



Selected Papers of #AoIR2025:
The 26th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Niterói, Brazil / 15 – 18 Oct 2025

WHY THE FUTURE OF JOURNALISM IS NOT A TECHNOLOGICAL RUPTURE: ON THE IMAGINATION OF SOCIETAL NEEDS FOR PUBLIC COMMUNICATION AND INNOVATION IN PIONEER JOURNALISM

Andreas Hepp
ZeMKI, University of Bremen

Wiebke Loosen
Leibniz Institute for Media Research | Hans-Bredow-Institut (HBI)

Abstract

Journalism often frames its future as shaped by “technological rupture” and “innovation”. This paper challenges such narratives, arguing instead for understanding journalism’s transformation as a broader structural change—one that involves the creation of new organizational principles, supported by an imagined need for new technologies to “innovate” toward a better future.

Through the concept of “pioneer journalism,” we analyze how journalists who experiment with new practices and imagine possible futures shape the transformation of the field. Based on a media-ethnography in Germany, we examine how pioneer journalists envision the societal needs for public communication and how these imaginaries inform their approaches to innovation. Our findings reveal that their imaginations are strongly rooted in democratic values, emphasizing six societal needs: creating encompassing publics, providing appropriate information, fostering exchange, correcting negative developments, promoting a sense of belonging, and supporting societal development.

Paradoxically, however, their discourse on innovation often mirrors Silicon Valley’s categories, raising critical questions about whether such frameworks can adequately address the imagined needs for public communication. There is a multiple refraction of innovation imperatives: pioneer journalists simultaneously critique Silicon Valley narratives and Big Tech power while appropriating their innovation methods, creating tensions between journalistic values and innovation practices.

Suggested Citation (APA): Hepp, Andreas; Loosen, Wiebke (2025, October). *Why the future of journalism is not a technological rupture: on the imagination of the societal needs of public communication and innovation in pioneer journalism*. Paper presented at AoIR2025: The 26th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Niterói, Brazil. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

Moving beyond innovation

The significance of narratives and imaginaries surrounding journalism's transformation and futures cannot be overstated. However, as scholars, we should describe transformation primarily as structural change. Within such processes, both "social" and "technological" innovations are important, and we must consider them to understand how "new" practices and technologies become established. Nevertheless, transformation as structural change is far more encompassing, and what is perceived as "innovation" today is not necessarily the driving force behind tomorrow's changes.

This is why we have developed the concept of "pioneer journalism" to describe and explain journalism's transformation. Although "innovation" is a widely used term (Hepp & Loosen 2021), we place it in quotation marks to signal the need for analytical distance (Evans 2018). This does not imply avoiding the term altogether, as "innovation speak" (Vinsel 2014a; Vinsel 2014b) continues to play a significant role in journalism.

In our paper, we reverse the usual perspective. Rather than asking which "technical ruptures" or "innovations" are changing journalism—a question typical within the journalistic field—we ask *how pioneer journalists imagine the societal needs for public communication and what implications they draw from this for innovating journalism toward a better future*. This shift entails a holistic perspective and requires examining how pioneer journalists' imaginaries shape their everyday practices.

Therefore, the first objective of our paper is to present this holistic approach to pioneer journalism in greater detail. The second part, based on a media ethnography of pioneer journalism in Germany, analyzes their imaginaries of the societal needs for public communication and their associated imaginaries of innovation.

A holistic approach to pioneer journalism

We define pioneer journalism as a figuration of actors who experiment with journalistic practices and imagine possible futures for the field (Hepp & Loosen 2021; 2022). Individual pioneer journalists within this broader figuration can be characterized by the following criteria:

1. Pioneer journalists perceive themselves as forerunners of their profession and are recognized as such by other members of the field (though not necessarily all);
2. Within their field, pioneer journalists act as intermediaries (Bourdieu 2010, 151, 325, 359); bridging disparate professional spheres and advocating for changes that extend beyond their immediate domain;
3. Pioneer journalists are typically embedded within "communities of practice" (Wenger 1999), which we conceptualize as "pioneer communities" (Hepp 2025);
4. Within these communities, selected professional pioneers take on the role of an "organizational elite" (Hitzler & Niederbacher 2010, 22);
5. By virtue of their experimental practices, pioneer journalists play a special role in the development of their profession (e.g., as trainers, consultants, or bloggers);

6. Pioneer journalists typically embody imaginaries of possible futures, which often makes them a subject of media discourse on related changes (e.g., in self-reflexive discussions about the future of journalism).

We use the term *pioneer journalism* to emphasize that it is particularly those journalists who, through established media companies, start-ups, accelerators, or as individual actors, exert a lasting influence on the transformation of journalism.

However, it is crucial to avoid a simplistic, linear view in which individual pioneers act as catalysts for “innovations” that inevitably reshape the field. The reality is far more complex: assuming that pioneer journalists, their projects, and their start-ups necessarily lead to successful products or companies is an overly narrow understanding of how pioneer journalism operates. Indeed, many of their ventures fail.

Nonetheless, pioneer journalism contributes to the ongoing transformation of the field in two key ways: First, the experimental nature of pioneering endeavors opens up space for new practices and technologies that have the potential for broader appropriation. Second, pioneer journalists’ visions of the future of the field inspire ‘ideas’ for possible trajectories of change (Fredriksson & Pallas 2017).

Pioneer journalists’ imaginaries of societal needs for public communication and innovation

Our media ethnography of pioneer journalism in Germany (2020-2023; n=63 interviews) draws on interview data to examine how pioneer journalists conceptualize societal needs for public communication and the associated imaginaries of innovation.

Our analysis reveals a broad consensus among pioneer journalists regarding the societal needs of public communication. They frequently emphasize six key needs: creating encompassing publics, providing appropriate information, fostering exchange, correcting negative developments, promoting a sense of belonging, and supporting societal development—each of which includes further nuanced dimensions.

Overall, pioneer journalists are oriented toward normative democratic values and are focused on sustaining democratic stability. “Technological ruptures” are, at best, perceived as potential threats to these societal needs of public communication. Consequently, their imaginaries of innovation are highly specific: they are particularly concerned with how technical innovations in a vulnerable world can help address these societal needs and secure the future of journalism. For pioneer journalists, “innovating” journalism is therefore not only an economic endeavor but also a means of maintaining forms of public communication that serve societal needs. We refer to this as the *vision of preserving public communication through journalistic innovation*.

Paradoxically, however, their discourse on innovation is often framed in the language of Silicon Valley: the focus shifts toward “users” rather than “citizens,” practices are shaped by “agile methods,” and there is an emphasis on “breaking down silos” between

departments within journalistic organizations. With such imaginaries of innovation, the “everyday cybernetics” of Silicon increasingly permeates the everyday practices of pioneer journalism.

Our analysis reveals critical tensions in how pioneer journalists appropriate these innovation imperatives. Most notably, there is friction between journalism’s commitment to contextual quality and Silicon Valley’s ideal of standardized scalability—captured in the insight that “journalism does not scale.” Similarly, while pioneer journalists embrace user-centric approaches from tech discourse, this conflicts with journalism’s aspiration to address citizens rather than mere users. Therefore, their approach is neither a naïve techno-solutionism nor a simple preservation of traditional journalism, but rather a *multiple refraction of innovation*: pioneer journalists simultaneously critique Silicon Valley narratives while appropriating their innovation methods (agile practices, user-centric, projectification). This ambivalent appropriation generates ongoing tensions between journalistic values and innovation practices.

References

- Bourdieu, P. (2010). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Evans, S. K. (2018). Making sense of innovation. *Journalism Studies*, 19(1), 4-24. doi:10.1080/1461670x.2016.1154446
- Fredriksson, M., & Pallas, J. (2017). The localities of mediatization: How organizations translate mediatization into everyday practices. In O. Driessens, G. Bolin, A. Hepp, & S. Hjarvard (Eds.), *Dynamics of mediatization* (pp. 119-136). London: Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-62983-4_6
- Hepp, A. (2025). Curators of digital futures: The life cycle of pioneer communities. *New Media & Society*, 27(9), 5390-5409.
- Hepp, A., & Loosen, W. (2021). Pioneer journalism: Conceptualizing the role of pioneer journalists and pioneer communities in the organizational re-figuration of journalism. *Journalism*, 22(3), 577–595.
- Hepp, A., & Loosen, W. (2022). Beyond innovation. Pioneer journalism and the re-figuration of journalism. In P. Ferrucci & S. A. Eldridge, *The Institutions Changing Journalism* (1st ed., pp. 118–135). Routledge.
- Hitzler, R., & Niederbacher, A. (2010). *Leben in Szenen. Formen juveniler Vergemeinschaftung heute. Dritte, vollständig überarbeitete Auflage*. Wiesbaden: VS.
- Vinsel, L. (2014a). How to Give Up the I-Word. Part 1. Retrieved from <https://culturedigitally.org/2014/09/how-to-give-up-the-i-word-pt-1/>
- Vinsel, L. (2014b). How to Give Up the I-Word. Part 2. Retrieved from <https://culturedigitally.org/2014/09/how-to-give-up-the-i-word-pt-2/>
- Wenger, E. (1999). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.