The Co-Creational Model for the News Media

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Summary

The aim of this project was to explore the potential for a new 'co-creational' model of news media which combines the traditional journalistic commitment to epistemic (knowledge-related) norms such as accuracy with a greater commitment to public participation and social inclusivity.

We distinguish the co-creational model from three other models of news media: the 'professional' model, exemplified by some broadsheet newspapers and public service broadcasters; the 'libertarian' model, exemplified by some tabloid newspapers, cable TV channels and fake news websites; and the 'social' model, found on platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Twitter and YouTube.

The project was led by Dr Jonathan Heawood and Professor Fabienne Peter and involved the participation of a range of pioneering news media organisations which, in different ways, exemplify this new model.

We found that these co-creational media organisations:

- differ from both professional media organisations and social media platforms in the way they approach public participation in their work

- have inherited or adapted some epistemic norms from the professional model of news media

- are forging new norms which blend their epistemic and participatory commitments

- differ from each other in significant ways

- share an equally strong commitment to public participation and epistemic value.

In this report, we describe the case for the co-creational model and the distinctive elements of this new model. We also discuss some challenges faced by co-creational news media organisations and suggest further work in this area.

Introduction

What is the role of the news media in a healthy democratic culture? Journalism experts often answer this question by providing a list of ethical duties for journalists like 'get the facts right' and 'don't be biased', or practices like 'attend council meetings' and 'expose dealings between politicians and lobbyists.' These behavioural principles, or norms, are supposed to help journalists fulfil their role as the 'fourth estate' or watchdog of democracy.

We don't dispute these norms, but in this project, we have taken a different approach. Rather than take things for granted about either democracy or the news media, we have begun by asking three fundamental questions:

- What constitutes a healthy democratic culture?

- Is there a role for the news media in supporting a healthy democratic culture?

- If so, what is this role?

What constitutes a healthy democratic culture?

In our view, a healthy democratic culture must respect two fundamental principles: the participation principle and the epistemic value principle.[1]

In its most basic form, the **participation principle** says that everyone in a society must be able to participate in democracy by voting in elections. But we don't think that voting alone is enough. We think that people must also be able to discuss matters of shared concern. How can we say that we're living in a democracy if some individuals or groups are systemically excluded from public debate? It must be possible for the public to hold politicians to account. And politicians as well as civil servants need to know whether they are truly responding to the views of the public.

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[1] The background for this project is Fabienne Peter's research on political legitimacy. This research sheds light on how the norms that should govern democratic political debate include both democratic participation norms as well as norms that aim to protect epistemic standards (Peter 2008, 2020, 2021). Our joint research explores the significance of these two types of standards for models of media ethics and practice (Heawood and Peter 2022).

So, our first principle is that *everyone in a society must have a meaningful opportunity to take part in democratic deliberation*.

But participation alone isn't enough to guarantee a truly healthy democratic culture. For that, we need an **epistemic value principle** as well. Otherwise, people might debate on the basis of false information and without understanding of the relevant context, and decision-makers might act without knowing what's at stake. How can good decisions be made if false views prevail without being challenged? Without some kind of commitment to epistemic (knowledge-related) values such as establishing relevant facts, we can't say that we are living in a democracy. Democracy isn't democracy if it's built on lies, misunderstandings or bullshit. So, our second principle is that *democratic deliberation must respect epistemic value*.

Is there a role for the news media in supporting a healthy democratic culture?

Putting these two principles together, it seems clear that we do need something like the news media to support a healthy democratic culture. We need specialist institutions to facilitate political debate, to help ensure that different viewpoints are well-represented, and to organise the critical scrutiny of factual claims that are being made in political debate. We need institutions that are equipped to create epistemic value – by sifting truth from falsehood, for example – and to enable participation – by conveying the views of everyone in society, for example.

Many different people and institutions play important roles in a healthy democratic culture: activists promote certain agendas; NGOs raise issues of concern; trade unions represent the economic interests of their members; faith groups bring a moral perspective to bear on proceedings, and so on.

Each of these groups has an important stake in democracy, but none of them is *primarily* geared towards epistemic value or participation. None of them is designed to sift truth from falsehood or to convey the views of stakeholders (other than their own followers). For this, we need specialised knowledge/participation workers. Let's call them journalists.

What is the role of the news media in supporting a healthy democratic culture?

Let's be clear that not all journalists or media institutions currently fulfil the demands of either knowledge or participation. Some media institutions have a high commitment to epistemic value, but a low commitment to participation. Others have a high commitment to participation, but a low commitment to epistemic value. And some media institutions are committed to neither epistemic value *nor* participation. We can map the various models of news media as follows:

High commitment to epistemic value	Professional model	Co-creational model
Low commitment to epistemic value	Libertarian model	Social model
	Low commitment to participation	**High commitment to participation**

The **professional model** of news media is typically found in broadsheet newspapers and public service broadcasters. These institutions are committed to epistemic value, but they usually enable only limited public participation. They tend to enshrine the belief that journalists are professionals who gather information *from* the public, and then provide information *to* the public, but who do not work *with* the public to decide what is true or salient. The public are involved in their work only as the source of stories or the audience for stories – but not, for example, as the people who decide which stories to follow, how to frame those stories or what facts to include in those stories. That kind of public participation is not only alien to the professional model; it potentially threatens the very ideal of professional journalism, which assumes that journalists must protect their independence from outside forces.

The **libertarian model** of news media is found in some tabloid newspapers, cable news channels and so-called 'fake news' websites, which care about neither epistemic value nor public participation. They exist to promote the views of a small group of people (their publishers and producers), regardless of whether these views are grounded in facts or conducive to understanding. At best, they are reckless with the truth; at worst, they set out to destroy epistemic value through the consistent and knowing publication of misinformation and disinformation. They might reflect the views of the public, insofar as they follow the market for certain stories, but they don't have formal mechanisms for involving the public in the production of their work.

The **social model** of news media is found on platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Twitter and YouTube, which enable anyone with an internet connection to take part in public debate. In the early days of social media, some people believed that platforms like these would supplant the professional model of news media, because they would allow everyone to share information directly with each other, removing the need for journalistic gatekeepers. More recently, that belief has given way to pessimism, as we have seen how platforms tend to support the spread of lies and propaganda, and to stifle participation by promoting hate speech against certain groups. Social media platforms certainly enable far greater public participation than either libertarian or professional media, but they tend not to have formal mechanisms for protecting epistemic value. In fact, they often describe any such mechanisms as 'ministries of truth', to be opposed at all costs.

Having identified these first three models of news media, we asked ourselves how the news media might respect *both* the epistemic value principle and the participation principle. Is there a trade-off between epistemic value and participation, whereby the media must either respect professional journalistic norms or enable mass participation but cannot do both? Or can we reconcile these two principles in a new, fourth model of news media?

The **co-creational model** of news media is our answer to this question. It reflects our belief that it is possible – and desirable – to build a model of news media that is committed to both epistemic value and public participation. We suspect that this model will have features that are distinct from the other models described above, and that co-creational media organisations will need to develop new journalistic norms – ethics and practices – if they are to satisfy their dual commitment to epistemic value and public participation.

The co-creational model of news media is not just an abstract concept. This model is currently being developed by a number of media organisations that are trying, in very different ways, to reconcile the demands of epistemic value and public participation.

In this project, we explored the co-creational model in dialogue with these media pioneers. This is not a sociological or ethnographic project: we did not set out simply to map the work of co-creational media organisations. Instead, this is a piece of public philosophy, bringing our normative framework into dialogue with the day-to-day considerations of media practitioners, to see what philosophers and practitioners can learn from each other. As such, we had three objectives in mind:

- Firstly, we wanted **to add value to the work of organisations who are developing forms of co-creational news media**. We hope that, by sharing our framework with a small group of media pioneers, we can provide them with a useful way of thinking about their work, leading to further innovation.

- Secondly, we wanted **to test and develop our framework** in light of our dialogue with the media pioneers who participated in the project.

- Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, we wanted to encourage these organisations and others **to benefit the public through the provision of co-creational news media**. We believe that the co-creational model has considerable potential to strengthen democracy, and so we want to see more members of the public actively participating in co-creational media.

Project Organisation

The 'Co-Creational Model for the News Media' project ran from July-December 2022. It was funded by an ESRC Impact Acceleration grant from the University of Warwick. The project was led by Professor Fabienne Peter of Warwick University and

Dr Jonathan Heawood of the Public Interest News Foundation (acting in a personal capacity), with support from Clare Simpson.

We began by identifying a small group of media organisations that appeared to be committed to both epistemic value and public participation:

- [Bellingcat](), a collective of researchers, investigators and citizen journalists using open source and social media investigations to probe subjects from Mexican drug cartels to crimes against humanity.

- [Black Ballad](), which tells stories, hosts events and creates experiences by, for and about Black British women.

- [The Bristol Cable](), an investigative newspaper, entirely owned by thousands of local people, free to access in print and digital.

- [The Ferret](), an investigative journalism platform for Scotland and beyond, owned and governed by a co-operative board which includes both journalists and subscribers.

- [gal-dem](), a media company committed to sharing the perspectives of people of colour from marginalised genders.

These organisations all aim to involve significant numbers of non-journalists in the production of journalism. In this way, we believe that they represent a distinct and important break from both the professional and social models of news media.

For this project, we worked with the following representatives of the participating organisations:

- **Eliot Higgins** of Bellingcat

- **Tobi Oredein** of Black Ballad

- **Lucas Batt** and **Eliz Mizon** of the Bristol Cable

- **Alastair Tibbit** of the Ferret

- **Suyin Haynes** and **Sereena Abbassi** of gal-dem

During July and August, we held individual briefing sessions with the participants using video-conferencing technology. In these sessions, we shared our thinking about the co-creational model and invited the participants to reflect on whether and how this model might be relevant to their work. All agreed that the co-creational model helped them think about their work, and several noted that they are already practising the model in various ways, though they had not thought about it in these terms before.

Building on the briefing sessions, we held a half-day workshop in London on 23 September, when we encouraged participants to reflect on how they perceive and address potential tensions between their commitments to epistemic value and participation. Following the workshop, we shared our preliminary findings with the participants for feedback, before drafting this report.

Emerging Themes

We identified a number of themes in our briefing sessions with individual organisations.

We heard about the **complex relationship between co-creational media organisations and their communities**. For example, the Bristol Cable told us that they provide 'in-depth journalism that reflects local issues and community values', whilst Bellingcat said that their '"communities" extend across a wide range of different disciplines and expertise, including international human rights, policy makers, journalists, governments and NGOs.' We began to understand that 'community' is not a simple or singular term in this context.

We also heard that the **co-creational model is a corrective to the weaknesses of other models of news media**. All the participants told origin stories about launching organisations to address the failings of other forms of media. However, the detail of these stories varied considerably. For example, Black Ballad told us that they were 'founded to address the dearth of publications catering for Black British women' whilst Bellingcat 'focuses on evidence, not opinions, which now overwhelmingly dominate news media.'

We picked up on the **continuing relevance of some norms of professional journalism in the co-creational model**. For example, gal-dem told us that they apply 'rigorous regulation of content, using reliable sources and scrupulous editorial standards', whilst the Ferret's editorial team 'scrupulously observe' the organisation's stance of impartiality on the question of Scottish independence. We were intrigued by these comments, which suggest that these organisations' commitment to public participation does not come at the expense of all traditional journalistic norms.

We also heard a lot about the **pressures of financial sustainability**. Several participants spoke about the challenge of generating revenue from subscribers, advertisers or donors whilst ensuring that they don't cater only to those who pay their bills. Whilst all news media organisations are facing economic challenges, co-creational media organisations have a unique struggle to find the balance between outside participation in their work and outside control of their work.

We used these initial insights to inform the design of the workshop, in which all the participants came together to reflect on the goals and methods of their organisations. We posed the following questions in order to tease out tensions and synergies between the participants' commitment to epistemic value and their commitment to public participation.

- Goals:
  - Do you aim mostly to provide accurate information or mostly to build community?

- o Is your content intended to be equally relevant to anyone in the world or is it intended to reach a very specific community (based on locality, identity, interest, etc.)?

- o When you think about 'truth' in your output, do you think of truth as something that should be the same for everyone (universally valid) or as something that is relative to specific contexts (location, social group, lived experience, etc.)?

- ● Methods:

  - o Who is the ultimate arbiter of truth in your publication?

  - o Do you make decisions <u>on behalf of</u> your community (i.e., you <u>represent</u> them, like an MP supposedly represents their constituents in Parliament) or do you make decisions <u>with</u> your community (i.e., you have a more participatory model of engagement, where you make decisions in dialogue with your community)?

  - o Who decides what to cover in your publication?

In response to our first question, all participants said that their organisations give equal weight to enabling public participation and providing accurate information, thus illustrating a core feature of the co-creational model. Some strongly rejected the idea that they should have to choose between these commitments which are, for them, deeply intertwined. They placed a very high value on the synergy between the aims of providing accurate information and audience engagement.

They differed in their interpretation of these twin aims, however. For some organisations, the goal is to serve a particular community, whereas others use the co-creational model with the aim of producing news that might be relevant for anyone. In all cases, they work with limited numbers of participants, and it would be interesting to see how the co-creation model plays out for organisations that aim to serve a very large audience (see 'Next steps', below).

We found that some organisations take a very context-sensitive view of what counts as 'truth' in their output, whereas others think of truth as something that is universally valid. This does not mean that the context-sensitive organisations are promoting 'alternative facts' or epistemic relativism. It means that they are working with communities whose experiences have been ignored or traduced – the victims of what some philosophers call 'testimonial injustice' and 'hermeneutic injustice'. For these organisations, certain facts may be more or less salient than for other organisations, but they do not dispute the empirical status of these facts.

In fact, all participants expressed strong commitment to some of the traditional epistemic norms of professional journalism such as fact-checking or editorial independence. They agreed that the ultimate responsibility for their output sits with the editor or journalist and can't be outsourced to the public. In this respect, they

are aligned with the traditions of the professional news media model. This sets their organisations apart from the social model of news media.

However, they also differ from the professional news media model in their strong commitment to community engagement. All of them have mechanisms for involving the public at one or other stage of their work, from agenda-setting, through information-gathering and fact-checking, to working on collaborative campaigns. The public are far more to them than sources or audiences; they are partners.

In discussion at the workshop, we also identified tensions within the co-creational model, including worries around the risk of contributing to echo chambers or other forms of fragmentation in the public sphere, safeguarding journalistic independence, and building strong communities without becoming socially exclusive.

Project Outcomes

The project confirmed that the co-creational model is a useful framework for describing the work of various pioneering media organisations and helping these organisations to think about their work in new ways.

The project showed that there are a number of ways in which **co-creational media organisations differ from both professional media organisations and social media platforms in the way they approach public participation in their work**:

- Whilst professional media organisations tend to have a linear relationship with the public, co-creational media organisations tend to have much more **dynamic** relationships with the communities they serve. Professional media organisations get stories from the public and then tell/sell those stories back to the public, whereas co-creational organisations expect to change and be changed by their communities.

- Whereas professional media organisations might conceive of the public as a single group which is largely passive – simply 'sources' or 'consumers' – co-creational organisations engage with **multiple** communities and see the multiplicity within the communities they serve. They don't see 'people from Bristol' or 'women of colour' as homogenous groups, for example.

- Whilst they aim to be objective in their pursuit of truth (see below), they don't purport to be disinterested. They tend to have **commitments** to their communities that go beyond simply providing information. For example, they want to help them pursue justice or social change or to gain authority in public discourse. They are often (but not exclusively) focused on the needs of historically marginalised communities.

- In turn, they expect to be affected by their communities – because, for example, the communities tell these organisations what's important to them or hold them **accountable** or pursue stories in partnership with them.

- In this way, co-creational media organisations are committed to **reciprocal relationships** with their communities. To put it simply, they don't just tell people things; they expect to have a conversation between partners who trust each other.

We have also shown how **co-creational media organisations have inherited or adapted some epistemic norms from the professional model of news media**:

- They are engaging with communities in quite radical ways, but that doesn't mean they have abandoned all the core values of traditional news media. We were very struck by how committed they all are to some form of **objectivity** in their journalism.

- They are committed to fact-checking and verification of truth claims, and to distinguishing truth claims from statements of opinion. We see this as a strong **procedural** commitment to epistemic value. In other words, they take steps to ensure the accuracy of what they publish (though the exact steps vary between organisations).

- They tend not to give members of their community direct access to the means of production. Instead, the communities accept the **authority** of an editor or publisher to act as a gatekeeper or filter, taking responsibility for the procedural steps mentioned above.

- This responsibility has both practical and **symbolic** value – signalling to communities and other stakeholders (advertisers, donors, politicians, lawyers, etc.) that co-creational media content meets their expectations of journalism and should be taken seriously as such.

There are also a number of ways in which **co-creational media organisations are forging new norms which blend their epistemic and participatory commitments**:

- Some of these organisations are taking advantage of the decentralised structure of social media to conduct **participatory research** and fact-checking.

- Some are pursuing forms of **participatory agenda-setting** and accountability, for example through formal members' meetings or audience representation on the organisation's board.

- Others are **learning from their audiences** through less formal mechanisms such as community meetings or audience surveys.

- Several co-creational media organisations are **addressing forms of testimonial and hermeneutic injustice** by giving voice to underrepresented social groups and covering otherwise neglected topics

We can also conclude that **co-creational media organisations differ from each other in significant ways**. Some have formal accountability mechanisms – their

members are their owners – whilst some learn from their communities through less formal mechanisms – surveys, etc. So, the field of co-creational media is itself **diverse and plural**, with different ways of pursuing similar goals.

In general, however, **these organisations share an equally strong commitment to public participation and epistemic value**. In fact, these twin commitments are tightly interwoven.

Co-creational media organisations serve their communities by taking responsibility for the epistemic value of the journalism they publish on their behalf. That is their unique contribution. But they don't expect to make this contribution in isolation. They expect to be part of a dynamic ecosystem of interlocking communities, which they affect through their journalism – and which affect them. They pursue epistemic value through these collectives, not apart from these collectives.

Next Steps

We believe that this project has implications for issues including trust in the news media, media regulation and journalism sustainability, and we would be happy to discuss our findings and questions with practitioners in these fields.

Widespread distrust in the news media is not the hallmark of a healthy democratic culture. We suspect that some of this distrust is driven by confusion about the different models of media – libertarian, professional and social – that can blur into each other in the online public sphere. By articulating the differences between these models, and strengthening co-creational news, we may be able to identify a pathway to **restoring appropriate trust in the news media.**

Regulatory frameworks for the media are under enormous pressure as a result of fast-changing economic, social and technological factors. Regulations for professional news media are not appropriate for social media and vice-versa. By setting out the differences between these different media models, we might help policymakers develop **appropriate regulatory frameworks** for supporting the best – and addressing the worst – of each type of media.

Economic, social and technological changes have also disrupted traditional business models for professional media, and they pose challenges to potential new business models for co-creational media. It seems that epistemic value is at odds with financial value in today's media economy. Without some way of realigning epistemic value with financial value, professional and co-creational media will continue to struggle. By helping co-creational media organisations to articulate their distinct contribution to a healthy democratic culture, we might play some part in setting them on the road to **financial sustainability**.

We would like to dig deeper into the co-creational model with media practitioners, not only small and independent organisations but also larger entities such as public service broadcasters, which have a legal duty to meet the needs of the public as a

whole, but which tend not to prioritise public participation in their work. We would like to see how far the co-creational model could help these organisations articulate and fulfil their public service duties in the new public sphere.

Acknowledgements

About the authors

Jonathan Heawood is Executive Director of the Public Interest News Foundation (PINF), the first charity in the UK with a remit to promote public interest news. He previously launched and ran the independent press regulator, IMPRESS, and has also served as Director of Programmes at the Sigrid Rausing Trust; Executive Director of English PEN; Editorial Director of the Fabian Society; and Deputy Literary Editor of the Observer. He has a PhD from Cambridge University and has held visiting fellowships at Stirling University, the University of East Anglia and King's College London. His first book, *The Press Freedom Myth*, was published in 2019. He worked on this project in a personal capacity.

Fabienne Peter is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Warwick, specialising in moral and political philosophy and social epistemology, including political epistemology. She was a postdoctoral student at Harvard University and an assistant professor at the University of Basel and has held visiting positions at the Research School of Social Sciences at ANU and the Murphy Institute at Tulane University. She is a past editor of *Economics and Philosophy* and a past associate editor of the *Journal of Applied Philosophy*. Her main philosophical contributions to date are in political philosophy and social and political epistemology and she is interested in the question of what, if anything, justifies democracy. She has published a book on *Democratic Legitimacy* and is the author of the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on 'Political Legitimacy'.