ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Explaining the Formation of Online News Startups in France and the United States: A Field Analysis

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This article examines the differential formation of online news startups in Toulouse, France, and Seattle, United States. While Seattle is home to many startups, in Toulouse there have been just 4 — and only 1 continues publishing. Drawing on Bourdieu's field theory, we argue that amount and types of capital held by journalists in the 2 cities varied as a result of differences in journalism's position in the field of power. These differences shaped the extent of startup formation in each city and structured journalists' capacities to convert their capital into the resources needed to form startups (e.g., funding, credentials, partnerships). These findings are positioned in relation to literatures on journalism innovation and comparative media.

Keywords: Online News, Startups, Comparative Research, Journalism Innovation, Field Theory, Interviews.

Online news startups are widely seen as important vehicles of journalistic experimentation (Carlson & Usher, 2016; Konieczna, 2014; Naldi & Picard, 2012; Ostertag & Tuchman, 2012; Schaffer, 2013). Yet the degree to which they take hold varies substantially by city and country (Bruno & Nielsen, 2012; Cook & Sirkkunen, 2013). What explains the differential formation and development of online news startups? Bringing a cross-national perspective to bear on this question, this article explores the degree to which startups have taken hold in similar cities embedded in two different media systems: Seattle, United States, and Toulouse, France. While Seattle has been home to a wave of online news startups (Friedland, 2014), in Toulouse there have been just four — and all but one has ceased publication (Smyrnaios, Marty, & Bousquet, 2015). Through interviews with journalists, analysis of news articles and

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an original data set detailing the educational and professional backgrounds of startup founders, we examine differential startup formation in France and the United States.

On its face, the differences are puzzling. Both cities are in markets where media have lost considerable proportions of their circulation and advertising revenues (Durkin, Glaisyer, & Hadge, 2010; Smyrnaios & Bousquet, 2011). In both, too, Internet access is high and growing over time, as are online advertising expenditures (Bruno & Nielsen, 2012; Friedland, 2014). While job losses have been greater in Seattle, precarious employment is a feature of journalism in both cities (Powers, Vera Zambrano, & Baisnée, 2015), and journalists generally accept that the future of journalism is online (Fancher, 2011; Smyrnaios & Bousquet, 2011). Finally, both cities are home to sizeable aeronautics and information technology sectors, which drive population growth and attract well-educated young people whose news consumption habits are increasingly digital. Since both cities seem to have favorable conditions for the creation of online startups (even if their financial viability is uncertain), the differential formation of online news startups is a puzzle in need of explanation.

We suggest that Pierre Bourdieu's field theory can help solve this puzzle. Drawing on his concepts of capital and field, we argue that the volume and type of capital held by journalists forming startups in the two cities varied substantially as a result of differences in journalism's position in the field of power. In Seattle, news organizations' heavy exposure to commercial logics led to a period of intense layoffs, which put many journalists—including established ones—on the job market. Some sought to convert their capital into the resources needed to form online sites (e.g., funding, press credentials, media partnerships). While financially tenuous, these efforts were recognized by audiences, funders, sources, and other journalists, thus making it possible to operate in the journalistic field. By contrast, in Toulouse media subsidies mitigated the effects of the economic crisis on newsroom employment while established links between media companies, advertisers, and local officials discouraged new entrants to the field. Labor regulations made it difficult for established journalists to lose their jobs, but restricted younger and less established journalists from gaining stable employment. As a result, the few startups that did emerge were the creation of young journalists with low volumes of capital, which they struggled to convert into the resources required for startup formation.

We position these findings in relation to extant scholarly literatures on journalism innovation and comparative media systems. Where the innovation literature emphasizes the importance of individual traits like business acumen, technological skill, and professional experience, we show that these traits are unevenly distributed across the startup population and how this distribution impacts the nature and extent of online startup formation. We also suggest that the importance of professional experience lay as much in its capacity to convert capital into new resources (funding, press accreditation, etc.) as in its specific knowledge about how to practice journalism. Similarly, where comparative research correctly emphasizes the role of media markets, political systems, and legal regulations in shaping the formation of online news startups, a field perspective shows how journalists involved in startups draw

upon their stock of material and symbolic resources in their quest to gain recognition as legitimate members of the journalistic field. By drawing on and contributing to extant scholarship comparing French and American journalism, we also extend that body of knowledge—which typically explores national news media—by examining startups in metropolitan cities far beyond the media capitals of Paris and New York. Our findings highlight field theory's utility for comparative research in general and the study of online news startups in particular.

Explaining startup formation: Journalism innovation and media systems

Online news startups refer to organizations that are built primarily around their web presence; are unaffiliated with existing legacy news organizations; and seek to be recognized by their peers as journalistic, usually by offering news and current affairs information (Bruno & Nielsen, 2012).[1] In recent years, such organizations have become an important focus of scholarly inquiry (Carlson & Usher, 2016; Konieczna, 2014; Naldi & Picard, 2012; Ostertag & Tuchman, 2012). Given diminished resources at legacy news outlets, scholars have suggested that startups may partially supplement losses in media coverage (Downie & Schudson, 2009; Friedland, 2014). This is especially true at the metropolitan level, where research indicates that legacy news organizations are most imperiled (Anderson, 2013; Ryfe, 2012). One important question for scholars is thus what leads to the formation and development of startups.

To date, scholars have offered two answers to this question. A first, rooted in the literature on journalism innovation, emphasizes individual traits like business acumen, technological skill, and professional experience. It states that online startups must develop business models, identify market niches, and diversify revenue streams (Naldi & Picard, 2012; Schaffer, 2013). Beyond business strategies, technical savvy is also important: Individuals who have the ability to experiment with new tools can discover novel forms of audience engagement and professional practice (Carlson & Usher, 2016; Nee, 2013). Finally, several studies find that online websites tend to be started by individuals with prior journalism experience, whose knowledge of journalism facilitates newsgathering efforts (Konieczna, 2014; Naldi & Picard, 2012; Schaffer, 2013).

From the perspective of journalism innovation, the greater prevalence of news startups in Seattle is the outcome of its journalists possessing more of these individual traits. Indeed, some case study research in both cities seems to support this view. In Toulouse, Smyrnaios et al. (2015) argue that the commercial failure of one startup comes from the founders' inexperience, "especially when it comes to defining an adequate commercial strategy" (p. 179). Several Seattle-based case studies suggest the importance of technological know-how and entrepreneurial acumen in shaping the formation of the city's online news startups. Fancher (2011), for example, writes that these skills foster a culture of experimentation that is "creating new opportunities for entrepreneurial journalists who can harness distribution methods and think creatively about how people interact with online content" (n.p.; see also Durkin et al., 2010).

Taken together, the journalism innovation literature identifies an important set of individual traits that seem necessary for online startup formation. Yet it has less to say about the structural features (e.g., market conditions, economic and legal constraints) that govern the distribution of those traits. This lends the literature an agentive aura that focuses primarily on what individuals can or should do in order to start online news sites. Journalists are encouraged to be more "entrepreneurial" (Briggs, 2012) and to take more risks (Naldi & Picard, 2012). Journalism education is urged to fashion this entrepreneurial spirit by offering business-oriented course work for aspiring journalists (Ferrier, 2013). Whatever the wisdom of this strategy, it leaves unanswered the question of variation in online startup formation. Why journalists in some cities have more business acumen, technological skill, and professional experience is not explored in detail.

A second explanation—which draws insights from the "media systems" literature (Hallin & Mancini, 2004)—emphasizes the structural conditions that make online startups more or less likely to form in a given city or country. This view especially emphasizes the importance of economic, political, and regulatory forces in creating incentives (or disincentives) for startup formation. Economically, online startups are said to emerge in advertising-driven markets like the United States, where "problems that mainstream local or regional press have faced are giving room for local or hyperlocal journalism" (Cook & Sirkunnen, 2013, pp. 76–77).[2] This differs from France, where advertising constitutes a smaller percentage of total revenue and where tight links between business officials and media organizations make it difficult for online startups to break into the market (Bruno & Nielsen, 2012). Politically, patterns of startup formation are said to resemble the systems of governance in which media systems are embedded. From this view, the decentralized form of U.S. governance—where substantial decision-making occurs at local and state levels—incentivizes startup formation at the city level (Friedland, 2014). This, too, differs from France, where decision-making is centralized in Paris, thus creating incentives for journalists—including those looking to form online startups—to concentrate in the capital city (Benson, 2013).[3]

Finally, online startups are also said to be the product of different regulatory regimes, which create further incentives for or against startup formation. American media receive no direct government subsidies, and media policies aimed at preserving existing news organizations—like Joint Operating Agreements—are decreasingly common (Picard, 2007). As a result, incumbent news organizations cannot rely on government aid during difficult financial periods. At the same time, U.S. tax laws incentivize philanthropic giving by allowing individuals and organizations to avoid paying taxes on donations to civic organizations. This tax regime has led some to envision a growing role for "nonprofit" online news startups (Downie & Schudson, 2009). This, too, contrasts with France, where government subsidies aim to buffer economic downturns for legacy media and where, until recently, online startups were taxed at a higher rate than established news organizations, thus simultaneously

favoring incumbent organizations and disincentivizing startup formation (Wagemans, Witschge, & Deuze, 2016).

Taken together, structurally oriented analyses correct for the overemphasis on individual traits found in much of the innovation literature. At the same time, this research devotes sparse attention to how journalists involved in startups navigate the economic, political, and regulatory contexts in which they find themselves. Structural factors shape startup formation; they do not dictate them mechanically. Thus, there is a need to account for both individual actions and structural constraints in startup formation. Rather than privilege one over the other, we suggest that field theory can be used to integrate the two and correct for some of the blind spots of each, thereby providing a more satisfying explanation for differential startup formation in France and the United States. In doing this, we build on previous communication research that utilizes field theory in order to understand various aspects of journalism practice (see, e.g., Benson, 2013; Benson & Neveu, 2005; Waisbord, 2013).

A field approach to online news startups

Field theory begins from the premise that contemporary societies are composed of semiautonomous social fields, each of which is structured around differences of perception and practice (Bourdieu, 1996). Within fields, agents compete for recognition and prestige according to the "rules of the game," which are enacted consciously or unconsciously by those in the field. This competition is structured by the material and symbolic resources different agents possess and which allow them to gain recognition vis-à-vis others in the field. Bourdieu (1986) terms such resources "capital" and argues that it takes multiple forms. Economic capital refers to money or assets that can be directly translated into money; cultural capital encompasses academic training, general knowledge, and verbal sensibilities; social capital refers to networks of contacts within a personal or professional milieu; and, finally, symbolic capital is the form the above capitals take once they are perceived and recognized as legitimate by others in the field.

Key to Bourdieu's concept of capital is its convertibility (Bourdieu, 1986). Agents with one form of capital (e.g., symbolic capital that comes from enjoying recognition among one's peers) may attempt to convert it into other forms (e.g., funding for new ventures). The capacity for this conversion requires the recognition of others in the field. Without recognition, agents are unable to impose their vision of the social world onto others. Below, we argue that it is precisely this recognition—which is itself a result of agents possessing different volumes of capital—that allows some journalists to convert their capital into the resources needed for online news startups.

According to Bourdieu, fields are contingent and historically variable. They are shaped not only by struggles among agents within fields, but also their position within the larger "field of power" (Bourdieu, 1996). By this latter term, Bourdieu refers to the field that encompasses all others (market, administrative, etc.) and that exerts influence on the functioning of all fields in a given nation-state. Comparatively minded

researchers have seized upon this insight to explore cross-national variations in journalistic fields that result from distinct professional histories, legal and political regulations, and market relations (Benson, 2013). On this view, the French and American journalistic fields are located in systematically different positions within the field of power. French journalism is located in closer proximity to what Benson (2013, p. 38) terms the "civic pole" of journalism, as it draws more financial support from non-market sources (as in government subsidies) and is historically more closely linked with the fields of politics and literature. American journalism, by contrast, is located nearer to the market pole, due to its heavy reliance on advertising for revenues, and its valorization of objective, informative, and fact-centered reporting. Scholars have thus studied the two countries because they represent opposing ideal types, which makes it possible to test assumptions about the factors influencing journalistic practice (Benson, 2013; Neveu, 2009). This article continues in this tradition by using the two cases to explore scholarly assumptions about the factors shaping online startup formation.

We suggest the field approach can integrate and extend the insights of journalism innovation and comparative media research. For innovation, we show how the position of journalism in the field of power created different conditions of possibility for online news startup formation in the two cities. In neither city was it simply the case that journalists had more or less business acumen or technological savvy; rather, the journalistic field's position within the field of power differed in both places, and this shaped both the number and types of journalists out of work and thus looking for a way to enter the field. At the same time, we also use field theory to extend comparative insights. While comparative media systems research shows that media systems differ, it pays less attention to how individual journalists navigate different economic, political, and regulatory contexts. Field theory can thus explore the processes by which journalists convert their capital into the resources necessary for startup formation.

While we believe that field theory offers a more precise explanation for startup formation than that found in the extant literatures, we do not claim that it accounts for all possible influences. Other factors not examined in detail here (e.g., audience demand for online news, individual motivations for creating startups) may also play a role. Our aim here is to integrate major assumptions about startup formation from extant literatures on journalism innovation and comparative media systems into an analytical perspective and in the process to identify patterns of startup formation that might guide scholarly research on this important topic in other cities and countries.

Data and methods

This article examines the experiences of online news startups in two cities: Toulouse, France, and Seattle, United States. We selected them because of a number of demographic and economic similarities. Both are comparably sized and located on the geographic peripheries of their respective countries (southwestern France and northwestern United States, respectively). Average levels of education and computer use in both are higher than national averages (Bruno & Nielsen, 2012; Friedland, 2014).

Economically, large aeronautics and information technology sectors have helped drive sustained periods of economic growth (Toulouse is home to Airbus, Seattle to Boeing). Partly as a result, populations in both cities have grown substantially over the past several decades, and large universities cater to sizeable student populations. Thus, while no two cities are strictly equivalent, we can be reasonably sure that by holding roughly constant economic and demographic features, any differences will come from the journalistic fields we are analyzing and not other confounding variables.[4]

Our research comprised three components. First, we developed an in-depth understanding of the structural context in which startups did and did not take hold in each city. To do this, we collected data on a range of indicators that previous scholarship finds differentiate French and American journalistic fields (Benson, 2013; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Powers & Benson, 2014). Specifically, we examined the degree to which print newspapers—still the dominant employers of journalists in both cities[5]—derive revenues from advertising; the amount and types of subsidies provided to news organizations by government; the nature of labor laws and government regulations (like joint operating agreements in Seattle); and the relationships between established news media and business officials. We found this data by examining stories in the trade press (both regional and national) in the two cities. In Seattle, the major sources included a column by Bill Richards, which chronicled troubles at major news media in the city, and occasional reports in national outlets and trade publications (*The New York Times*, *Columbia Journalism Review*). In Toulouse, the major sources were an online column about local news maintained by Fabrice Valéry, a journalist working at France 3, as well as articles produced by the local journalists' association, Association de Journalistes de Toulouse, and made available on their website. We confined our analysis for both cities to the period in which online news startups began forming (2005) and continued to 2015. This coverage allowed us to identify the economic conditions and political regulations that enabled and constrained online startup formation in both cities.

Second, we created an original data set that identified and catalogued the full range of online news startups in each city. In Toulouse, this was relatively easy given the small number of such entities identified by previous scholars (Smyrnaios et al., 2015). This procedure was more difficult in Seattle, which has seen a great deal of churn in its online news ecology. A 2011 survey conducted by the Washington News Council found more than 90 "place-based" news sites in Seattle (Fancher, 2011). Using this survey as a baseline, we examined each site and included in our sample only those sites that fit our definition—drawn from extant research (Bruno & Nielsen, 2012)—of an online news startup: organizations built primarily around their web presence, that have no formal affiliation with legacy news media, and that seek to be recognized by their peers as journalistic. We especially sought to distinguish between websites that offer commentary and those that provide news and information. Seattle has many of the former, which are important to the city's "civic information ecology" (Friedland, 2014) but are not part of—nor do they wish to be part of—its journalistic field.[6] To ensure an accurate total, we crosschecked the U.S. data against the online directories

recommended by Napoli, Stonbely, McCollough, and Renninger (2016). In Seattle, this led us to identify 51 startups; in Toulouse, 4.

For each online news startup, we collected biographical information about its founders.[7] This information was used to examine the amount and types of capital that individuals brought to their efforts to form and develop online startups. Given claims in the journalism innovation literature about the importance of business acumen, technological skill, and professional experience, we examined the professional backgrounds of startup founders. We complemented this data with information about each founder's level of education (a proxy for cultural capital), number of years in journalism (social capital), and journalism awards (symbolic capital). In most cases, this information was available on the organization's website. In cases where it was not, we found it either through news coverage of the startup or interviews with the relevant persons (described below). Given our aim of specifying the resources most important to formation and development, we distinguished between sites that are still publishing and those that are defunct. This gives some insight into the specific forms of capital that are important for formation and development. Finally, to examine claims about a growing philanthropic role, especially in the United States, we also characterized the commercial status of each organization (commercial, nonprofit).

For the third component of our research, we conducted in-depth interviews. In keeping with our field perspective, we interviewed both the founders of online startups and journalists working at legacy news media. Our interviews with startup founders asked about the strategies used to gain recognition and legitimacy from advertisers, sources, audiences, and peers, while interviews with legacy journalists explored the relationship between startups and legacy news media, as well as the working conditions of journalists more generally. Our sample was purposive. We interviewed a cross-section of journalists working in print, audiovisual, and online media for varying periods of time to capture both recent and established agents in the field.[8] Saturation served as an indicator of the adequacy of our sample; we stopped our interviews after hearing similar themes repeated by multiple interviewees. In Seattle, we conducted 36 interviews in total, 14 of which were with online only journalists. In Toulouse, we conducted 24 interviews in total, 6 of which were with online only journalists (2 websites had multiple founders). Interview respondents agreed to speak on the condition that they would only be identified by the medium for which they currently work (e.g., print, radio, online).

The results are presented in two sections. The first explores the structural contexts that create incentives and disincentives for startup formation in the two cities. The second profiles differences in the volume of capital held by journalists as a result of those structural contexts, and details how journalists sought to convert their capital into the resources needed to form online news startups. Together, the two sections provide a view of startup formation that integrates and extends the structural analyses typical of the comparative media systems literature with the individual emphasis associated with research on journalism innovation.

Structural contexts: Journalism's position in the field of power

Structural contexts in the two cities differed substantially, and this created different conditions of possibility for startup formation in each. In Seattle, heavy exposure to the market and the dissolution of a joint operating agreement led to widespread job losses among even established journalists. In Toulouse, adverse economic conditions were mitigated by government subsidies, and labor regulations helped established journalists keep their jobs, whereas the same labor laws and existing links between media companies, advertisers, and local officials disincentivized new entrants to the field. The result was that in Seattle a number of established journalists found themselves looking for ways to remain in the journalistic field, while in Toulouse it was young and novice journalists — and only a few at that — who looked to create startups.

Economically, Seattle was far more exposed to commercial pressures than Toulouse. In 2009, the city's main newspaper, the *Seattle Times*, reported that 90% of its revenues derived from advertising (Richards, 2009a). By contrast, advertising comprised just 36.5% of revenues at Toulouse's main newspaper, *La Dépêche du Midi* (Cousteau, 2011). Sharp downturns in advertising associated with the global financial crisis thus helped usher in an intense period of layoffs in Seattle, where many journalists — including established ones — lost their jobs. Between 2005 and 2010, newsroom employment at Seattle newspapers was cut by more than half, from 540 journalists to 230 (Pérez-Peña, 2009; Yardley & Pérez-Peña, 2009). During that same period, *La Dépêche du Midi* lost comparatively fewer journalists (50, from 230 journalists to 180), who left either through retirements or buyouts (Haudebourg, 2013).

Relative stability in Toulouse was also shaped by tight links between media companies and advertisers. In the few cases where online startups did form, potential advertisers told founders that while their projects were interesting, they would not do business with them. Doing so, they said, would upset *La Dépêche du Midi*, which prefers "exclusive" clients (Toulouse online journalist, personal communication, 29 December 2013). More broadly, the perception of tight links between local officials, media companies, and businesses created a general sense among journalists that startup formation was futile. One journalist, when asked why he did not consider forming a startup, replied: "You could do it, but *La Dépêche* would kill you" (Toulouse freelance journalist, personal communication, 12 October 2015).

Regulatory measures further shaped different conditions of possibility for startup formation. In Toulouse, national media policies buffered the downturn in advertising and circulation by providing newspapers with tax breaks and by increasing direct and indirect forms of support to news organizations. Between 2008 and 2009, the French government nearly doubled the amount of direct financial aid given to news organizations (from 165 million euro to 324). This "help plan" (*Les Etats généraux de la presse écrite*) expressly aimed to give news organizations more time to find a more sustainable business model. These were given in addition to existing subsidies for delivery expenses. In Toulouse, government aid covers 6 cents of every newspaper copy sold for *La Dépêche du Midi*. In 2013, total revenues from the government came to just

under €3.5 million, nearly €1 million of which was direct aid (La Cour de Comptes, 2013). Complementing this aid is a preferential tax regime for newspapers, which are taxed at a far lower rate than other goods (2.1% as opposed to 19.6%). Together, this government support minimized the need for layoffs at established news organizations.

In addition to subsidies, French labor laws make it difficult—and financially unattractive—for news organizations to lay off employees. By law, any employee who is fired is entitled to compensation from the employer. For journalists, this payment amounts to more than one month of salary for each year worked. Furthermore, organizations with more than 50 employees who wish to engage in layoffs are required to develop "Employment Protection Schemes" (*Plan de Sauvegarde de l'Emploi*). These schemes require employers to identify alternatives to layoffs, typically by providing an equivalent position elsewhere in the company or offering early retirement. These laws are especially aimed at protecting older employees from losing their jobs, based in part on the assumption that it will be difficult for them to reenter the workforce. As one journalist who has worked in journalism for 35 years put it: "Why do they [*La Dépêche du Midi*] keep me? Because it would be too expensive for them to fire me" (Toulouse print journalist, personal communication, 27 April 2015).

This contrasts strongly with the regulatory environment in Seattle. There, the dissolution of a joint operating agreement intensified job layoffs, and government officials provided no direct financial support to established news media. Made possible by the Newspaper Preservation Act of 1970, these agreements allow competing newspapers to combine business operations while maintaining independent newsrooms. In Seattle, two daily newspapers—the *Seattle Times* and *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*—had been in such an agreement since 1983 (Richards, 2009b). By virtue of being in effect, the agreement helped keep an entire newsroom—whose numbers between 1983 and 2009 ranged between 100 and 165 journalists—employed (Hughes, 2015). The dissolution of this agreement in 2009, and the decision by the *Post-Intelligencer*'s parent company to cease print publication, further raised journalism unemployment in the city. When the *Post-Intelligencer* switched to an online-only format, it reduced its newsroom workforce from 165 journalists to 20 (Yardley & Pérez-Peña, 2009).

Despite claims about a growing role for philanthropic foundations in the United States, we find little evidence that foundations are driving growth in online startups. Only 6 of the 51 startups in Seattle operate as nonprofits. The rest are primarily commercial businesses. Very few sites receive foundation funding to get started, and several described unsuccessful efforts to attract philanthropic donations. In fact, multiple startup founders discuss foundations in skeptical terms. As one person put it:

> We stopped wasting our time on funders like Knight years ago, when for multiple years in a row, it was made abundantly clear they don't want to help people who are already sort of successful, they just want to give money to people who have 'ideas' for something they 'might' do. (Seattle online journalist, personal communication, 2 January 2014)

Instead, differential patterns of online startup formation seem mostly to be driven by different job situations in the two cities. Interview data from journalists illustrate this point. In Toulouse, an established journalist working at *La Dépêche du Midi*

described an informal system among experienced reporters called, "No initiative, no hassle" ("Pas d'initiative, pas d'emmerde"). In this system, journalists propose topics that can be easily reported. In return, management leaves the journalists alone: "You do what you are expected to do and … they leave you alone. … You can lay back" (Toulouse print journalist, personal communication, 9 November 2015). Such a system is one indicator of the relative job security afforded to those journalists already employed by the newspaper.

This security stands in sharp contrast to the comments of younger journalists in Toulouse, who work internships and then find it difficult to secure full-time employment. As one person put it: "I will end my internship … and start a three month contract in September. … I'll be at full speed on my contributions [freelance articles]. … I can't afford to forget them, mainly because I really don't know what I'll be doing after" (Toulouse freelance journalist, personal communication, 9 July 2015). It also differs from the comments of many Seattle journalists, including established ones, who see their employment as unstable and their future as uncertain. One reporter put it this way:

> I am 51 … I have never advanced. … I am gonna have to be a reporter until the end. I do not know if I can get to 60. I am not bored with my craft. I am worried that there might be some cataclysmic change that will stop anybody from being able to continue to employ me. (Seattle radio journalist, personal communication, 26 October 2015)

Forms of capital and online startup formation

Cross-national differences in journalism's position in the field of power led individuals with different volumes and types of capital to create online startups. In Seattle, experienced journalists with high volumes of social and symbolic capital were among the first to form online startups, while Toulouse startups—when they were formed at all—were the provenance of young journalists with low volumes of capital. High volumes of capital enabled established journalists in Seattle to acquire the resources needed for their new ventures (e.g., funding, professional legitimacy, visibility), while journalists in both cities with lower volumes of such capital had difficulty making similar conversions. Social and symbolic capital proved far more important than business or technical skills. They also seem to mediate structural variables, like political system differences.

Table 1 summarizes the social profiles of online news startup founders. In both cities, founders possess comparable levels of cultural capital. Advanced education (anything beyond 4 years of university studies) is atypical in both cases (roughly 20% of all founders have such degrees). Moreover, sites created by founders with advanced degrees are equally likely to go defunct as those with lower volumes of cultural capital. In Seattle, they are in fact more likely to cease publishing (42.9% vs. 26.5%, respectively; data not shown in table). In Toulouse, two founders had advanced degrees. Together, they launched a startup that is now defunct. Finally, in neither city is it common for a startup founder to hold a degree from a nationally prestigious university.[9]

Table 1 Social Profiles of Online News Startup Founders

Level of Education[a]

Toulouse	% (N)	Seattle	% (N)
Advanced	22.2 (2)	Advanced	17.1 (7)
University	77.8 (7)	University	82.9 (34)

Professional Background[b]

Toulouse	% (N)	Seattle	% (N)
Professional journalism	0 (0)	Professional journalism	58.5 (24)
Business	0 (0)	Business	4.9 (2)
Technology	11.1 (1)	Technology	9.8 (4)
University student (in journalism or other)	77.8 (7)	University student (in journalism or other)	2.4 (1)
Other	11.1 (1)	Other	24.4 (10)

Years in Journalism

Toulouse (trainees)	1.0	Seattle (professionals)	8.7

Representative Journalism Awards

Toulouse
- N/A

Seattle
- Regional Emmy Award for Television News (Tracy Record)
- John B Oakes Award for Distinguished Environmental Journalism (Robert McClure)
- Pulitzer Prize (Peter Rinearson)

[a]In the United States, higher education comprises any graduate education beyond a bachelor's degree (MA, MBA, Ph.D.). In France, higher education is any education five or more years beyond the attainment of the "bac," which is a more advanced level of education than the U.S. high school degree.

[b]In both cities, N is not equal to the number of sites. In Toulouse, and to a lesser degree Seattle, this is because most sites have multiple founders, and we include the professional background of each individual. In Seattle, several individuals formed multiple online news sites.

On the whole, the founders of online startups in the two cities are not distinguished from each other by their volume of cultural capital.

Instead, the key differences in the profiles of founders appear in terms of their professional backgrounds, and the social and symbolic capital that derive from them. In Seattle, individuals with prior journalism experience constitute more than half (58.5%) of all online startups, whereas students coming out of journalism school form the majority of startups in Toulouse (77.8%). The founders of Seattle startups had also worked in journalism for much longer, which—as interview data below

show — gave them a larger network of relevant contacts from which to draw. On average, the founders of Seattle startups had worked in journalism for 8.7 years before starting online sites. By contrast, in Toulouse, the average was just one year, mostly in the form of internships. Finally, backgrounds in journalism also meant that startup founders in Seattle had accumulated a greater number of journalism awards than their French counterparts. In both cities, individual cases illustrate the broader trend. In Seattle, Robert McClure, founder of *InvestigateWest*, had worked in journalism since 1979, and at the *Post-Intelligencer* for 12 years before being laid off. In 2002, he won a national award for environmental reporting. In Toulouse, Xavier Lalu and Bertrand Enjalbal founded *Carre d'Info* after finishing their master's degree in journalism and working several internships.

Despite claims about the importance of business and technological acumen, we find little evidence of either to be in great supply among startup founders in either city. An established journalist at one Seattle startup remarked that from a technical perspective, "I had no idea what I was doing" (Seattle online journalist, personal communication, 22 October 2015). Another said that her site relied on a basic blog format and occasional assistance from community supporters. "If we had to be the technical people too, it would have been impossible" (Seattle online journalist, personal communication, 24 February 2016). While one person acknowledged that a background in business would have been helpful, it was not necessary to get the startup going (Seattle online journalist, personal communication, 5 October 2015). This person is typical: Across all startups, only one person holds an MBA. Similar dynamics are observed in Toulouse, where the majority of the founders have little experience in either business or technology. We asked one journalist in the online unit of *La Dépêche*, who several informants told us had strong technical skills, why he never formed a startup. His answer stressed the importance of resources beyond technical acumen: "I was very skilled. I just didn't have the resources [to start my own site]" (Toulouse print journalist, personal communication, 14 May 2016).

Differences in capital proved crucial in the success or failure journalists had in attaining the resources necessary for startup formation. In Seattle, experienced journalists were able to raise the funds needed to begin their ventures. The founder of one online-only website — who had previously created one of the city's two alternative newspapers — described the site's genesis as a phone call from a venture capitalist friend with a long history of civic involvement in Seattle. "He said, 'Let's look at starting an online only local only publication. Advertising is swinging to the web, local newspapers are in trouble, and the gap is local news'" (Seattle online journalist, personal communication, 13 January 2014). Similarly, the founder of a local politics site described his ability to attract initial funding from local business people "who were fans of my work, liked me, [and] trusted me as a journalist" (Seattle online journalist, personal communication, 24 February 2016). In these and related instances, established journalists drew upon their credibility as journalists, and the social capital they gained from existing in this professional milieu, to obtain the funding necessary for starting an online news site.

The success of established journalists in raising funds contrasts strongly with less established journalists with lower volumes of capital, who struggled to do the same. In Toulouse, the founders of online news startups drew from smaller and less wealthy social networks to raise initial funds. The founders of *Carre d'Info* raised their initial funds from family and friends, not venture capitalists or bankers (Toulouse online journalist, personal communication, 29 December 2013). Once started, these and other sites had difficulty attracting advertisers who had little knowledge of the founders or their efforts. One journalist described efforts to generate advertising revenue. In calls to advertisers, he would explain that his online audience was as high as, if not higher than, any newspaper in Toulouse—to which advertisers would reply: "'Yes, but you don't [have a print copy] and we don't know you anyway.' And then they would just hang up" (Toulouse online journalist, personal communication, 12 October 2015). This suggests that the combination of incumbent links (i.e., wanting a print copy) and lack of recognition ("we don't know you") made it difficult for online startups to generate revenues.

Beyond money, experienced journalists were also able to convert their capital into some of the symbolic resources necessary for their work. In multiple cases, experienced journalists in Seattle applied for and received press credentials within different channels of city and state government. Most described the process as "easy," but acknowledged the importance of their reputation in securing the credentials. One person described his successful application for press credentials in the state legislature. "I think a key point is that I had been in the press corps for years so they knew who I was. That helped. I didn't just show up as someone they never heard of" (Seattle online journalist, personal communication, 24 February 2016). This relative ease can be contrasted to the difficulty faced by less experienced journalists in getting similar credentials. In 2010, a local blogger was denied credentials to cover a Seattle Public Schools meeting. When asked why, she was told by a public schools spokesperson she was "not a real journalist" (Seattle online journalist, personal communication, 30 October 2015).

Beyond press credentials, established journalists were also able to bring their network of sources to their new ventures. As the founder of a Seattle startup put it: "I had a very good rolodex, and a lot of great sources and relationships. So I was able to parlay that very fast" (Seattle online journalist, personal communication, 23 February 2016). Less experienced journalists not only lacked those connections; their inexperience also left them with a different—and often highly antiestablishment—sense of how news should be reported, and this more critical sensibility made it more difficult to develop source networks. In Toulouse, one journalist described an instance where he wrote negatively about the mayor's political communication strategy. A few days later, someone from the mayor's office called to tell the journalist he was no longer welcome to attend the mayor's events. With elections coming up, this meant that he could not be present at any of the mayor's campaign events. "If you are not welcome to the campaign, it is very difficult to get good material for the articles" (Toulouse online journalist, personal communication, 29 December 2013).

Established journalists also had contacts at news outlets, which made visibility-boosting collaborations possible. In 2009, *The Seattle Times* established a partnership with four startups. As part of the deal, the *Times* linked to each from its local news webpage. It also allowed editors from those sites to question mayoral candidates in a town-hall style debate organized by the newspaper and a television station (Seattle online journalist, personal communication, 2 October 2015). Of the four sites, individuals with backgrounds in journalism operated three. Having this background in journalism was essential to their inclusion in the partnership. As a *Seattle Times* editor put it: "We only partner with people who share our journalism values … we want to create a network of journalism that can be trusted in an environment where there's a lot of journalism and not all of it *can* be trusted" (quoted in Friedland, 2014, p. 113).

This, too, stands in contrast to the experiences of less established journalists in both cities, but especially in Toulouse. At one startup, a journalist said that his peers in legacy media saw his efforts as either a "front shop" for a public relations agency, or a "copy paste" news agency that relies on the efforts of "real" journalists (Toulouse online journalist, personal communication, 11 March 2016). At another startup, the journalist had little respect for established journalism in the city, which he viewed as "corrupted" (Toulouse online journalist, personal communication, 29 December 2013). Whether they are rejecting established journalists or being rejected by them, journalists with low volumes of social and symbolic capital had difficulty establishing working partnerships with news media, and this contributed to difficulty in growing their audiences.

Finally, different volumes of capital also seem to mediate political system differences. While our analysis does not compare startup formation in Seattle and Toulouse to other cities in each country, it is noteworthy that many journalists in France stressed that Paris remains the center of journalistic legitimacy. As one person put it: "France is still a Jacobin country: It's Paris, Paris and Paris again" (Toulouse television journalist, personal communication, 14 November 2013). This suggests that while Paris and Toulouse may have structural similarities in terms of job regulations, symbolic capital on the whole is concentrated in Paris, thus creating conditions under which recognized journalists may seek to reshape the balance of power within the field by forming their own startups. At the same time, while the decentralized U.S. system seems to incentivize startup formation at the local level, there is wide variation in both the durability and visibility of "hyperlocal" news sites. While some have been around for about a decade, others are characterized by long periods of dormancy (when they publish little if anything). The sites that are longest lasting — West Seattle Blog and Capitol Hill Seattle — are run by journalists. Together, the situations in Seattle and Toulouse suggest that journalistic fields, through their control of capital, may mediate political system differences in important ways.

Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we have sought to explain the differential formation of online news startups in two cities. Despite seemingly favorable conditions for startups, Seattle and

Toulouse evince markedly different trajectories. Drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of capital and field, we argue that the volume and type of capital held by journalists forming startups in the two cities varied substantially as a result of cross-national differences in journalism's position in the field of power. These differences in turn shaped distinct patterns of startup formation in the two cities. Where established journalists in Seattle were able to convert their capital into the resources needed to form online news startups, less established journalists in Toulouse struggled to convert their comparatively lower volumes of capital into the resources needed to maintain online sites.

These findings extend and revise insights from the scholarly literatures in journalism innovation and comparative media systems. Scholars of journalism innovation typically argue that startup formation is shaped by individual traits like business acumen, technologically savvy, and professional experience. We show that professional experience matters far more in startup formation than do business or technical skills, and that the amount of professional experience among the startup population varies as a result of journalism's position in the larger field of power. Moreover, we argue that the importance of professional experience lay as much in its capacity to convert capital into the new resources needed for forming an online news startup as in its specific knowledge about how to practice journalism. Our field perspective thus specifies the individual traits that seem most important to startup formation, while also analyzing them as resources (i.e., forms of capital) that circulate within the journalistic field.

Comparative media systems scholarship has long emphasized the importance of economic, political, and regulatory contexts in shaping journalistic practice (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Our research confirms these insights, even as they cast doubt on more recent assertions about a move in the United States towards greater reliance on philanthropic funding, at least at the metropolitan level. Further, by exploring the interplay between structural contexts and individual actions, we show how journalists navigate the journalistic fields in which they form online startups. Finally, in drawing on and contributing to extant scholarship that compares French and American journalism, we extend that research to metropolitan cities far beyond the media capitals of Paris and New York that scholars typically explore.

Our field analysis suggests that social and symbolic capitals are the crucial resources for startup formation. By limiting our analysis to two cities, we have been able to closely explore how this capital is converted into the funding, accreditation, and public visibility needed to form startups. Future research can refine, test, and adapt the analysis by exploring which types of capital are important for online startup formation in cities within and beyond the country samples explored here. Given our emphasis on startup formation, it is important for future scholars to examine the specific skills and resources needed to maintain startups. It may well be that skills not salient in the startup phase—like business management—will become more important over time.

In drawing on field theory, our aim has been to integrate major assumptions about startup formation in the literatures on journalism innovation and comparative media systems into an analytical perspective. While this identifies patterns of startup formation that might guide future research, we do not claim that it accounts for all influences on startup formation. In focusing attention primarily on the factors influencing the supply of journalists able to form startups, little consideration has been given to the potential role of audiences in shaping the creation of online news sites. Moreover, while we emphasize the structural contexts in which journalists do and do not create online startups, we do not focus on the motivations that lead individuals to take the initial decision to create news sites. Given the suggested importance of startups in the contemporary news environment, these and related concerns deserve attention in future research.

Finally, while our research has drawn attention to the importance of the notions of field and capital, we do not suggest that membership in fields or the possession of capital will translate into enduring success. Indeed, many of the websites in Seattle, which has seen the widespread proliferation of online startups, remain financially precarious. In 2015, *Crosscut* — the city's largest online-only public affairs news site — announced it would merge with a local television provider. Conveyed in press releases as a happy merger, the underlying reality was less upbeat: Despite efforts to raise membership donations as a nonprofit, the site could no longer afford to go it alone. The example is just one reminder among many that, when it comes to online news startups, the object of analysis moves and changes quickly. Our effort here has been to illuminate the dynamics shaping this movement at particular moments in time and place, and to situate them within broader debates about the changing nature of journalism in the twenty first century.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1 We use the term "startups," as favored in Anglophone communication research. However, we recognize that the term is neither universal (in France these sites are commonly referred to as pure players) nor neutral (journalism innovation scholars often want journalists to act more like entrepreneurial businesspersons). It is thus important not to

equate online news startups with "startup cultures" more generally, which certainly differ in France and the United States, as do cultural evaluations of entrepreneurship more generally (Lamont & Thévenot, 2000).

2 Advertising comprises 73% of U.S. newspaper revenue nationally, versus about 40% in France (Benson, 2013).

3 While Paris has been described as "one of the most exciting laboratories for the future of online journalism in Europe" (Bruno & Nielsen, 2012, p. 11), Smyrnaios et al. (2015) write that elsewhere in France startups are few and far between, and that they "remain unknown to the majority of the public, even at the local level" (p. 167).

4 Important for our study is the comparability of the two cities, rather than the degree to which they are strictly "representative" of their respective media systems. Journalism employment in Seattle declined by half, which is steeper than the 33% national average (Downie & Schudson, 2009). The situation in Toulouse is likely more typical, as journalism employment has stagnated throughout France. That said, job precarity is growing in both countries: One study finds that those with short-term and freelance contracts produce 50% of editorial content in France (Leteinturier & Frisque, 2015). In both countries university degrees are basic conditions of entry for journalists. For an overview of journalists' demographics in both countries, see Benson (2013).

5 At the onset of the 2008 financial crisis, Seattle's two daily newspapers employed 540 journalists. Three television stations each had about 30 journalists, while the major public radio provider had approximately 50 journalists. Alternative weeklies employed about a dozen journalists. In Toulouse, the main newspaper employed 230 journalists in 2008. The regional public television station employed about 70 and smatterings of journalists were employed at radio stations and nondaily print media like Milan. For further details, see Powers et al. (2015). Overviews of local media can be found for Seattle in Durkin et al. (2010) and for Toulouse in Smyrnaios and Bousquet (2011).

6 Because our focus is on local journalism, we also excluded a small number of nationally oriented news sites, like Grist, which is based in Seattle.

7 We focus on founders because prior research suggests that it is their vision and resources that are central for startup formation (Naldi & Picard, 2012).

8 Prior to starting, we created lists of all journalists working in the two cities. These lists were culled by looking at newsroom contacts of news outlets, and we relied on these lists to select journalists to interview. However, these are not exhaustive, and systematically overlook important categories of journalistic labor, like freelancers. We corrected for this by deliberately seeking out such journalists to include in our sample.

9 Highly prestigious university degrees are uncommon in both cities. In Toulouse, no founder comes from any of the Parisian grandes écoles. In Seattle, there are two instances of founders with prestigious degrees, but neither demonstrates a common pattern. David Brewster holds an MA from Yale. He started Crosscut, an important public affairs site that continues publishing despite financial difficulties. Julia Pham holds a doctorate from Cambridge University. She started SeaBeez, which is now defunct.

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