John Mills and Dr Ana Cecília Bisso Nunes—written evidence (FOJ0057)

**House of Lords Select Committee on Communications and Digital
Inquiry into the Future of Journalism**

Journalism innovation: UK and global perspectives on Journalism's innovation structures and processes

1.   Submitted by John Mills, Reader in Emergent Technology and Journalism Innovation at the University of Central Lancashire, UK, and Dr Ana Cecília Bisso Nunes, Assistant Professor in Entrepreneurial Journalism, Digital Media and Innovation at Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil

2.   **Biographies:**

3.   **John Mills:** based at the Media Innovation Studio at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan), John's interdisciplinary research interests focus on journalism innovation and prototyping. They span journalism, the Internet of Things (IoT), augmented paper, mobile journalism, wearables, human-centred design, drone journalism and innovation theory. In recent years, John's research has focussed on how journalism organisations innovate, and the structures they put in place to develop new products and processes.

4.   **Dr Ana Cecilia Bisso Nunes:** is an Assistant Professor of Entrepreneurial Journalism, Digital Media and Innovation at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (PUCRS / Brazil), where she also plays a role as academic head of IDEAR, an interdisciplinary entrepreneurship lab she helped to found in 2016. Her research interests span media and journalism innovation, entrepreneurship and digital media. For the past four years, she had been dedicated to her PhD: a research on processes and characteristics of media and journalism innovation in experimental contexts known as media labs. That work counted with a partnership with WAN-IFRA and has just been approved with honours on March 2020. Her PhD was a joint degree between PUCRS (Brazil) and University of Beira Interior (Portugal).

5.   **Background context:** besides unpublished and original data, this evidence also builds on already published material on media labs. With a focus on innovation processes and practices, the study and new research work is relevant to Committee's enquiry into how collaboration can drive innovation within the industry. Published by the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers and the World Editors' Forum Trends in Newsrooms series, our report[1] explored 'media labs' as a way legacy journalism publishers, academic institutions, accelerators and incubators were being adopted across the globe to catalyse innovation. Its key findings included that

   • Media labs are rapidly increasing as a tool for innovation

---

[1] https://www.wan-ifra.org/reports/2019/11/18/trends-in-newsrooms-3-media-labs

- Labs are open and collaborative in terms of the skills they harness, position they take within their organisation and ecosystem and how they look outwards for solutions to the challenges they face

- They primarily deploy small and interdisciplinary teams that have the space, time, facilities and mindset to prototype, iterate and deploy new processes, products and services

- They allow experimentation, and therefore create the potential for attitudinal change within their organisation and beyond it: creating new ways of working and problem-solving

- Media labs horizon scan future innovation structures and trends, absorbing technologies and processes into their organisation

- Focus on rapid prototyping rather than formative research

6. **Current research**

7. We are submitting evidence from an ongoing research project, and a recently completed PhD thesis. The current, and unpublished, 'pathfinder' research develops some of these themes. Funded by the European Media Management Association, and involving researchers from UCLan, PUCRS and the University of Beira Interior (UBI), it seeks to learn more about the innovation processes that are used within media organisations, how funders of journalism innovation influence the ecosystem, and how is the efficacy of innovation judged. It does this through holding collaborative workshops with media leaders and innovators in Latin America and Europe, and conducting semi-structured interviews with funders and newsroom management and leaders. Insights will be supported by data from Ana Cecilia Bisso Nunes' PhD thesis, which surveyed 54 media lab leaders from 15 countries. It has also analysed 60 projects from these spaces, with special attention to the 30 related to the media and journalistic industry.

8. The research team therefore submit this evidence as a work-in-progress report, which hopes to add value to the Committee's enquiry around:

9. **Q1: How can innovation and collaboration help news providers of all types to maintain sustainable business models and adapt what they produce to audience demand? What lessons can be learnt from successful innovations, including in other countries?**

10. *Many funders target "innovative journalism" but sustainable innovation comes from journalism innovation:* Although there is a broad and diverse range of funders operating within the industry ecosystem internationally, initial desk-based research shows that a number focus on innovative storytelling approaches (or soft innovation) rather than process or editorial technologies.

11. Our research indicates that storytelling innovation can both emerge from:

- unsystematised innovation processes within newsrooms and

- media labs or other sustainable innovation structures.

12. However, they are most common in the former. According to the analysis of 49 projects indicated by the media labs surveyed on Ana Cecilia's PhD thesis, just 7 (14%) were related to storytelling innovation. Looking at projects related with the journalism industry, just 4 out of 30 (13%) were focused on this type of innovation. Therefore, the fact that many funders target storytelling innovation raises the question on whether journalism players are majorly encouraged to take further steps into continuous and systematized innovation within media and journalism rather than specific efforts on storytelling. This lends itself to the potential that grant income becomes a revenue model, rather than as a catalyst for sustainability.

13. Nevertheless, some funders that do look towards innovative technologies and processes can provide high levels of funding that are geared towards a sustainable future beyond funding dependence. Examples include public-sector/national research councils and European funding tracks such as Horizon 2020. Equally, Google's recent DNI programme invested significant resources.

14. *Creating resilience, and not just funding:* European Journalism Centre and the post-Cairncross Nesta's Future News Fund, are indicative of organisations that support a cohort of organisations rather than simply offer a cash injection. They attempt to build resilience and knowledge in funded organisations in order to better equip them to succeed within their ecosystem. Support and learning around business agility, understanding unique value propositions, and how to conduct rapid or paper prototyping are all offered to instil resilience.

15. *Human-centered approach is permeating the ecosystem:* From our current research, a human centred approach is identifiable from most participants. This can be seen in the early workshop responses which demonstrated a preference for user-led innovation rather than technology-first approach, and in the presence of design thinking approaches used by industry and funders in the support of industry innovation. Besides ongoing funder interviews, a PhD survey with media lab leaders reiterates this. The vast majority (76%, or 39 from 51 leaders) 'completely agreed' with the sentence: "My laboratory process starts from diverse problems of the information age and then thinks about the appropriate technologies to solve it". In addition, in relation to the innovation source, the data shows that the indicated projects are mainly derived from:

    - engagement with communities and / or approximation with the user's contexts (35%) or

    - the emergence of new technology (29%).

16. The two perspectives are quite different: one more active and focused on audiences and the other more reactive and technocentric. The latter is more in line with the organizational culture of the media, particularly journalism, that tends to be more defensive and reactive (BOCZKOWSKI, 2005), instead of proactive. Still, 22% of the innovations indicated come from a new market opportunity / need. The fact that the approach to communities is the most popular innovation source corroborates a strategy of a closer relationship with the audiences. It is also in line with most popular methodologies adopted by media labs, which were, according with our data, primarily qualitative and human-centred. The sector is putting people at the centre of their innovation activities – either through design thinking approaches or, potentially, via big data. However, that raises two elements:

- how effective are their methods for understanding audiences?

- are they focussing on audiences that they already access, rather than ones which they do not?

17. More work should be done in this space, particularly around better understanding the metrics of the methods that publishers are increasingly using when viewed internationally. This would have a direct impact on the potential sustainability of individual players, and the ecosystem more broadly.

18. *Overcoming short-termism: Long-term collaborations between research and industry are key for sustainability and effective innovation over longer time-frame: a* more general reflection from this research and others is that there is an immediacy to innovation within the industry globally. Many 'innovators' use rapid prototyping to test and develop products and services with the goal of commercialisation. Some, such as the BBC, are engaged with formative research programmes, but there is potential to explore this in more detail: how can publishers influence R&D programmes that result in innovation if they are not involved at the outset, or at an earlier stage? Would a longer-term mindset to innovation, either directly or via collaborative arrangements, create more effective innovations? These questions seem key.

19. *The funding and innovation ecosystem are creating newsrooms that are testbeds:* A key insight so far is in the lived reality of some regional newsrooms in the UK. For example, one newsroom interviewed was simultaneously hosting Facebook-funded community reporters, multiple DNI projects funded by Google, exploring training and individual championing of change. The reality of this is that, implicitly, an editorial member of stuff would be exposed to an open model of new ideas, approaches, technologies, practices and engagements. For new members of staff, this 'testbed' environment will be a normative newsroom culture. What this means for sustainability is uncertain, but the approach instils the DNA for openness and collaboration at both an organisational and individual level. For organisations, this additional capacity is focused on expanded reporting capacity, and the resources to innovate, and individuals

20. *Multidisciplinary teams seen as requirement for [effective] innovation:* The initial research probe data revealed an appetite for multidisciplinary and potentially interdisciplinary collaboration to fuel innovation. This is also confirming previous research in this space. This was seen in all the research approaches currently taken. Openness and collaboration are founding principles of many innovation constructs: through people, products, processes or technologies.

21. Journalism and IT were the most common existing majors among the surveyed lab's teams. In addition, most (56% or 30 out of 54) media labs work (mainly) with more than one media field. Journalism though, is the most common, being related with the mainly field in 74% or 40 out of 54 surveyed labs.

22. **Q2: Are there any other ways in which public policy could better support journalists and news organisations, now and in the future? Are there examples from other countries from which the Government could learn?**

23. *Public funding in support of resilience:* In this way, public funding of journalism could provide not just the monetary value, but the support systems and structures

that are needed to realise the aspirations of government policy. One good example internationally is Media Lab Bayern, which was created by the Government of Bavaria to boost journalism and more broadly media innovation throughout the region by funding the lab to accelerate start-ups, connect them with media organisations and generate economic growth and media innovation. This intervention is geared towards driving innovation and enterprise, and equipping innovators with skills and knowledge to allow them to be more effective. It is geared towards benefiting start-up, media publishers and regional economic growth.

24. In fact, the public-based model of the lab seems to provide a greater space and freedom for testing, experimentation and the ability to learn from errors. In 2019, we conducted an observation study for three days at Media Lab Bayern and have interviewed eight people involved with this project, half of them being team members and the other half incubated fellows from the main innovation program of Media Lab Bayern. Looking into the questions "What makes Media Lab Bayern a media lab?" and "What makes it different from a regular accelerator?", the funding model was highlighted among both groups. It seems both team members and fellows see it as a differentiation, not just because it gives legitimacy and trustworthiness to the selected projects, but also provides scope for r experimentation as a "safe space".

25. Rather than storytelling innovation, the startups there hoped to provide solutions to help journalists to do their jobs. Others exploit new niche markets around content and media. Another noticeable point is that most fellow weren't from media and journalism backgrounds. So, even if innovation in journalism is a need on a digital challenging context, we still need to find ways to encourage them to get involved in long-term innovative solutions for the field. It raises the question: How can we encourage the view that journalists can also be engaged in entrepreneurial solutions for the field? Through the interviews with the team members, they state to perceive a growth of the engagement of these professionals in the area lately, but more is still needed. Tech and business were common majors we found among fellows.

26. *Impact measures need to be clear, understandable and sustainable in and of themselves:* More work needs to be conducted into how funders measure the impact of thier work. Initial research shows that the ability to measure impact over short-, medium- and long-term is challenging, both in choosing a framework through which to assess their role, and in accessing resource to track impact over time. This is both a resource question and a methodological one. The project will continue to explore this theme.

27. **Summary**

28. Our research suggests that:

  - Funders support innovative journalism, but journalism innovation is less frequent, although players such as Google DNI offer substantial support. 'Journalism innovation' rather than 'innovative journalism' has the greatest potential to provide long-term solutions to the industry

- Funders are supporting innovation not just with money, but with other supporting processes to encourage resilience and adaptability.

- International examples such as Media Lab Bayern are examples of public funding that supports the ecosystem and individuals

- Rapid development is a fundamental way that publishers are tackling innovation. This is driven through a multiskilled and multidisciplinary approach

- Innovation is geared towards users, but questions remain around how best to understand users

- Potential to involve a wider range of journalism publishers in more formative R&D

April 2020