

The logics of innovation. Institutional logics and isomorphic pressures in public service media innovation labs in the age of artificial intelligence

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Abstract

This study explores how Public Service Media (PSM) innovation laboratories navigate a complex institutional environment that simultaneously constrains and demands innovation. Drawing on the concepts of isomorphic pressures and institutional logics, the study investigates strategies used by PSM innovation labs to innovate within institutional constraints. Based on interviews with editorial technologists from three PSM innovation labs in Germany, we identify five institutional logics that enable innovation despite strong normative and coercive pressures: the logics of agility, efficiency, public service, audience, and interdisciplinary collaboration. These logics function as adaptive mechanisms that enable PSM innovation labs to balance the demands of innovation with adherence to norms, regulations, and limited resources. Our findings illustrate how PSMs can manage institutional complexity and sustain innovation within constrained operational environments. Hence, this study offers a dynamic view of isomorphism, where conformity and agency coexist, and where innovation can emerge from within institutional boundaries rather than in opposition to them.

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Keywords

Digital journalism, institutional logics, isomorphism, media innovation, organizational change, public service media (PSM), technology adoption, Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Introduction

PSM occupy a unique space within the broader media landscape, balancing the demands of serving the public interest with the challenges of remaining relevant in a digital environment (Martin and Lowe, 2014). Being a major information source in many European media markets, PSM are expected to effectively serve digital audiences while adhering to their core mission of providing high-quality and accessible content that serves the public (Lowe and Maijanen, 2019; Sehl and Eder, 2023). Meeting these expectations has required excessive process, product, and distribution innovations in the digital age (Evans, 2018; Sehl and Cornia, 2021) as well as operational and strategic agility (Jantunen et al., 2018). In the age of artificial intelligence (AI), PSM must adopt algorithmic technologies in alignment with public value (Porlezza et al., 2022).

In response to the need for technology adoption, PSM have established innovation laboratories (Zaragoza Fuster and García Avilés, 2022). These labs represent a structural innovation with the purpose of facilitating the integration of digital technologies into journalistic practices and news products (Hogh-Janovsky and Meier, 2021). While innovation labs are often portrayed as hubs of experimentation and technological progress (Cools et al., 2024), their development and operation are subject to isomorphic pressures—coercive, mimetic, and normative forces—that drive organizations to adopt similar structures, practices, and personnel compositions (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). The personnel composition of PSM innovation labs is characterized by multidisciplinary teams of editorial technologists (Hogh-Janovsky and Meier, 2021; Mills and Wagemans, 2021; Zaragoza Fuster and García Avilés, 2022). Editorial technologists, a community of practice positioned at the intersection of journalism and technology, develop tools that integrate computational methods into editorial workflows (Kosterich, 2022; Zaragoza Fuster and García Avilés, 2022). Their work is shaped by institutional logics (Lischka, 2020), which are broader belief systems that guide decision-making (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999).

PSM innovation labs catalyze change and promote technological advancement (Mills and Wagemans, 2021). However, PSMs must carefully navigate innovation and institutional conformity, as they operate within a highly regulated environment where legitimacy is tied to public service mandates (Lowe and Savage, 2020). PSM innovation is therefore subject to pressures to conform to established norms, regulations, and professional standards (Sehl and Cornia, 2021). This study aims to examine how PSM innovation labs manage these tensions between conformity and agency, focusing on institutional logics that are in place to navigate innovation. Specifically, this study addresses the following research question:

How do PSM innovation laboratories navigate the tension between innovation and institutional conformity?

Empirically, we conducted 14 interviews with editorial technologists from three PSM innovation labs in Germany, a democratic-corporatist media system (Humprecht et al., 2022) with a high relevance of public service news (Hölig, 2023). The study contributes to the field of PSM innovation research by showing how editorial technologists use institutional logics to manage isomorphic pressures. Practically, the study offers insights into how PSM foster innovation while preserving their public service mission.

Literature

This study employs the concept of isomorphism and institutional logics from institutional theory to analyze the dynamics within PSM innovation labs.

Isomorphism in PSM innovation

Institutional theory posits that organizations are significantly shaped by their external environment. This perspective emphasizes that organizational innovation is not merely influenced by factors internal to an organization, but largely determined by the broader institutional context in which organizations operate. The concept of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) explains how organizations within a field become more similar over time instead of becoming more distinct. As organizations seek legitimacy, they conform to coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures when innovating.

First, coercive isomorphism arises from regulatory pressures and formalized constraints (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). For PSM innovation labs, this includes governmental regulations (e.g., GDPR), funding structures, and public accountability requirements, which limit the degree to which they can freely experiment with digital technologies (Nel and Rymajdo, 2024). Moreover, algorithmic governance (Caplan & boyd, 2018) by dominant platforms introduces additional external constraints on innovation strategies. In addition to formal coercive pressures organizations face informal coercive pressures, including budget expectations and reputational risks associated with failed innovation projects, which influence decision-making even without formal enforcement (Bisso Nunes and Mills, 2021).

Second, mimesis suggests that organizations model themselves after similar organizations perceived as successful in their field. For instance, PSM, often navigating financial and technological uncertainty, tend to model their innovation practices after private-sector digital media ventures or other successful PSM innovation labs (Hogh-Janovsky and Meier, 2021; Sehl and Cornia, 2021). As Mills and Wagemans (2021: 1481) note, innovation labs globally adopt similar methods such as design thinking, sprints, and hackathons: “Labs, now present across the globe, are fuelled through similar motivations and replicate a number of elements, thus mirror a degree of isomorphic replication”. Therefore, innovation labs can be considered as a collectively legitimized structural innovation of PSM. However, Sehl and Cornia (2021: 1470) point out that PSM

innovation labs “do not simply mimic others based on their observations, but adapt observed practices according to their own audiences, purposes, strengths, weaknesses, and public service mission.” Beyond mimesis, interdisciplinary collaboration that leverages diverse expertise to drive content development is important in innovation labs (Bisso Nunes and Mills, 2021; Virta and Lowe, 2016).

Third, normative isomorphism results from the formation of shared norms and values through professional education, industry associations, and hiring practices (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Professionalization involves the collective effort of members of a professional group to define their values and ways of working, which establishes professional autonomy (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). In the case of editorial technologists, professionalization and autonomy manifests in homogeneous ideas about audience-centric innovation, data-driven journalism, and automated content production (Lischka et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2019). On the one hand, this creates a “pool of almost interchangeable individuals who occupy similar positions [...] and possess a similarity of orientation” (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983: 152). Employees with similar backgrounds evaluate similar approaches and structures as appropriate, find similar solutions to problems, and make similar decisions, argue DiMaggio and Powell (1983). On the other hand, innovation labs have a multidisciplinary occupational staff profile distinct from the rest of the organization with a pro-innovative culture that allows experimenting with new technologies (Mills and Wagemans, 2021). In the case of PSM innovation labs, the professional community of editorial technologists (Kosterich, 2022; Lischka et al., 2023) place emphasis on audiences as a primary source for understanding how innovations are to be adopted (Zaragoza Fuster and García Avilés, 2022). Their shared professional identity fosters a collaboration culture that encourages team members to function as communities of practice that center innovation around increasing their public service function (Zaragoza Fuster and García Avilés, 2022). However, such collaborative environments are often shaped by organizational structures that limit the decision-making agency of innovation actors, particularly when formal hierarchies remain dominant (Cools et al., 2024). We suggest the following research question:

RQ1. What are the specific coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures experienced in PSM innovation labs?

Institutional logics in journalism

Institutional logics are overarching belief systems that structure how individuals and organizations operate within a given institutional field (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Thornton and Ocasio, 1999). Defined as “supraorganizational patterns of human activity by which individuals and organizations produce and reproduce their material subsistence and organize time and space” (Friedland and Alford, 1991: 243), these logics operate as “taken-for-granted social prescriptions” that shape what is considered legitimate in a field (Battilana, 2006: 656).

A foundational distinction exists between professional logics, which emphasize normative values, and market logics, which prioritize profitability (Thornton et al., 2015).

In journalism, the *professional logic* underscores the public mission of news media in upholding democratic society, sustained through journalistic routines that reinforce editorial autonomy and integrity (Deuze, 2005; Nielsen, 2017). This logic is particularly central to PSM, where legitimacy is derived from serving the public interest (Martin and Lowe, 2014). The *commercial logic* reflects market orientation, framing news as a product designed to attract audiences and generate revenue within a competitive environment (Hamilton, 2004; Picard, 2004). This logic is relevant for PSMs because they are required to demonstrate efficiency to justify public funding (Saurwein et al., 2019), which can incentivize commercially-oriented practices.

Beyond professional and commercial logics, additional logics influence journalism, including managerial, technological, and audience logics (Blassnig and Esser, 2022; Lischka, 2020). The *managerial logic* emphasizes organizational flexibility, process efficiency, and strategic positioning (Raviola and Hartmann, 2015; Rohn, 2018). This logic supports innovation practices that optimize workflows or improve operational agility. The *technological logic*—reflecting the non-neutral influence of algorithmic infrastructures and automation (Lischka, 2020)—promotes digitalization, datafication, and AI-driven journalism (Zamith and Braun, 2019). At the intersection of the managerial and technology logics, Simon (2025) describes a logic of rationality that reconfigures editorial processes along the lines of efficiency, calculability, and standardization through technology integration, more specifically, AI. Here, rationality functions as an operational extension of the managerial logic.

The *audience logic* emphasizes engagement of and interactivity with news users (Blassnig and Esser, 2022; Costera Meijer, 2020). Audience metrics guide editorial decisions, sometimes creating tensions when metrics conflict with editorial judgment of public interest (Lamot et al., 2021). While this logic supports news relevance, it also risks instrumentalizing the audience as data points rather than citizens (Schaetz, 2024). In PSM, the audience logic is relevant as user data and personalization are used to demonstrate responsiveness and justify public value (Medina et al., 2025; Sehl and Eder, 2023).

Institutional logics are not monolithic but elastic in journalism (Lischka, 2020). Also, institutional logics are enacted differently across professional groups, shaped by their values and roles (Pallas et al., 2016). In PSM innovation labs, editorial technologists align technological innovations with professional values while responding to organizational and audience demands (Lischka et al., 2023). Their work creates space for alternative legitimation by balancing professional, technological, commercial, and managerial logics (Pallas et al., 2016). We thus ask:

RQ2. Which institutional logics are mobilized to navigate innovation in PSM innovation labs?

Method

We conducted 14 guideline interviews with editorial technologists of three PSM innovation labs in Germany.

Sampling

Germany's PSM landscape is shaped by the ARD consortium (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Rundfunkanstalten Deutschlands*) and ZDF (*Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen*). ARD is a federation of nine regional and two associated national and international broadcasters. ZDF functions as a national PSM. At the time of research, a total of eight innovation labs operated within this PSM ecosystem. Using maximum variation sampling to capture a wide range of experiences, three innovation labs were selected based on distinct structural characteristics. Innovation lab A operates as an autonomous editorial team within a regional PSM. Its work centers on developing support tools, such as software solutions, to facilitate journalists' daily routines, and conducting and publishing its own investigative journalism projects. Innovation lab B is an innovation agency of a PSM and focuses on implementing technical solutions such as data dashboards and Web site redesigns. Innovation lab C is involved in international research collaborations and the development of automated translation and transcription tools. While the study draws on multiple cases, its aim is not to directly compare them but to identify common patterns and approaches in how editorial technologists navigate innovation.

To select interviewees, we followed an intensity sampling approach focused on technologist characteristics relevant to multidisciplinary teams. Editorial technologists were chosen as key informants because they work at the intersection of journalism and technology, directly shaping innovation within PSM labs. As both implementers and negotiators of change, they offer critical insights into how innovation is navigated (Kosterich, 2022; Lischka et al., 2023). First, we listed all employees within the labs and their job titles using the news organization's Web site or their job descriptions on their LinkedIn profiles. Then, we chose lab employees from each news organization whose main focus was on "Software Development," "Data," and "Machine Learning." Additionally, we applied snowball sampling, asking interviewees to name potential interviewees whose perspectives could be relevant to the study, and two additional interviewees were recruited.

Interviews

The interviews with editorial technologists in innovation labs were conducted between December 2022 and February 2023, a period marked by increasing adoption of generative AI and algorithmic tools in journalistic workflows. The interviews averaged 43 min in length (see Table 1). The interviews took place via Microsoft Teams or Zoom. To ensure respondent anonymity, the names of the innovation labs and additional information such as job titles are omitted.

We structured the interview guide to explore media innovation, editorial technologists' roles in comparison to editorial work, and perspectives on innovation within PSM. Beginning with an introduction to establish rapport, the guide progresses through sections addressing the nature of media innovation labs, the specific tasks of editorial technologists, the types of knowledge and standing they leverage, and their assessment of innovation within traditional news structures. This approach ensures a focused inquiry into

Table I. Overview of interviews.

Innovation lab	Interviewee	Interview length (min)
A (Autonomous editorial team within PSM)	A1	48
	A2	47
	A3	60
	A4	26
B (Innovation agency of PSM)	B1	50
	B2	29
	B3	42
	B4	45
C (Research-oriented innovation unit within PSM)	C1	49
	C2	42
	C3	45
	C4	41
	C5	44
	C6	40

the goals, activities, and impacts of innovation labs, and perceived challenges and successes associated with innovative practices.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed ad verbatim. For analysis, the coding process is divided into semi-open, axial, and selective coding following a Grounded Theory approach (Glaser, 1998).

We began by examining interview transcripts line-by-line to identify and label key concepts, actions, and patterns emerging directly from the data. This inductive process generated initial codes such as “regulatory compliance,” “audience metrics,” and “budget traditions.”

In the axial coding phase, these initial codes were grouped into broader categories based on thematic similarities and conceptual relationships. For example, codes referring to formal rules or constraints were organized under coercive isomorphic pressure (e.g., “regulatory compliance,” “technological debt”), while codes pointing to imitation of other organizations were classified under mimetic isomorphism (e.g., “benchmarking”). Normative isomorphism was constructed through codes emphasizing professional standards and leadership culture (e.g., “budget tradition,” “interchangeable management”).

In parallel, data were coded with respect to institutional logics (RQ2), based on both predefined categories—such as public service, commercial, audience, and technological logics (Blassnig and Esser, 2022; Esser, 2013; Lischka, 2020)—and emergent sub-logics identified during the analysis. These sub-logics include the agility logic, a refinement of the technological logic, the efficiency logic, nested within commercial logic, and the

interdisciplinary collaboration logic, which spans across domains and highlights the need for cross-functional cooperation within and beyond PSM institutions.

A coding tree illustrating the progression from open codes to axial categories and institutional logics is included in [Supplemental Appendix I](#) to show the analytical pathway from raw data to findings.

Selective coding integrated core categories and logics into a coherent framework that explains how innovation labs in PSM settings navigate institutional complexity and isomorphic pressures. This step involved returning to the data and refining categories through constant comparison to ensure theoretical saturation.

Findings

Isomorphic pressures

The following section presents findings related to RQ1, focusing on the three types of isomorphic pressures—coercive, mimetic, and normative—and how they shape innovation processes within PSM labs.

Normative isomorphism. Normative isomorphism is evident in the perceived resistance to innovative processes and a lack of digitally savvy leadership within PSM, which can significantly hinder project execution and innovation initiatives of editorial technologists. Some management teams grapple with the introduction of new processes because “they are overwhelmed” (B4), resulting in the slowing down or partial blocking of projects, as well as budget cuts. Critiques of the “classical, hierarchical leadership mindset” (B3) and a diversity-lacking management team “that has the same kind of look” (B4) underscore the challenges editorial technologists encounter when attempting to implement new ideas. Individuals who are open to innovation—instead of seeing it as a threat to journalism—should be strategically placed in management roles (C3). Management with more digitally oriented personalities who possess a contemporary understanding of media production are required (B3). Leadership changes—such as the appointment of a new Director General (*Intendant*) from a privately funded news organization who focuses on audience metrics and growth—can introduce shifts in innovation priorities. However, participants describe a scarcity of management approaches that fully embrace innovation and promote forward-thinking initiatives.

Coercion. Editorial technologists face a range of formal and informal coercive pressures that shape their work. They experience regulatory complexities such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), as adding another layer of caution to innovation efforts: “You have to be careful with it. You have to make sure that we follow these standards” (B5). Internally, lengthy bureaucratic regulation is cited as a significant roadblock: “This just takes a mega long time because they always require three business offers. It’s all fine because it’s public service. You just have to justify everything. I understand why it’s like that, but it just delays everything” (C6). Beyond formal coercive pressures, interviewees acknowledged the stark differences in investment between PSM and U.S. platforms,

suggesting informal coercive pressures. For example, while a large project might be pursued with a budget of one million in the PSM context, “the Americans do it with one hundred million,” referring to Silicon-Valley budgets (C4). These variations underscore the resource constraints for PSM innovation.

Moreover, technological debt, accumulated over the past decade, has become an informal coercive pressure. This debt forces one lab to dedicate resources to maintaining outdated systems rather than investing in innovation. As one respondent aptly put it, “We are still trying to catch up on the technological debt of the last ten, fifteen years” (B2). The coding debt stemming from legacy codebases are another impediment: “I’m at least trying to modernize the codebase so that it’s enjoyable to work with and you can make changes quickly. I think this is what’s currently slowing us down a bit with these legacy projects we inherited” (B2). Conversely, a participant from another lab argues that their organization does not lag behind but “we are usually ahead of such a wave or at least trying to be” (A4), indicating that experiences with coercive technological debt can vary widely across organizations.

A pronounced informal coercive pressure is underinvestment in innovation labs and individual projects. While one participant points out that not every PSM can afford to fund an innovation lab—“neither the staff nor the projects” (C6)—the complexities of securing funds for innovation projects remain a recurrent theme. One participant explains they are doing “all the strategic work, the lobbying, raising money, the budget business” (A4) for the lab. Budget allocations profoundly affect the labs’ ability to operate effectively. A participant notes, “if the budget is not allocated, then we can’t hire those good developers” (C4). Regarding natural language generation models, one interviewee states, “by the time we get funds and we get projects and we work on this project, [...] we’ll always be late to it [the development of language models]” (C2). These limitations result in difficult choices, such as opting for more cost-effective alternatives over highly skilled developers or postponing projects due to resource scarcity.

Underinvestment into new technology becomes evident in incumbent investment decisions: “The majority of the money still flows into linear [broadcasting], and there is still a significant need for redirection,” criticizes B3. As a result, “certain target groups are over-served, while others are not served at all or underserved.” In contrast, resource rigidities can be overcome, but especially in times of dwindling resources, budget justification becomes crucial: “When we hire experts like Natural Language Generation experts [...] and elsewhere programs are canceled, there is very close scrutiny. Funds are taken away from one hand, and to the other hand, funds are allocated” (A4).

Mimesis. Editorial technologists occasionally look to successful peers or adopt practices from other organizations, although these instances are relatively rare. When mimesis did occur, it was typically in the form of looking to a few exemplary labs that had achieved notable success in their innovation efforts. For instance, one lab was recognized as a role model, with participants noting its groundbreaking projects and its influence on other labs. As one participant (B1) remarked, “it’s very impressive what they are doing,” while another participant (C6) noted that they regularly look to this lab for inspiration and guidance. Some editorial technologists also believe their own work could serve as a model

for others; one interviewee (C3) stated, “We develop some good product or automation so that we can offer it to other regional broadcasting corporations.”

Overall, the interplay of formal and informal regulations, professional norms, and organizational imitation shapes how innovation labs evolve and operate. These findings show that innovation is not just shaped by technical feasibility, but also by broader environmental expectations, funding constraints, and normative assumptions about what constitutes legitimate public service journalism. However, editorial technologists actively develop strategies to manage these constraints, positioning themselves as key agents in balancing innovation with institutional legitimacy through institutional logics.

Institutional logics

This section addresses RQ2 and explores the institutional logics identified in the narratives of editorial technologists.

Agility logic. To surmount isomorphic pressures, editorial technologists are diligently cultivating technology adoption capabilities, as they understand the need to stay agile. The interviewees describe their initiative toward adoption and integration of technologies, such as AI and machine learning, to remain competitive and relevant. The lab enables the organization to swiftly respond to emerging trends and bring new topics into the fold, allowing to “quickly respond to things and bring topics into the house,” as well as to work on long-term themes and “respond to future developments” (C5). The PSM would lag further behind if it were not for the “in-house startup” like the innovation lab, which forces “older” departments to become more innovative, faster, and possibly more transparent (A3). Anticipating the next technological wave is a proactive measure. Initiatives such as “AI circles” foster discussions among employees about AI and its ethical implications. Labs are also exploring infrastructure enhancements, such as server improvements, to support machine learning projects and stay ahead in the technological curve, avoiding the creation of coding debt.

Efficiency logic. Interviewees emphasize operational efficiency aspects of their innovation output when providing examples of “good” innovations. In relation to financial constraints, innovation efficiency secures the innovation labs’ legitimacy within the organization. When talking about their innovations, they strive for providing efficiency regarding an innovation’s utility, speed, and scale.

Utility. Interviewees emphasize the delivery of tangible results that are not only used in everyday practice but also achieve measurable impact. They emphasize that their innovation efforts are not confined to abstract concepts but translated into measurable outcomes: “We do innovation, where we actually bring out real results that are actually used and can be measured and evaluated” (B1). For instance, enhancing autonomy emerges as a defining characteristic. An innovation is useful when journalists can independently generate various types of content, such as social media graphics, without relying on external resources: “You can also, at 6 p.m. on a Friday, when, for example, a

serious accident happens near [city], still create a localization map, even though the graphic team has long left the house” (C4). The user-friendliness of tools is paramount to fostering autonomy of journalists: “It should be easily accessible, so that everyone can work with it, preferably without technical expertise to use these tools [...], because they are supposed to make the work easier and not more complex” (B5).

Speed. Efficiency is further exemplified through the rapid execution of journalistic tasks. For instance, participants highlighted tools that enable them to efficiently translate content: “If you have content, videos, texts available in English, and now you want to subtitle the video in German, you can do that very quickly with it” (C4). This functionality significantly expedites the production process and improves localization capabilities. Additionally, the labs have harnessed automation to achieve time savings “in the range of 30 to 70%” (C3). Such tools optimize resource utilization and streamline operations.

Scale. Innovations are characterized by their scalability across news topics, over time, and regarding their potential for sharing across different organizations. One automation project reassembles regional news: “There will always be regional news that we can somehow break down. So, eventually, we can do it every day. Because it’s automated, the costs are also significantly lower than if someone were to sit down and individually edit the contributions in the studio” (A3). Also, interviewees are committed to lasting impact rather than short-lived innovation: “For us, it’s more about wanting to achieve long-term sustainable digitization and change” (A4). They aim to create innovations that remain relevant and valuable in the coming years. Also, innovations are meant to be shared with other PSM: “We develop some good product or automation so that we can offer it to other regional broadcasting corporations” (C3).

Public service logic. Balancing the imperative of change with the preservation of core public service values remains an ongoing challenge. C2 succinctly captures this quandary, pondering, “How much can or should the public media change to get into this new environment without losing the principles of public media?” Striking this balance requires recognizing that journalistic work and the tools for content delivery are increasingly intertwined, as highlighted by C3: “Because it’s simply no longer possible to separate journalistic work from the distribution or the tools available to improve and accelerate the editorial process.”

Ethical guidelines help to steer and justify innovation decisions. Often described as a “compass”, ethical frameworks aim to ensure that innovation remains aligned with public service values (C3). One lab, for example, has developed comprehensive AI guidelines intended to provide durable, long-term orientation rather than short-term, reactive policies. While these guidelines are designed to withstand technological change over decades, they also leave room for ongoing dialogue and adjustments on specific applications as needed (A4). Ethical deliberations also touch on questions of accountability—i.e., who is responsible for AI-generated content—as well as the preservation of editorial oversight. Investing time in ethical frameworks is not considered “time wasted” (B5) and

documenting and communicating limitations of innovations contributes to organizational learning and public trust.

Audience logic. Regarding an audience focus, the innovation labs engage in projects focused on collecting and reporting various web traffic metrics, such as impressions, comments, and app downloads. This “wealth of data” informs their decision-making processes and ensures a more audience-centric approach to innovation (B1). Improving news products so that they become more meaningful to audiences is treated as a secondary priority, following the needs of in-house colleagues. Nevertheless, as one interviewee points out, it remains the fundamental responsibility of a PSM to deliver the greatest possible value to license fee payers (A3).

Interdisciplinary collaboration logic. Interdisciplinary collaboration is a cornerstone in the labs’ strategy to overcome isomorphic pressures. A clear consensus among participants revolves around the importance of embracing interdisciplinary teams. As one interviewee (A3) remarks, “I believe the future belongs to cross-functional, hybrid teams. The division into silos, such as graphics, IT, and automation experts, makes relatively little sense. The closer we get to the editorial teams, the better we understand the problems they face”. This shift towards interdisciplinary collaboration not only enhances efficiency but also bridges the gap between technical expertise and editorial needs: “collaboration in interdisciplinary teams helps to break down silos”, supports mutual understanding, and contributes to a more digital corporate culture (A4). Through nurturing an innovation-friendly climate and by “talking to each other” (A4), the labs have evolved into trusted and integral components of the organization and editorial decision making. One participant (A3) noted that “generally, our team is well accepted. This is something we had to work on for a long time.” Another highlighted the transformation: “When we first started doing it, it was a bit like science fiction. Now it’s an integral part of the work for everyone” (C3), highlighting the normalization of editorial technologists’ performance.

Additional to internal collaboration, PSM innovation labs actively seek to extend their impact beyond their organizational boundaries. The aspiration to develop innovative products and automation that can benefit other PSM is a recurring theme. This collaborative mindset extends even to private news organizations: “I’m not a big fan of the strong separation between private and public media” (C1).

Navigating innovation through institutional logics

Normative pressures manifest through resistance to change and the reinforcement of traditional professional norms. Normative pressure is related to the public service logic and interdisciplinary collaboration logic, to gain strategic agency. Coercive pressure stems from regulatory requirements, technological debt, and resource constraints. Coercive pressure drives the need for agility and efficiency to meet demands of internal stakeholders, such as editors and management. Mimetic pressure, although less pronounced, involves the influence of successful peer labs and industry standards. Mimetic

pressures encourage agility and audience logic to mirror successful innovations in the field (see Table 2).

The agility logic allows for rapid adaptation to technological changes, ensuring that labs can stay competitive despite the rigidities imposed by normative and coercive pressures. Focusing on efficiency in their innovations helps labs maintain their legitimacy within the organization under financial constraints. The multifaceted efficiency logic acts as both a driver of resource optimization and a legitimacy mechanism within the organization. Agility and efficiency logics complement each other to implement rapid and practical solutions. The public service logic ensures that innovations align with the core mission of serving the public, balancing the need for change with the preservation of public service values. While efficiency emphasizes measurable outcomes like time savings, streamlined workflows, and scalability for journalistic users, these can at times challenge ethical principles. For instance, automating content to speed up production may lead to reduced human supervision, raising concerns about accountability and content quality. Finally, the interdisciplinary collaboration logic bridges the gap between technological and editorial expertise. It can thus mediate tensions between public service logic and efficiency logic.

Discussion

This study explores isomorphic pressures and institutional logics of PSM innovation labs through the lens of editorial technologists to understand how they navigate innovation. The findings contribute to the existing literature on media innovation and institutional theory, specifically within the context of PSM, by illustrating how isomorphic pressures and institutional logics interact to shape technology innovation practices.

Findings confirm that PSM innovation labs are influenced by isomorphic pressures—normative, coercive, and to some extent mimetic—consistent with DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) theory of institutional isomorphism. Normative pressures, rooted in traditional management practices and professional norms, often lead to resistance to change. This aligns with the expectation that professionalization results in leadership styles and decision-making processes that are homogeneous. The strong emphasis on adherence to established norms reinforces the view that PSM organizations prioritize stability over innovation.

Table 2. Relations between isomorphic pressures and institutional logics in PSM innovation labs.

├─ Normative Pressure
├─ Public Service Logic (adherence to ethical guidelines)
└─ Interdisciplinary Collaboration Logic (gaining strategic agency)
├─ Coercive Pressure
├─ Agility Logic (responding to organizational rigidity)
└─ Efficiency Logic (justifying resource use by focusing on utility, speed, and scale)
└─ Mimetic Pressure
├─ Agility Logic (keeping pace with industry trends)
└─ Audience Logic (collecting similar audience metrics)

Coercive pressures, such as regulatory compliance with GDPR and the challenges posed by technological debt, further constrain innovation efforts. The additional burden of technological debt highlights a unique form of coercive pressure that has evolved in response to historical underinvestment in technology. Hence, internal organizational constraints can have long-term implications for innovation capacity. Additionally, budget constraints act as informal coercive pressures that significantly shape innovation practices, as noted by [Bisso Nunes and Mills \(2021\)](#). In response, innovation lab staff have developed a three-dimensional logic of efficiency to navigate these limitations and legitimate their innovations. According to this logic, successful innovations must (i) provide clear utility to internal stakeholders, (ii) accelerate operational processes, and (iii) be scalable across different areas of application. Hence, editorial technologists in PSM innovation labs have deeply internalized the logic of instrumental rationality, as outlined by [Simon \(2025\)](#).

Mimetic pressures, while present, are less prominent than normative and coercive pressures. The limited role of mimesis in PSM innovation labs contrasts with the literature that emphasizes the importance of mimetic isomorphism in organizational fields ([Mills and Wagemans, 2021](#)). There are few possible reasons why PSM innovation labs might be less inclined to mimic external practices. PSM organizations typically have a long history and a well-established organizational culture rooted in their public service mandate ([Lowe and Majjanen, 2019](#)). This strong internal culture may limit mimetic incentives, particularly if external practices are perceived as prioritizing profit over public interest. Further, because PSM rely on public funding they may have limited opportunities and less pressures to mimic the risk-taking behaviors seen in resource-rich private organizations.

The study also reveals how editorial technologists navigate innovation in the complex institutional environment of PSM innovation labs through the adoption of multiple logics—agility, efficiency, public service, audience, and interdisciplinary collaboration. These logics represent adaptations of institutional logics identified previously ([Blassnig and Esser, 2022](#); [Lischka, 2020](#); [Simon, 2025](#)), reflecting the specific challenges and opportunities associated with innovation in PSM.

First, the *agility logic* emphasizes rapid adaptation and integration of new technologies, as pointed out previously ([Bisso Nunes and Mills, 2021](#); [Jantunen et al., 2018](#)). This finding is consistent with research by [Mills and Wagemans \(2021\)](#), who note that innovation labs often act as in-house startups that push older departments towards faster and more transparent operations. By focusing on agility, labs can better anticipate and respond to emerging trends, ensuring their relevance in an evolving environment.

Second, the *efficiency logic*, a technology-induced refinement of the commercial logic, highlights the importance of operational efficiency in maintaining the legitimacy of innovation labs within resource-constrained environments. This finding resonates with the literature on commercial pressures in journalism, which emphasizes the need for measurable outcomes and cost-effective solutions ([Evans, 2018](#); [Sehl and Cornia, 2021](#); [Simon, 2025](#)) that need to be useful for editors ([Cools et al., 2024](#)). However, the focus on efficiency creates a tension: while committed to long-term public service goals, PSM must demonstrate short-term innovation impact through measurable outcomes. Innovation labs navigate this by balancing visionary projects with institutional demands for operational

results, such as productivity gains. This tension reflects a central challenge in PSM innovation: aligning public values with efficiency metrics to manage change within legacy structures.

Third, the *public service logic* underscores the ongoing challenge of balancing innovation with the preservation of core public service values. As Zaragoza Fuster and García Avilés (2022) point out, innovation lab members are aware of their public service function but view their work as serving the journalistic staff first and the audience second. This aligns with the observation that PSM organizations must continuously negotiate the competing demands of market-oriented and public service goals (Lowe and Savage, 2020; Saurwein et al., 2019). The incorporation of ethical guidelines and audience-centric approaches into the innovation process further illustrates how PSM labs seek to align technological advancements with their foundational mission of serving the public interest.

Fourth, the *audience logic* further illustrates how innovation labs seek to demonstrate relevance and impact by aligning product development with user needs and behaviors, in line with previous research (Medina et al., 2025; Sehl and Eder, 2023). This logic operates as both a legitimizing and strategic tool, especially under coercive and mimetic pressures, where demonstrating audience engagement becomes a proxy for value creation.

Finally, the *interdisciplinary collaboration logic* reflects the increasing importance of breaking down silos within PSM organizations to foster a more integrated and collaborative innovation environment, as suggested previously (Bisso Nunes and Mills, 2021; Virta and Lowe, 2016). This finding extends the literature on collaborative innovation by highlighting how cross-functional teams can bridge the gap between editorial and technological expertise, promoting a culture of mutual understanding and shared goals (Cools et al., 2024; Zaragoza Fuster and García Avilés, 2022).

Taken together, our findings provide a comprehensive view of the interplay between isomorphic pressures and institutional logics in PSM innovation labs. The influence of normative and coercive pressures suggests that these labs operate within a highly constrained environment, where innovation is often limited by the need to conform to established norms and operational requirements. However, the adoption of multiple logics, particularly the agility, efficiency, and interdisciplinary collaboration logics, indicates that PSM innovation labs are actively seeking ways to navigate these constraints and drive meaningful innovation.

This duality—where innovation labs are both constrained by and actively resisting isomorphic pressures—highlights the nature of institutional complexity within PSM organizations. While isomorphic pressures can lead to homogenization and inertia, the strategic adoption of diverse logics allows PSM innovation labs to carve out spaces for innovation that are both contextually relevant and aligned with their public service mission as suggested in Sehl and Cornia (2021). This balance between conformity and innovation is crucial for the long-term sustainability and relevance of PSM in a constantly changing field.

Regarding limitations, the findings are based on a relatively small number of interviews with a select group of editorial technologists from PSM innovation labs. The specific dynamics observed in the sampled labs could be unique to these particular contexts, and the findings may not be entirely generalizable to other PSM organizations.

That said, potential parallels may exist with PSMs in Nordic and Western European countries, where similar institutional frameworks, governance models, and public service mandates may lead to comparable challenges and strategies. Another limitation is the potential influence of the interviewees' subjective perspectives. The study relies on self-reported data, which can introduce biases, as participants may portray their experiences in ways that align with their personal or organizational interests. This could lead to an overemphasis on certain themes or the underreporting of others, affecting the balance and comprehensiveness of the findings. While the study explores how PSM innovation labs navigate isomorphic pressures through institutional logics, it does not explore the long-term impact of these logics on the sustainability and success of the labs. Future research could build on these findings by examining how these logics evolve over time and how they influence the overall effectiveness and resilience of PSM innovation efforts in the face of ongoing technological and institutional changes, for instance using action research approaches as in [Nel and Rymajdo \(2024\)](#). Finally, although isomorphic pressures can constrain innovation, some PSMs have shown adaptability and creativity in their operations. This study points to differences in how labs navigate these pressures, which future research could examine more systematically to shed light on the conditions that enable innovative practices within legacy institutions.

Conclusions

This study provides empirical insights into how PSM innovation labs experience and navigate isomorphic pressures and institutional complexity. It shows that normative and coercive pressures—often viewed as constraints—can be actively negotiated through the development of specialized institutional logics such as agility and efficiency. These logics demonstrate that PSM do not merely conform to external pressures but respond strategically, expanding on [DiMaggio and Powell's \(1983\)](#) concept of isomorphism. This study shows that actors within organizations, such as editorial technologists, can leverage institutional logics to actively reinterpret or resist these pressures. In doing so, they create space for innovation, not by rejecting institutional norms, but by aligning new practices with existing values, as suggested in previous research ([Sehl and Cornia, 2021](#)). This highlights a more dynamic view of isomorphism, where conformity and agency coexist, and where innovation can emerge from within institutional boundaries rather than in opposition to them.

The development of an agility logic underscores the critical role of technological adaptation in environments where traditional norms and regulatory frameworks slow down change. Agility is visible in PSMs as they adopt AI technologies in response to audience demands to remain relevant for these audiences ([Medina et al., 2025](#)). The efficiency logic, in turn, emphasizes measurable improvements in cost-effectiveness, productivity, and resource allocation. An efficiency focus translates the value of innovation to operational terms to justify public funding ([Saurwein et al., 2019](#)), reflecting a convergence with performance-oriented managerial logics. These logics shape how innovation is legitimized—and thus made possible—within the PSM field.

Ultimately, editorial technologists perceive that PSM organizations do not sufficiently regard innovation as a strategic priority essential to their continued relevance. Systemic barriers, such as rigid hierarchies, short-term project thinking, and fragmented knowledge flows, continue to inhibit broader innovation efforts. To overcome these obstacles, PSM organizations must approach innovation as a long-term and organization-wide strategy. This requires committed leadership, sustained investment in innovation capacity, and stronger cross-departmental collaboration. It also involves relating innovation units more widely into organizational structures and involving them in strategic decision-making processes.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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