporters of Hope began partnering with a few regional newspapers to produce one-off editions of solutions journalism. By contrast, journalists said they were less familiar with the idea of using Snapchat or Periscope, for example, to produce news.

Beyond familiarity, journalists reported that lab members were attracted by the promise of increased sales and growing audiences. At *Le Télégramme*, one journalist said he was inspired by the fact that the annual solutions journalism edition produced by *Libération* always ranks among one of the paper's best-selling: 'It's their sales record! We get inspired by that and by studies about how [the articles] impact readers' (*Le Télégramme*, 17 November 2016, personal communication). A chief editor involved in a one-off collaboration with Reporters of Hope said that the edition did well with advertisers. Moreover, he said, 'I never had so much positive feedback from readers and advertisers. I received a lot of positive emails [about the edition]' (*Nice-Matin*, 14 October 2016, personal communication). Finally, lab members also reported reading American studies suggesting that 'readers were ready to pay for … information that might bring them something helpful' (*Nice-Matin*, 14 October 2016, personal communication). Leaving aside the veracity of these studies' findings (and journalists' interpretations of them), they created a perception that solutions journalism could plausibly bring back readers, especially – according to the journalists we interviewed – among those in the advertising and marketing divisions.

Journalists involved in the labs were also keen about solutions journalism. Several linked the model to long-standing ideals in the regional press that emphasize bringing

practical information to readers. One person said, 'Solutions journalism is in the blood of the local press … Because to promote the territory by talking about [positive] initiatives is the foundation of local journalism' (*Nice-Matin*, 27 August 2015, personal communication). Another used similar phrasing about solutions journalism being 'in the blood' of his newspaper: 'It's a committed newspaper, *Ouest France*, it's "fraternity and solidarity", it's marked in the mast of the first page … We propose real solutions. For me, it's a common thing in the local press to be involved in the territory' (*Ouest-France*, 3 November 2016, personal communication).

Beyond this linking of solutions journalism to long-held ideals, journalists also seemed excited for a more basic reason: Solutions journalism promised to make them relevant again in their own organizations. Numerous interviewees stressed that journalism was less important than marketing, advertising or other divisions in the multimedia conglomerates where they worked. With solutions journalism, they found an opportunity to do journalism that their colleagues in other divisions saw as worthwhile (*Nice-Matin*, 27 August 2015, personal communication). It should be noted that the journalists making this choice (i.e. those who worked with the labs) are a minority of the total journalistic population. But to these journalists, solutions journalism appeared as the best possible solution to the problems of shrinking audiences and journalistic irrelevance.

Nearly every journalist we talked with from these labs expressed excitement about 'doing' solutions journalism. In fact, they spent 3 times as much time in the initial interviews discussing solutions journalism – something not initially included in the interview protocol – than other ideas discussed in the labs, like using social media applications like Snapchat and Periscope. Because our sample is limited largely to people involved in solutions journalism, we cannot make systematic statements about other journalists' perceptions of the model. Informal conversations with journalists at several newsrooms, however, suggest that not all journalists in the newsroom are happy about this development, and instead feel as if the model is being thrust upon them.

The effects of solutions journalism on French regional media

The primary effect of solutions journalism can be seen in journalists' discourses. They talk about using solutions journalism to rethink their editorial choices, emphasizing solutions over problems; about deepening their interactions with audiences to better comprehend issues of public concern; and about developing news formats better suited to reach audiences. Journalists' practices seem less impacted. Many of the solutions journalism products interviewees point to are republished articles, not new reporting ventures. Moreover, efforts to develop novel news formats mirror existing service orientation norms that long characterize French regional media. To the extent that solutions journalism affects regional media, it seems oriented towards greater emphasis on commercial considerations (e.g. finding ways to boost readership and sales), even while it is presented by its appropriators as a form of professional renewal.

Several journalists suggested that solutions journalism forces them to rethink their editorial choices. The chief editor of *Nice-Matin*'s digital newsroom, which has a website dedicated to solutions journalism, described solutions journalism as 'taking the problem

upside down' (*Nice-Matin*, 14 October 2016, personal communication). Whereas regular reporting starts with the impacts of government policies, solutions journalism explores the lives of individuals. As an example, he recalled recent coverage about ghettos in Nice. Initially, the reporter proposed to examine the impact of local policies on ghettos in the city: 'But what we have to do in solutions journalism is the opposite, [which is] to make a portrait of someone who gets out of the ghettos thanks to the local policies'. At *Ouest-France*, a journalist explained that solutions journalism was an opportunity to boost involvement in community problems: 'We want to say, "You can act instead of suffer"' (*Ouest-France*, 3 November 2016, personal communication). These examples highlight how solutions journalism is used to justify novel editorial approaches to news coverage.

Interviewees also described solutions journalism as a way to deepen their connection with audiences. In all the newsrooms visited, journalists – working under the banner of solutions journalism – urged readers to share their opinions and suggestions about how to address problems. In *Nice-Matin*, they also publish a 'making-of' of their solutions journalism inquiries each month to explain the process to readers. One journalist at the newspaper described reporting he had done about a mosquito infestation problem. He followed up the reporting by inviting audience members for their advice about how to fight against mosquitoes. By doing so, he suggested that it was possible to turn a 'somewhat formalistic' article into something more interesting and 'somewhat humorous' by developing portraits of different audience members' solutions to the mosquito problem 'because what interests them can interest their relatives' (*Nice-Matin*, 27 August 2015, personal communication). The 'road map' sent by *Centre France* to its newsroom also suggested encouraging audiences to 'participate in editorial choices' in several ways: 'We ask readers and Internet users about subjects and angles that interest them. We agree to respond to their requests, and never assume any of them. Similarly, a posteriori, we propose to evaluate our subjects, treatments and products [in light of audience suggestions]' (*Centre France* internal documentation). The editor-in-chief at *Le Parisien* echoed this theme: 'The idea is that people talk more in the newspaper. For me, it's an absolute necessity' (*Le Parisien*, 2 December 2015, personal communication).

Journalists also said solutions journalism coincided with efforts to reformat news articles. At *Nice-Matin*, the newsroom created a new article interface that featured graphics and photography, which allowed users to navigate seamlessly from one article to the next while on a mobile phone (*Nice-Matin*, 26 August 2015, personal communication). At *Le Parisien*, the turn towards solutions journalism coincided with a broader shift to a 'web first' mentality, with one consequence being a strict number of character allowances for each article. These character allowances are based on the assumption that audiences spend limited time on news articles, and therefore information should be delivered to them as quickly as possible (*Le Parisien*, 30 November 2015, personal communication). Finally, *Centre France* journalists created maps to present news about different geographic locales. In each of these examples, solutions journalism is part of a broader shift to find news formats that are most useful to audiences.

Given journalists' discourses – and anecdotal examples – about the effects of solutions journalism on their reporting, we were somewhat surprised when showed the products of their efforts. While *Nice-Matin* has a website dedicated to solutions journalism reporting, many of the articles are simply reformatted versions of older reports.

For example, 'solutions journalism' reporting about transportation issues in the city simply drew from prior news coverage about cable cars as a potential solution. It also listed different mobile apps that could be used to minimize commute times. In more extreme cases, the website simply posted previously published articles, as with an article examining the rise of wolves in Nice, a topic already covered by journalists. The solutions reporting, while featuring new graphics and fresh photography, contained the same interviews with the same people as the original reporting.

At many organizations, solutions journalism is used as a way to spotlight practical information, rather than highlight potential fixes to complex problems. For example, journalists at *Le Parisien* emphasized the amount of service-related information they provide through their website on topics like air quality, weather, transportation and restaurants. These efforts closely accord with long-held views of the regional press as service providers. As one person put it, 'It's pure local information. The future of the press is in the local and service [oriented] information' (*Le Parisien*, 16 May 2016, personal communication). The person went on to point out a new app developed by the newsroom that geo-locates users in order to provide them with relevant local content.

Differences between journalists' discourses of solutions journalism and their actual practices are visible because of our strategy of data triangulation. During interviews, journalists typically showcased examples that corresponded closely to ideal typical views of solutions journalism. While such examples exist, our analysis of the broader pool of solutions journalism stories suggests those are not the most common.

Perhaps the greatest impact of solutions journalism on French regional media is its correlation with the introduction of marketing discourses in newsrooms. Given that solutions journalism was implemented largely due to economic difficulties, it is perhaps unsurprising that the discourse of interviewees is replete with marketing terminology. Journalists talk as much about their audience (which they seek to grow) as their readers (whom they seek to inform), about monetizing news content and about improving their organizations' sales records and profits. One journalist, in a moment of frankness, told us that solutions journalism is 'just marketing' (*Nice-Matin*, 14 October 2016, personal communication). Journalists might produce great journalism, he explained, but if they do not promote it, no one will ever read it. Thus, the 'good logo and different typography' associated with solutions journalism provided him with an opportunity. Another remarked that solutions journalism is 'just a showcase' designed for marketing purposes (*Ouest-France*, 3 November 2016, personal communication). Others suggested that the aim of solutions journalism is to improve sales and increase audiences; informing people about local news was only useful insofar as it helped achieve that goal. These comments highlight the fact that while solutions journalism may help journalists connect with readers and provide novel ways of doing journalism, it also eases the entrance of marketing discourses into newsrooms and allows journalists to also see these readers as revenue sources (i.e. 'audiences').

In this way, solutions journalism may provide the necessary cover – a Trojan horse of sorts – that enables some journalists to engage in discourses and interactions that previously were viewed as unethical. At *Le Parisien*, one journalist explained that while the newspaper's brand 'means seriousness', its journalists must take on tasks that extend well beyond the traditional remit of a journalist: 'What we [used to] do, it is not possible

anymore. We have to do event organizations, [and other] services … We have to adapt' (*Le Parisien*, 2 December 2015, personal communication). In all organizations, journalists collaborate with marketing and advertising divisions as they develop their solutions journalism offerings. In the past, such interactions were viewed as inappropriate and unethical. Today, as at least 12 interviewees stressed, journalists see such interactions as necessary. Perhaps more surprisingly, many also suggest that such interactions are innovative, as can be seen in journalists describing the uptake in solutions journalism as 'new', 'interesting' and 'satisfying'.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has sought to develop an alternative account of media system change. Rather than ask whether journalism models induce cross-national convergence, we examine the process by which a new journalism model is appropriated and examine its implications for journalistic autonomy. Using solutions journalism in the French regional press as a case, we suggest that journalism models can be analysed as efforts to translate external challenges into professional terms, and in doing so to introduce alternative principles for evaluating journalistic work. This view helps scholars see solutions journalism as both a source of professional renewal and a 'Trojan horse'. On the one hand, solutions journalism does lead journalists to feel more relevant, and it does provide new ways for thinking about editorial choices. On the other hand, solutions journalism legitimates and valorizes marketing discourses. The principles that these efforts induce (e.g. emphasis on sales, marketing) suggest a form of media system change in the direction of marketing and advertising, and further away from journalistic autonomy.

To be sure, our study is based on a single case that looks only at the appropriation of journalism models. In providing a close-up empirical analysis, we have sought to develop a hypothesis about media system change that scholars working elsewhere can use to guide their own inquiries. Our research has focused exclusively on the journalists appropriating journalism models. More research is thus needed to better understand the degree to which such models are or are not adopted by other journalists (i.e. those not involved in the labs). Moreover, our emphasis on the diminished position of journalists vis-à-vis marketing professionals suggests the need to better understand how these actors interact to shape the direction of local media companies. Finally, scholarship that traces the full circulation path of journalism models – from their points of origin to the sources of their appropriation – is needed to understand how and in what ways these models produce cross-national convergence or divergence in journalism practice.

While we seek to provide an alternative account of media system change, some of our findings can inform extant debates about the effects of journalism models. Adoption scholars frequently highlight the role played by states, professional bodies, media companies and business consultants in sending and receiving journalism models. Our research suggests that consultants played an important role in bringing solutions journalism to the attention of French regional journalists. Indeed, without consultants, several journalists explained they likely would not have considered this way of doing journalism. More research on where these consultants learn about journalism models and how they present them to 'local' clients is required to unpack the role played by this potentially important intermediary.

Adaptation theorists argue that national contexts shape how journalism models are eventually used. While we do not contrast solutions journalism in France with its practice in the United States, we can note that solutions journalism fits with long-held views of the French regional press as a community service. This fact certainly helped some journalists embrace it, partly because they see the model as a continuation of past practices. More broadly, our approach suggests that models are more likely to be appropriated when journalistic autonomy is weakened, and their primary effect is to translate external changes into journalistic language. This is not precisely adoption or adaptation; rather, it is an effort to reorient how journalists value their work. It may produce journalism that looks similar or dissimilar to US journalism, but will nonetheless validate marketing discourses. It is precisely in this sense that we see solutions journalism as 'Trojan horse' for marketing.

In calling solutions journalism as Trojan horse, we do not deny that the French regional journalists who appropriate it see this model as a source of excitement, meaning and professional renewal. Indeed, their excitement about solutions journalism was evident in many of our conversations, with journalists talking about the initiatives frequently and often with a positive valence. Our aim here has been to show that those feelings are embedded in a larger pattern of organizational transformation that predisposes their favourability to this model. Put bluntly, solutions journalism offers journalists a chance at relevance in organizations that have in recent decades seen reporters as irrelevant.

Whether solutions journalism will satisfy managerial hopes and consultant promises is unclear. While some journalists told us about audience growth, others suggested that the initiatives had not delivered in this domain. One year after its start, for example, the director of *Journal Toulousain* announced that the publication was still in 'bad shape' and had to 'launch another project to make it live' (Valéry, 2018). Further research is thus needed to know how the appropriation of solutions journalism in the French regional press will evolve over time. Yet, even if the specific appropriation of solutions journalism ceases, the changes wrought to journalists' modes of evaluation are unlikely to be easily reversed. And this, we suggest, is the single largest effect of the model's appropriation.

Authors' note

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