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Disruptive technologies and community engagement

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Even when companies are great and they invest in innovation, they can still become obsolete (Levitt, 1960). Regardless of industry, giants still fall. Disruptive innovation theory warns of the bureaucracy of big business (Christensen, 2011). It suggests that the newspaper's decline due to poor management is a misnomer. Instead, it may have been the failure to invest in emerging media, such as microblogging and user-generated and sponsored content, that led to its demise. The founder of disruptive innovation theory, Clayton Christensen, suggests that the choice not to invest was due likely to the fact that such investments would have yielded a much lower return on investment (Christensen, Skok, and Allworth, 2012). Why would a media company profit just a cent from a YouTube video view when it can sell a single newspaper for two dollars? Disruptive innovation teaches a hard lesson in marginalizing returns. Profit cannot always be maximized (Dyer, Gregersen, and Christensen, 2011). Christensen himself states that even though news media are losing advertising revenue off-line seven times as fast as they are growing it online, they must continue to pursue online news (Christensen, Skok, and Allworth, 2012). Disruptive innovation boldly claims that investment in technologies should come because of future promise, not initial return.

News media have not been completely absent at the technological wheel (Terry and Jason, 2010). History shows us that companies such as Knight Ridder built the first prototype newspaper e-readers in 1994 (Kaye and Quinn, 2010). In fact, most well managed companies continuously innovate their products. Christensen points out a systemic flaw in these innovations. Labeled "sustaining technologies," these innovations usually come in the form

of improvements that increase the performance of established products and revenue streams. In the Knight Ridder example, the e-reader, while innovative, was largely a digital version of the daily newspaper. It would have incurred the same daily cost as a newspaper and largely fed into the existing revenue stream of daily subscriptions. Why would managers of a media organization stray? Daily subscription fees were successful and established value in the form of stable revenue (Kaye and Quinn, 2010). For another example, think of early newspaper websites that uploaded digital copies of their newspapers, unaltered, often as exact PDF copies. Instead of offering full-stories as Web content, stories were for subscribers only. Alone, favoring these existing revenue streams does not result in the failure of firms. Indeed, some do pay for e-subscriptions to the *New York Times*. But when compared to the number of print subscriptions, it is well known that the majority of consumers refuse to pay for online news. It is estimated that digital subscriptions only make up from 1–3 percent of total subscriptions for newspapers (Chyi and Lee, 2013). The focus for these industries has been primarily on existing revenue streams. This leaves the door open to alternative business models. This is when disruptive technologies have the opportunity to change a market (Kaye and Quinn, 2010).

Often, disruptive technologies do not return the same amount of revenue when compared to mainstream markets, at least at their conception. They typically emerge because they contain things that the consumer values. Nearly all of the metrics that measure a disruptive technology are evident in new news media. These metrics, while defined broadly for all types of business, are tailored to the case of the news industry:

Twitter is cheaper, smaller, more frequent, and more convenient than cable network news.

Google News is cheaper, smaller, more frequent, and more convenient than newspapers.

Feedly is cheaper, smaller, more frequent, and more convenient than magazines.

Christensen provides evidence that the door opens for cheaper, smaller, more frequent, and more convenient innovations when products lose sight of customers (Christensen, Skok, and Allworth, 2012). This is a phenomenon to do with companies and their tendency to “overshoot” their market. Any time a company delivers a product that is more costly and exhaustive than the customer would ideally prefer, an opportunity is created for a disruptive technology. We are not arguing here that newspapers are too exhaustive for readers. But we do know that consumers, if given a choice, would prefer not

to pay for costly subscriptions (Chyi and Lee, 2013). Certain audiences do not desire in-depth news coverage. Given these dispositions, freely accessible content did indeed disrupt newspapers and their traditional revenue streams.

When the performance of products improves beyond consumer demand, the choice is no longer based on the higher performing product. That is to say, when more than 100 credible news sources all deliver acceptable information, and some offer their content for free online, the basis of consumer choice often evolves. This change goes first to convenience and then ultimately to price.

However, one less bleak conclusion that we can derive from disruptive technology is that although it can be initially unprofitable, history shows that over time, these markets can be made profitable once an industry learns how to use the platform. At the time of writing this paper, we see that microblogging services such as Twitter are beginning to be monetized. Still, news organizations must ensure they are receiving their due share of the profit.

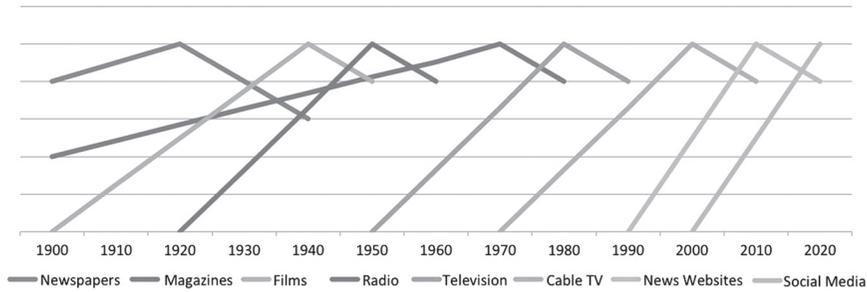
The rise and fall of mass media

The bold predictions of disruptive innovation apply to what we have observed in the journalism news industry. However, there is one important difference. The scholarship here seems to indicate that once a disruptive technology is introduced, the older technology becomes obsolete. In the case of news media, that would amount to the end of newspapers. Ahlers noted that this is not the case, and that while disruptive technology has displaced traditional news consumption, it has not done so to the degree imagined (2006). Many alternative media outlets have emerged in the history of mass media. The preceding media have not have completely disappeared.

In actuality, media have cycles. Media are young, then middle aged, and then finally reach their golden years. In *The Rise and Fall of American Mass Media*, Shaw sketched an historian's perspective on the evolution of newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and e-mail in the United States (Shaw, 1991).

Daily newspapers achieved their greatest circulation growth, relative to population, in the 1920. In the 1920s, more than one daily newspaper circulated per adult. Although the number of subscriptions to newspapers appears to have stabilized in recent years, now only 23 percent of Americans read newspapers on a printed page. This is compared to 47 percent as recently as 2000 (Kohut, 2012). Yet daily newspapers are still important. The *New York Times* remains the major player in the American news industry.

The Rise and Fall of the American Mass Media



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FIGURE 3.1 *The rise and fall of the American mass media. (Adopted and updated from Shaw [1991].)*

Benjamin Franklin published one of the first magazines in Philadelphia, *The General Magazine*, in 1741. After the Civil War, magazines exploded to fit the interests of women, merchandizers, sportsmen, political parties, farmers, Sears and Roebuck, and thousands of others. Some emerged as major mass magazines, such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's*, *Life*, and *Look*. But despite large circulation, these magazines did not thrive in the competition for advertising revenue against television. *Life* died in 1972 and *Look* in 1971. These mass magazines sought to attract wide audiences. They did, to a degree. But just as newspaper's subscriber rates were interrupted, so were those of the magazines before them. With broadcast television costing no monthly fee, consumers once again shifted from convenience to price. Broadcast television was cheaper.

The caveat of rise and fall in relation to disruptive innovation still holds true for magazines. Smaller, more targeted magazines thrive. These revenue streams, while initially much smaller than large mass-appeal magazines, have grown into a thriving market. Magazines for different hobbies, trades, and demographics return profits. This narrowed focus was perhaps the single innovation that saved magazines. Just as most innovations in their infancy, small magazines were initially less profitable than their mass counterparts. As Christensen preaches, despite small initial returns, these products can quickly outgenerate industry leaders.

From disruptive technologies to disruptive consumer trends

The history of news media shows that the medium itself has not been the key reason that people flocked from one media to another. Instead, the uses

and gratifications drove the flock. Convenience and cost drove consumption. The majority of innovations discussed in disruptive innovation are new technologies. While this is certainly one type of innovation, technologies are not the only things that innovate and change over time (McQuivey, 2013). Innovations themselves now stem from consumer trends. Moreover, innovations in technology typically result in more power for consumers to exert choice and freedom. Customer preference is now innovation.

Coined “digital disruptors,” new companies that structure themselves on the basis of consumer insight and engagement are poised to succeed in this new environment. Digital disruptors continuously assess consumer need. They deliver their product in the exact moment that the consumer wants it. They also “innovate the adjacent possible.” Digital disruptors take traditional products and experiment with adding new benefits.

In this chapter, we suggest a core benefit that the news has been providing for years: community. Digitized news does not provide a new core benefit that other news media did not. In fact, data show that consumers’ needs are relatively static (Christensen, Skok, and Allworth, 2012). Digital disruptors dented the media industry because they now satisfy needs better (Terry and Jason, 2010). How? Technological innovations provided levels of customization and interactivity far beyond the scope of the media businesses typically rooted in a static medium, such as print or television. This customization just is not just the freedom of media choice (i.e., on a tablet, on a phone, on Twitter, etc.); it is the freedom of community choice.

Newer, online types of media organizations have seized the sense of community via digital disruption. This does not mean that traditional media organizations cannot be reconfigured to address the consumer’s needs for community. But before for this change can occur, the disruption must first be understood. Newer media understand groups of people. They reach out to them. They speak directly to them. The following section focuses on new technologies that can allow this process to go on more quickly, more cheaply, and more effectively than ever before (Abernathy and Richard, 2010).

Delivering community

In media, while technology plays a role in disruption, so does community. Media present a picture of the world. In some ways, that picture also constitutes a “community.” The news media and what they cover are often the only voices for groups of people. The media decide what issues are important to the groups of people that subscribe to them. The conscious choices that news-media managers make are media agendas. They cover X instead of Y. They devote

a certain amount of resources to issue C, which is more than they devote to issue A. These agendas in many cases represent a community. How do you know the local happenings of your neighborhood? This comes from other people or from media such as newspapers, television, or social networking services. So as media technologies evolve, the pictures of community evolve. Consumers constantly seek to maximize our participation and enjoyment of life by selecting and participating in attractive and rewarding communities.

Clayton Christensen, the disruptive innovator himself, encourages managers to ask themselves what exactly the job is that the consumer wants done. In some regards, consumers now want you to portray the community (or communities) that they are interested in. As with magazines, the specialization of news can disrupt general news (Christensen, Skok, and Allworth, 2012). Community engagement, or lack thereof, can also disrupt news-media organizations.

Compared to fifty years ago, newspapers are lively, readable, entertaining, and accessible. But demand has frayed. Consumers are attracted to different communities via different media technologies. Newspapers represent agendas of a geographical community. For older people, reading newspapers means knowledge of the courts, streets, schools, and laws of the places where consumers live and work. It is an extension of their community. However, this type of readership is in decline. The thirty-year-old every day citizen today reads newspapers far less than the previous generation of thirty-year-olds (Stevenson, 1994).

But geographical community is not the only part of a consumer's identity. Media technologies allow consumers to select from an ever-expanding number of communities. Just as mass magazines now specialize, so do millions of Tumblr blogs and Twitter feeds. Consumers once again choose convenience. After all, why wait for a newspaper? If you want an update on the impending snowstorm, check Twitter. Technology allows the rearrangement of any number of different media on demand. Media technologies allow our audience the freedom to find their communities of interest.

Vertical and horizontal community

A particular type of news media has disrupted the likes of more mainstream news media, such as local newspapers and cable news. An example of this new type, Twitter, is particularly disruptive because it allows consumers to customize news digests while lowering the cost of consumption. This new type, of "horizontal media" appears to be chipping away at more traditional

mainstream media (Vargo et al., 2014; Shaw, El-Toukhy, and Terry, 2010). Vertical media can be thought of as a pyramid, such as those in Giza, Egypt. These reach more than 400 feet into the air; imagine the sweeping view from the top (Shaw and Vargo, 2012). Historically, newspapers evolved to fit this level of social structure. Certain media sit atop this structure and broadcast down vertically. Their goal is to communicate with the greatest number of people possible. Consumers have come to call this mass media.

But parallel to these vertical media are magazines, cable television, FM radio, Tumblr, Snapchat, YouTube, and Twitter. These media enable our audience to find content based on specific individual preferences. Moreover, they can communicate with others interested in the same topics. Horizontal media only create news that is of interest for niche audiences (Abernathy and Richard, 2010; Christensen, Skok, and Allworth, 2012).

Vertical media inform our audience about where consumers live and work. Horizontal media is where our audience plays and dreams (Shaw, El-Toukhy, and Terry, 2010).

Of course there is overlap. Vertical newspapers carry news about sports. So does *Sports Illustrated*, blogs, websites, Twitter, and Facebook. Consumers subconsciously balance the two forms of community, vertical and horizontal.

Audiences read the *New York Times* on the Web. They pick and choose topics of interest rather than leafing page by page through the newspaper. In doing so, of course, consumers rearrange a vertical medium into a “magazine” of personal interest.

Disruptive technologies allow our audience the freedom to organize their community in satisfying ways. Consumers constantly seek individualistic connections. Media that connect individuals into small groups allow our audience to reconstruct the social worlds they ideally prefer. These sources often offer social support and encouragement for ideals and beliefs. While these media have not developed ways to generate revenue widely, disruptive innovation tells us that they have the capability to do so. Media managers must now visualize the balance of community their audience desires. While it is hard to imagine responsible citizens living completely in a horizontal community, it is likely that it will play some key role.

Media’s new roles

Small magazines, social organizations, and blogs continue to reach sizable audiences. Some media succeed for a while, and some fail after a while. The answer is not the technology alone. Twitter is another social media

service that connects users with topics, issues, and people that they care about. The technology of sharing short text messages with other people has been around for over twenty years. Therefore, it was not the technology that was the answer. Instead, Twitter focused on making it easy to connect with communities of people that had common interests. These communities took to Twitter and made its usage skyrocket.

However, the direction of development is not always up. Rupert Murdoch spent \$580 million to purchase MySpace, a social medium created before Facebook. Murdoch was quoted as calling the buy a “huge mistake,” and he sold the company for \$35 million in 2011 (Lynley, 2011).

It is hard to argue with the dramatic disruptive impact social networking services have made on the dissemination of media. With that said, the majority of all new social media are not disruptive. In fact, the majority of new services created on the Internet fail. In the last few years, even Google failed twice with Google Buzz and Google Wave (and now perhaps a third time with Google+). In fact, most new technologies do not disrupt the communication patterns of news media or people.

There are of course, very notable exceptions: Snapchat, Facebook, and Twitter. What makes these services so exceptional? The technology itself is a mere service with an intuitive interface. Yet, those services somehow facilitate community building to a greater degree than possible before. Communication services that enable communities to form easily and most effectively have are the most successful. Again, as McQuivey states, the innovation usually concerns added consumer benefit, not a new technology (2013).

Since the onset of Facebook, the service has been centered on communities. Facebook’s original mission was simple: It was a way to keep up with and talk to your college community. The growth of the service was fueled around these communities. Everyone was associated with the school they attended. Facebook expanded its website one college at a time. Since its expansion to a broader audience outside of college, Facebook still focuses on existing social connections and on extending that relationship online. While things such as Facebook groups and pages now exist for companies and organizations, the majority of the interactions stem from person-to-person relationships.

While existing in-person communities are powerful, one of the real innovations of Twitter was the focus the service placed on connecting with like-minded people and things. Here, the emphasis was placed more on imagined communities; not just circles of friends, but circles of social support. On Twitter, social circles form around person-to-person friendships, geographic areas, sports teams, political ideologies, and hobbies. People are less concerned with the intimacy of their interactions, instead focusing on

what information the other users Tweet. Interacting with strangers is not taboo, as it has been with other services like MySpace and Facebook.

It also appears that news disruption of the last decade has also dealt with the liberation and increased dissemination of content. Whether it is community-driven journalism or news services themselves sharing the news via these new social services, there appears to be an expectation that the content will be fast and free. This is particularly disruptive to the journalism industry, which, until this point, has directly profited from advertising whether online or off, when advertising was served to the consumer. The expectation has shifted to accessibility and instant delivery. Social media services appear to be disruptive when they ensure a higher degree of accessibility than previously available. Tweets can be viewed on almost any device, at any time. No newspaper firewalls exist, there is no waiting, and, most importantly, no financial investment is required. This represents another accurate foreshadowing of disruptive innovation as defined by Christensen.

Finally, these services all appear to add a level of interaction that is not only novel but also beneficial to the user. Now journalists can be instant messaged and questioned directly. Users can comment on the news. They can curate it into custom lists and share those lists with others. Audiences can aggregate together and collectively speak using hashtags. The top news stories are no longer solely at the mercy of news editors but instead can be dictated by the aggregate. Social media services such as Twitter now offer the highest degree of social reinforcement yet. Whatever a person's views are, compatible social support is available. No matter how eccentric, no man is an island.

New "horizontal" news media have also become forms of social reinforcement (Vargo et al., 2014; Shaw and Vargo, 2012). These media are as highly customized to the specific communities they serve. Just as they are diverse, audiences are fragmented. More traditional news services such as the Associated Press and CNN have great presences online, but mainstream media's reach online is now supplemented by bloggers, citizen journalists, and friends. Now, there is no one source that is charged with reporting the heartbeat of a nation. A typical user of a social networking site such as Twitter may rely on a myriad of news services, as many as 300 plus, for their daily news digest.

Tactics: Learning from communities

There are ways to subdivide the communities that a media organization must serve. In this case, newspapers might compete with online blogs and

horizontal media. Just as the *New York Times* now has 535 Twitter accounts that include journalists that cover beats from LGBT to vegan dining, so can other newspapers. While the *New York Times* has unsurpassed reporting power, other newspapers can identify which types of communities their audiences are also engaged in and join those conversations. Media managers should follow audiences and must create the communities that most closely match their viewers.

News managers must embed themselves within disruptive technologies, regardless of their initial promise. Every member of your business should be an innovator, from the executives to the reporters (Dyer, Gregersen, and Christensen, 2011). When a media outlet takes on a new social media service, it must put forth an aggressive effort to connect with customers who need them, not just reuse existing content. This goes beyond making a Facebook page and setting up a Tumblr account. Actively finding members of the community and attempting to connect with them yields the best results for engagement (see Chapter 10 for a full review) (Terry and Jason, 2010). Audiences must be analyzed and investigated. Their interests, thoughts, opinions, and concerns represent valuable feedback. Surveys are no longer the best measure of an individual's media consumption. Their digital footprints are direct, quantifiable points of data. Harnessing demand can drive profit from the technology. The overwhelming majority of all news media now have a social media presence. Journalists now share their stories across all types of services. But photo sharing, blogging, microblogging, live blogging, and live streaming are not enough. Demand must be created. This demand, once quantified, can be used to negotiate revenue agreements with services such as YouTube and Facebook. If a journalist's feed is in demand and thus drives traffic, it should share in the profit of the service in which it exists. At the time of this writing, few journalistic sources have capitalized on this possibility in the ways that record companies have with their music.

Christensen also cautions managers not to fear failure. For every Nate Silver and his blog "538," there are thousands of failed endeavors. Making a new news service requires both persistence and ingenuity. Making that service profitable is generally an iterative process of trial learning. Large organizations are at an inherent disadvantage when it comes to the development of a new technology. Often, values and cost structures within large organizations are static. This can result in stifled innovation. Business norms must not interfere with innovation.

To avoid this pitfall, disruptive innovation theorists suggest the creation of "spin-off" companies. Here we might envision alternative media startups. It is crucial that these offspring remain free from the parent companies' cost structures and pressures. If the news organization and its business ethics

and practice impede the process of innovating to cover new communities, separate start-up media should be created. Things that bound traditional news sources, such as objectivity, journalistic styles of writing, and profit margins, should not bound these new endeavors. Instead, they should exist outside of traditional management so they might innovate the most freely. The real driver must be learning and discovery, not senior management. Therefore, when projects are embarked upon, the final results are often not known. Two products with drastically different profit margins have trouble coexisting under the same corporate umbrella. One will always compete against another, often at a cost to innovation and future promise. Instead, when different cost models exist, different companies should be created. The best, most innovative companies are not delivery driven but discovery driven (Dyer, Gregersen, and Christensen, 2011). Innovation marks progress in these businesses.

Scale and size are two assets that media organizations traditionally used to exert dominance. In the digital landscape of news, scale no longer matters (McQuivey, 2013). Now everyone has the ability to create and publish content. Social media has torn down the barriers to entry. Of course, just because content is now easy to distribute does not mean that anyone with the desire to publish stories on the Internet is successful. There remain ways to gain competitive advantages. Through the knowledge of and engagement with consumers, companies of smaller scales can succeed. While companies have been trying to understand their consumers for centuries, this process has drastically changed.

No matter how small profit margins might be in the early onset of a company, growth can still be observed and appreciated (Carayannopoulos, 2009). If today Twitter signed an agreement with newspapers resulting in one cent per click and two cents for a retweet, would small town newspapers be saved? Unlikely. But it would be then be possible that a small start-up organization could leverage local news. It runs on a razor-thin profit margin (Carayannopoulos, 2009). Then, with proper incubation, it could attempt to scale and grow. These investments must be viewed as essential experiments. These ventures should not be cut if times get hard. Doing so prevents an organization from fostering disruptive innovations.

What might a disruptive media company look like?

Consider the varying ways in which news can be delivered. It may differ in the technological method in which users discover, read, or interact with

the news. Currently, we see innovations in different technological devices such as tablets, augmented reality, and interactive television. How can the media harness these technological innovations to disrupt the current way of consuming news? Each answer is an experiment that may be worth trying.

Alternatively the news coverage itself can vary. Scholars talk of the need to invest in innovations that harness different methods of reporting, such as crowdsourcing and big-data journalism. Startups that embrace these ideas should be pursued. Shortly after their inception, they must actively be put in front of consumers who want to use them. The rest is often uncontrollable. Undoubtedly, even the most optimistic scholars of innovation conclude that while the overwhelming majority of new ideas fail, the chase is necessary to avoid obsolescence.

Finally, new advertising revenues must be explored. The *New York Times* recently took a huge chance and pioneered what it called a “branded content studio.” Outside of the control and norms of its advertising department, the studio set out to write full-length feature stories for its advertisers, which it would run as stories on its namesake site (Moses, 2014). The initial reaction within the company was likely mixed. Would this disrupt advertising revenue? Would this compromise journalistic objectivity and integrity? The studio addressed concerns and sought to generate compelling, factual, and journalistically integral pieces of journalism for brands. It leveraged existing reporters throughout its newsroom and encouraged them to go where the facts did. It was able to generate “sponsored content” or “branded content” for large-pocketed clients such as Netflix, who ran a wildly successful piece on women’s prisons for an upcoming premiere of a television show about the subject. Now, brands with compelling stories to tell turn to a plethora of online branded content studios embedded in major news organizations, such as the *Huffington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*, to create content. The result for the media organization is additional advertising revenue. When delivered compellingly, both the advertiser and consumer feel they are producing content that is engaging at a rate that far exceeds traditional online advertising.

Conclusion

While media do not seem to disappear, revenue streams most certainly appear to be susceptible to disruption. Taking heed of alternative technologies is not enough. Listening intently to your audience and what it cares about is important, but watching what other types of media they consume is crucial.

Clayton Christensen challenges news organizations to “watch people and get a deep understanding of how they live their lives” (Christensen, Skok, and Allworth, 2012).

Your job as a news manager is no longer to report on the place in which you live but rather the social and economic contexts in which your audience lives. Know what your audience likes and dislikes. Scholars are now arguing that if your audience is fragmented on viewpoints or ideologies, you must be too (Abernathy and Richard, 2010). Do this by whatever means possible, even if it requires creating separate companies for each ideology. Despite the initial return on investment, being first counts. Demand must always precede monetization when it comes to news. The competitive advantage of being a leader in new media will yield long-term benefits after economic models are established. This investment does require allocation of resources and should not be taken lightly. If treated as a serious and required inquiry, disruptive innovation shows that ideas can eventually yield fruitful revenue streams. Like any investment, innovation needs time and room to grow. The process is also highly iterative and prone to trial and error. Still, the payoff comes in the form of obsolescence insurance—the ability to adapt to the changing landscape in concert with the surroundings and not to purely react to already present forces.

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