

Patrick Ferrucci, **The Organization of Journalism: Market Models and Practice in a Fraying Profession**, Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2024, 219 pp., \$26.00 (paperback).

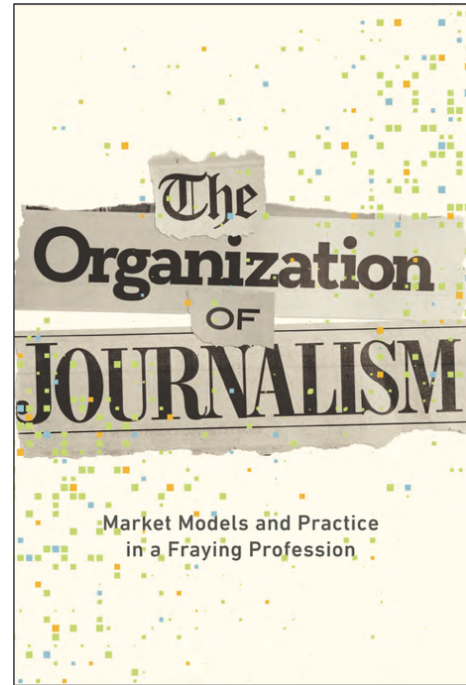
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With the professionalization of the news industry in the 19th century came standardized journalistic practices such as adherence to a code of ethics that dictated news production processes. Journalists went to school to learn how to gather and write news, and the standardization created a monolithic news culture that lasted for about a century—until the emergence of what Patrick Ferrucci, author of **The Organization of Journalism: Market Models and Practice in a Fraying Profession**, calls “seismic disruptions” (p. 2) that forever changed how journalists produce news and think about their role in society.

Ferrucci, the department chair of the College of Communication, Media, Design and Information at the University of Colorado Boulder, argues in his book that the culture of professionalization in the journalism industry can no longer predictably define the way news is produced and disseminated. Now, he says, organization and ownership of newsrooms are what largely determine journalistic practice.

To make his argument, Ferrucci presents six case studies featuring newsrooms with distinct organizational structures and funding models. These case studies, each presented in its own chapter, chronicle how journalists across different newsrooms conceptualize their roles in the media ecosystem and the types of news they value. They also explain how each newsroom perceives its audience. For example, Ferrucci argues that whether newsrooms consciously retain their agenda-setting power or cede it to the audience is a direct result of an outlet’s organization and funding schemes. Through in-depth interviews focusing on organization and news values with journalists at these media outlets, Ferrucci analyzes the culture and the news production processes that he says stem from and are dependent on organization and ownership.

Ferrucci conducted in-depth interviews lasting between 30 and 90 minutes with journalists and nonnewsroom staff at each organization until he reached a point of saturation. He supplemented interviews with participant observation and textual analysis of written materials such as employee handbooks. He situates his findings within organizational frameworks and theories, including Edgar H. Schein’s (2010) three levels of organizational culture: (1) items in the public image, such as mission statements and dress codes; (2) what employees say about their work and shared assumptions about it; and (3) patterns and behaviors that consistently come up but are not said out loud. These three pillars of



organizational theory are the foundation of Ferrucci's analyses, helping illuminate why journalistic practice differs from newsroom to newsroom.

He organizes the six newsrooms—*The St. Louis Beacon*, *Defector*, *The Colorado Sun*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Athletic*, and *The Denver Post*—along a spectrum of most radical to most traditional organizationally. Ferrucci describes the *Beacon* in Missouri as a "digitally native, nonprofit newsroom" (p. 18) powered by a donation- and grant-based funding model. Margaret Wolf Freivogel led the *Beacon* until her departure, and journalists described her as having substantially shaped newsroom culture and story coverage. Under her leadership and through the nonprofit model, journalists felt free to pursue stories without the stress of profit demands. Instead, they worked toward the *Beacon's* mission of providing context through "news that matters" (p. 28).

Ferrucci then introduces *Defector's* model, an employee-owned cooperative that posts all stories behind a paywall, without ads. Former *Deadspin* journalists started *Defector* in 2020, and today, subscriptions make up 95% of its revenue. Each *Defector* journalist believes they have a say in the way the organization is run. Indeed, when new hires come aboard, they are inculcated into *Defector* culture, in which they receive equity and learn about the organization's values of transparency and an open, democratic process. As such, the editor-in-chief, currently Tom Ley, does not yield extensive power over the newsroom and can be voted out by other staffers. The open culture extends beyond the staff, with *Defector* journalists directly engaging with their subscribers through comments and fireside chats.

The third newsroom Ferrucci analyzes is *The Colorado Sun*, which he describes as a "digitally native, for-profit public-benefit corporation" (p. 20), a legal designation that means the *Sun* runs like a traditional business but with the goal of advancing the public good. Like the *Beacon*, there is no emphasis on breaking news. Rather, *Sun* staffers focus on collaborative explanatory journalism that helps contextualize Colorado ongoings. And like *Defector*, the editor-in-chief is viewed as a peer. However fissures exist between staffers and founders, who have more security and standing than staffers. As a result, while the *Sun* does emphasize collaboration, newcomers might feel ostracized and like collaboration is awkward given hierarchical disparities. In terms of audience, *Sun* staffers understand them as recipients of their own news judgment and stories rather than as co-collaborators in the news production process.

The next newsroom profiled is *The Boston Globe*, owned by billionaire John Henry after having previously been owned by a local family and *The New York Times*. Switching to private ownership brought on a new organizational culture in which the newspaper became known as a "writer's paper" (p. 91), meaning that reporters have significant latitude on what they cover and a strong sense of job security. *Boston Globe* staffers rely on metrics to inform news coverage, considering the audience as "numbers and not partners in newswork" (p. 105). They use Chartbeat to guide editorial decisions, but reporters are still largely driving the coverage.

*The Athletic* is the next newsroom profiled in Ferrucci's book. The sports outlet is a venture-capital-funded news organization whose articles all sit behind a paywall. During onboarding and socialization into the newsroom, *Athletic* journalists emphasize that new hires should think about reporting out "unique and compelling" (p. 116) angles, rather than producing quick news hits. Like *The Boston*

*Globe*, journalists have autonomy over story coverage. And because there is a decreased emphasis on breaking news, journalists have more time to devote to individual stories, meaning there is space to collaborate and produce in-depth, analytical reporting. While *The Athletic* has created space for audience members to weigh in on the articles produced, the outlet works to preserve its own autonomy over news-making processes, using readers' comments primarily as an idea reservoir or a temperature check.

Finally, the last case study profiles *The Denver Post*, a legacy newspaper now run by Alden Global Capital, which journalists have previously described as a "hedge fund vampire" (p. 137) that pushes staffers to do as much as they can with waning resources. Alden's presence permeates the newsroom culture at *The Post*, with staffers describing burnout and an obvious rift between them and hedge-fund leadership. The editor-in-chief oversees the newsroom but cannot shield staffers from layoffs or Alden's emphasis on profit-driven news coverage. Journalists at *The Post* view the audience as "customers [rather] than citizens" (p. 151), and metrics such as page views and subscriptions drive most news production and decision making.

These truncated summaries do not do justice to Ferrucci's rich and detailed case studies. Through them, Ferrucci reveals how organizational structures and funding models are crucial to news production and considerably alter the relationship between journalists and audience members. Each case study elaborates on newsroom leadership, organizational mission, socialization processes, news production processes, engagement, and technology. Ferrucci also documents changes in news processes with organizational fluctuations. When, for example, *The Athletic* was acquired by *The New York Times* in 2022, journalists described the leadership change as disruptive. Journalists said they felt Freivogel's departure from *The Beacon* worsened news production. Henry's acquisition of *The Globe* strengthened it. Ferrucci's longitudinal analysis, for which he returned to the newsroom after significant leadership change, strengthened his position that news production is dependent on funding, organization, and hierarchy.

Ferrucci's argument that organization is a useful framework for studying journalistic practice is theoretically innovative. Organizational theory helps journalism scholars identify how external influences shape journalistic practice. Ferrucci notes that his book stands in contrast to other works of media sociology that study journalistic practice, which he says frequently center "myopic" elements that decenter "the organization in journalism studies research, often minimizing the power of the organization" (p. 176). By taking organization into consideration, Ferrucci fills a gap in the literature of media sociology. He pulls his findings together to offer valuable best practices for journalists, including clear communication about changes from newsroom leadership and a shared news decision-making process.

Though Ferrucci incorporates ethnographic elements into his methodology, such as participant observation conducted in remote and on-site newsrooms with journalists, he emphasizes that he did "nowhere near enough" (p. 17) of it to constitute a true ethnographic study. His interviews are compelling and detailed, but so are his observations, through which readers get a sense of the extent to which newsrooms relied on metrics to drive decisions and the way workplaces influenced news coverage. These observations are interesting to read and helpful because they supplement and contextualize the journalists' voices. As a reader, I would have welcomed more of them.

Nevertheless, Ferrucci's approach opens a valuable window into the lived routines of contemporary journalists. The book offers a compelling and accessible account that will benefit both scholars and practitioners, making it a worthwhile contribution to the study of newsroom culture.

#### **Reference**

Schein, E. H. (2010). *Organizational culture and leadership* (vol. 2). San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.