

# The spread of news standards: Examining an emerging means for control and legitimacy in local journalism

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## Abstract

Disruption in local news has spurred development of varying journalism forms, including news collaborations and digital start-ups, and has increased the salience of social actors who are not news producers. With these changes have come new and different sets of standards on ethics, diversity, community engagement and news operations. Framed by an institutional “supply side” perspective, this study examines the adoption and adaptation of standards by local news collaborations and digital startups. A content analysis of the websites and standards of 119 local news collaborations and digital news start-ups indicate both non-profit news producers and news producers that emphasize “watchdog” accountability had more standards and more extensive standards. Additionally, news producers frequently distance standards from daily production and only infrequently require compliance. Results suggest local news management should be intentional in adopting standards and integrate them meaningfully into daily operations while keeping an eye on relevance to the local area.

## Keywords

News collaborations, standards, ethics, diversity, community engagement, content analysis

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## Introduction

New forms of local journalism such as news collaborations and digital start-ups are spreading across a disrupted news field, and they are bringing new standards with them. New standards, guidelines and codes focus on news quality, ethics, diversity, community engagement, and daily operations, among other areas. Both news-producing outlets and supportive third-party “meta-organizations”—professional associations, non-profits, research centers, advocacy organizations, civic and community organizations— can be involved in creating and disseminating these new local forms and their standards (Aucoin, 2022; Giotis, 2023; Graves and Lauer, 2020; McIntyre and Lough, 2021). These diverse actors circulate “templates” (Wedlin and Sahlin, 2017, p. 115) for standards that aid managerial control: They (a) regulate and promote quality of local news, news production and journalist behaviors while, more latently, they (b) shore up the legitimacy of new news-producing efforts and (c) enhance the authority of the social actors that create and promote standards (Lowrey et al., 2022).

Budding standards are common during disruptive times when emerging, innovative efforts seek to change and support weakening fields (Wilding and Molitorisz, 2022). One such effort in the journalism field is the digital news start-up, often supported by third-party actors (Wright et al., 2019). A second is the local news collaboration, a news-producing form that allows multiple organizational actors to pool resources and wield stronger impact. By definition, a news collaboration has multiple members, and while, typically, most members produce news, other members may be professional organizations or civic and community actors. Members may have diverse backgrounds, purposes and missions, some of which are not journalistic (Konieczna, 2020; Lowrey et al., 2023; Stonbely, 2017), and the standards of actors supporting such efforts may be adopted (Wright et al., 2019).

*Standards* have been defined in a number of ways. The International Organization of Standards (IOS) defines them narrowly and formally: “A document, established by consensus and approved by a recognized body, that provides, for common and repeated use, rules, guidelines or characteristics for activities or their results, aimed at the achievement of the optimum degree of order in a given context” (Djelic and Den Hond, 2014, p. 70). But, standards have also been defined less strictly, as aspirational guidelines or principles and as “pieces of general advice offered to a large number of potential adopters” (Brunsson and Jacobsson, 2000: p. 2). This study adopts this looser definition for several reasons. First, journalism actors aim not only at organizational efficiency and order but also at institutional and professional appropriateness (Beam and Meeks, 2011; McQuail and Deuze, 2020). Second, U.S. journalism is only loosely regulated, in contrast to many other media systems. Third, the loose definition allows for a range of types of standards. For example, standards for ethics and community engagement tend to be broadly aspirational (e.g., focusing on journalistic honesty or empowerment of communities) while standards for news operations and news quality tend to be more specifically prescriptive (e.g., focusing on policies for archiving or standards for audience-generated photos).

Why study the spread of standards in local journalism? Of course, we assume standards can be important in regulating and shaping news and news production. But our study is also prompted by the rapid spread and increasing complexity of standards. Standards are relatively easy to generate, adopt and adapt, and compliance can be optional. As such, standards may appeal to news managers because they encourage journalists to control themselves, making strict administrative enforcement less necessary (Brunsson, 2000; Soloski, 1997).

Also, as a means of control over work, “standardization is ... favored when organizations are weak” (Brunsson, 2000: p. 32) and where controversy around organizations is high (Brunsson, 2000). Standards can be popular in disrupted, resource-depleted fields, where management has relatively weak control over employees, who come and go in a fluid labor market—as in today’s local journalism. Standards also appeal to flexible organizations with less rigid hierarchical structures (Brunsson, 2000) as these organizations are in search of the public legitimacy and stability that standards promise (Aldrich et al., 2020). The local news collaborations and digital start-ups examined in this study are generally flexible and non-hierarchical organizations that take varying forms. Collaborations include a mix of member types: Many include mostly local legacy news media with a few niche, alternative media. Others include both media and local community members such as colleges, libraries, non-profit civic organizations, and advocacy organizations. Digital startups range from non-profit investigative outlets to commercial outlets focused on civic and social events.

Newer, less traditional, and more pluralistic organizations experience greater uncertainty, complexity and risk; therefore, they may see a greater need to adopt or develop standards (Djelic and Den Hond, 2014). It follows that a study of newer local news media forms—i.e., news collaborations and digital news startups, both non-profit and commercial—should help us understand the spread of standards, the conditions under which sets of standards emerge or are adopted, and how and why media operations situate or display their standards as they do. Standards are also worth studying because of their possible dysfunctions. For example, standards may be superficial or blindly aligned with principles of external organizations (Timmermans and Epstein, 2010)—organizations that may be more interested in “promoting their own respective standards” than in “pursuing shared overarching objectives” (Djelic and Den Hond, 2014: p. 71).

This study explores these questions through the lens of “inhabited institutionalism,” a supply-side framework that emphasizes influences of social actors in institutional processes. These findings have implications for the ways news managers and news entrepreneurs pursue, adopt, develop, adapt and apply standards at their local outlets. Inhabited institutionalism will be discussed next, followed by a discussion of the framework’s applicability to the spread of standards in local journalism.

## Literature review

### *Standards, legitimacy, and “inhabited institutionalism”*

To help explain the spread of journalism standards, this study adopts the theoretical framework of “inhabited institutionalism,” a supply-side approach that emphasizes both fieldwide and local actors, their motivations and their actions (Haedicke, 2012: 47-48). Like other institutional theories, this approach assumes organizations, such as news outlets, pursue public legitimacy in order to be in accord with their institutional environment and that organizations may do this more than rationally calculate market conditions in order to optimize (Lowrey, 2012). However, the “inhabited” approach places an especially strong emphasis on agency, proposing that actors “suffuse institutions with ... force and significance” (Hallett and Ventresca, 2006: p. 213).

According to inhabited institutionalism, the adoption of standards is not merely a rational-choice response to the field’s functional needs or moral demands; rather, benefits of standards accrue to the actors who urge them and who can use them to bring order (Brunsson, 2000; Djelic and Den Hond, 2014). In this approach, standards may be successful less because of empirically demonstrated worth and more “because of who transports and supports them” (Wedlin and Sahlin, 2017: p. 105) and who benefit from the legitimacy that standards confer (Lowrey et al., 2023). Thus, standards are not merely regulatory or corrective. They are also legitimating, a quality that is relevant for emerging local news forms in a time of damaged credibility, disruptive change, and existential threat.

This approach stands in contrast to the traditional demand-side framing of standards as fundamentally beneficial for a field and its outcomes. Studies of journalism ethics codes often assume codes support sanctioned, aspirational practices that benefit journalists and management (Wilkins and Brennen, 2004): Aucoin (2022) quotes a conversation between two journalists about the need for investigative news standards to prevent reputational damage from poorly reported stories: “A few lousy jobs and the whole field could get a bad name” (p. 424).

Also important to the inhabited approach is the acknowledgment of dysfunction. For example, standards are relatively painless to adopt, and they are malleable and adaptable, and so they may multiply, leading to confusion (Brunsson, 2000). This confusion has been evident in journalism (e.g., Wilding and Molitorisz, 2022). Ellis (2012) discussed the “burgeoning lists of principles, guidelines, and protocols that are mixed with other aspects of ... production and presentation” in news broadcasting, “where it is rare for existing ethical provisions to be removed” (p. 121). In contrast to management rules of hierarchical organizations, standards are often voluntary, with mild or absent consequences for non-compliance. Indiscriminate adoption of standards may be especially prevalent in an inhabited institutional field where multiple actors have multiple and conflicting aims (Brunsson, 2000), fueling incoherence (Djelic and Den Hond, 2014). For example, in news collaborations, standards of local news producers may mix with standards of the Solutions Journalism Network, the Institute for Nonprofit News, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, professional associations, or “civic good” organizations, etc.

Standards may reward appearances more than effectiveness, displacing constructive goals of an organization, and the “gaming” of metrics and compliance is common (Power, 1997). Standards may be “decoupled” (distanced or buffered) from an organization’s core operations: “Check-the-box” auditing can take the place of substantive compliance, providing outward legitimacy more than improved quality; moreover, standards that are generic and abstract tend to spread more widely (Brunsson, 1989) as opposed to standards that pertain to an organization’s specific mission or local community (Timmermans and Epstein, 2010). Consistent with these broad criticisms, journalism codes have been criticized for being insubstantial (Himmelboim and Limor, 2011), cosmetic (Merrill and Odell, 1983), and unenforceable (Fink, 1995).

When standards don’t translate well to particular local sites, the standards may be watered down and made less specific to encourage adoption (Timmermans and Epstein, 2010) and correctness of auditable processes may be emphasized over efficiency and effectiveness of outcomes (Wedlin and Sahlin, 2017). This has pros and cons. In their study of the institutionalization of global fact-checking, Graves and Lauer (2020) found that less specific standards facilitated agreement among fact-checking operations from varied cultures and media systems while also encouraging (often ceremonial) cohesiveness. However, vagueness of standards and an emphasis on process over outcome may also encourage “organized hypocrisy,” where non-compliance is ignored for the sake of spreading standards (Brunsson, 2007: p. 111).

### *The spread of standards in journalism*

There is no widely recognized, comprehensive count of journalistic standards. In a 2011 study, Himmelboim and Limor counted 242 outlets worldwide that had ethics codes, a common type of journalism standards, and they counted 11 distinct codes in North America. There is evidence that both the number of journalism standards and standards producers have grown since. An analysis of professional-membership associations in U.S. journalism found 53 additional national and local associations since 2000 for a total of 354 associations as of 2019. A random sample of 84 of these U.S. associations revealed that 18 displayed detailed ethics codes (Sherrill et al., 2021). Extrapolating to the entire sample suggests a total of around 60 to 90.

What explains the spread of journalism standards? Certainly, the adoption, adaptation and defense of standards is shaped by discursive negotiation about journalism’s values, purposes, norms and practices (Vos and Thomas, 2018), and emergence of new journalism forms spurs this negotiation at the field’s boundaries. As Ihleboek and Figenschou (2022) argue, journalism’s “professional codes ... and the associations that protect them represent powerful points of reference in institutional boundary making processes” (p. 18). It follows that adoption of standards may result from a mission-driven motivation to defend and reaffirm professional and institutional boundaries.

Yet, as sociologist Pierre Bourdieu holds, forces of change and stasis in a field depend not only on discourse, but also on actual “social agents who have entirely real interests in the different possibilities available to them...” (Johnson, 1993: p. 34). This claim is consistent with the inhabited institutional approach, and, in fact, journalistic standards are

influenced by an increasingly complex set of national and local actors that benefit from widespread influence of new standards. Such actors include news producers, but also the field's meta-organizations that generate standards—e.g., professional journalism organizations as well as non-profit organizations and civic actors with an interest in supporting journalism.

Meta-organization actors also tend to support new journalism forms (Lowrey et al., 2023), and the number of standards has likely grown due to the many new media forms that have emerged over the recent turbulent decades: Loosen et al. (2022) identified 166 different forms of emergent journalism genres (“X journalisms”) that have gained traction over the last 20–30 years. According to studies of particular emergent genres, many have developed standards, principles, or guidelines. Examples include civic/public journalism, solutions journalism, data journalism, non-profit journalism, collaborative journalism, and fact-checking journalism (e.g., Aucoin, 2022; Graves and Lauer, 2020; McIntyre and Lough, 2021). These new forms of journalism introduce new kinds of actors into the journalism field, suggesting increased complexity of normative and operative guidelines for journalists as well as the possibility that internal motivations of such actors may encourage the spread of standards at least as much as professional journalism boundary work.

## Hypotheses

Literature and theory suggest a number of hypotheses about contexts that further the adoption of standards and shape standards in local news collaborations and digital startups. Several of the hypotheses below are, informed by the inhabited institutionalism perspective. These hypotheses assess influences from the complexity of agency, which results from greater organizational size and organizational age (H1a, H1b, RQ1) as well as the possible influence of third-party actors (H2a, H2b). Other hypotheses are informed by expectations of professional boundary maintenance (from a broader institutional approach). These assess the roles of non-profit versus market orientation and the relative emphasis on accountability journalism (H3a, H3b, H3c, H4).

### *Size and complexity of news producers*

One key context is the size and complexity of the news-producing organization. Size and complexity tend to encourage formally written rules and guidelines (Tolbert and Hall, 2009). Organizational complexity encourages use of standards in particular because complexity makes it hard to predict outcomes, and standards are more forgiving of missteps than are formal rules. Similarly, large collaborations are likely to involve a greater number of organizational actors with differing normative frameworks. As inhabited institutionalism suggests, this makes it hard for leaders to agree on mandatory directives. This environment is conducive to standards, which are relatively voluntary and forgiving (Brunsson, 2000). It follows that news-producing collaborations, with their multiple members, are more likely to have standards than are single, sole-membered news producers. By a similar logic, collaborations with more members (and greater complexity)

are likely to have more lengthy and elaborated standards. In this study, the conditions of (a) both having standards versus not having them and (b) having more elaborated standards are both represented by the phrase *greater extent* of standards. This logic suggests a hypothesis:

**H1a:** The larger the news producer, the greater the extent of the standards.

Organizational complexity makes it difficult to agree on and adopt standards that direct internal operation, encouraging standards that are more abstract, aspirational and flexible: for example, standards for ethics, diversity, and community engagement. For clarity, we provide a few examples here of abstract standards from our data set: “Ethical journalism treats sources, subjects, colleagues and members of the public as human beings deserving of respect,” “Editorial independence is essential to serving the public interest ...” and “Provide a dynamic media landscape representative of our culturally rich and diverse communities that ... amplifies voices.” Conversely, standards for internal operations direct specific actions. For example: “Commit to uphold the purpose and mission of the partnership by regularly attending meetings” and “Supporting data ... should be indicated either by linking to a credible source or ... providing source information in parentheses.”

**H1b:** The larger the news producer, the more likely the standards will focus on abstract principles than on operational guidelines.

### *Age of news producers*

Older organizations have had more time to generate standards and to generate specific standards that relate directly to a particular mission or audience. However, older organizations have developed more interconnections with other social actors, creating complicated normative environments that may lead to more pluralism, complexity and generality in standards. Because of these dueling logics about effects of age, research questions are proposed rather than hypotheses:

RQ1: What is the relationship between news-producer longevity and the likelihood that the news producer’s standards are particularly relevant to the news producer?

### *Prevalence of third-party actors*

Third-party actors such as meta-organizations—civic organizations, professional associations and networks, research/training centers, etc.—are often a source of standards. Typically, these actors are not news producers, and they are more likely to focus on professional normative issues than on technical, operational matters in news production. Additionally, their standards are likely to be “formulated in general and abstract terms” (Wedlin and Sahlin, 2017: p. 109). The following two hypotheses follow from this logic, which derives from inhabited institutionalism:

**H2a:** Presence of non-news producing members in a collaboration will make it less likely the collaboration's standards will be adopted from news-producing members.

**H2b:** Presence of non-news producing members in a collaboration will make it more likely the collaboration's standards will focus on abstract professional issues than on operational issues.

### *Non-profit versus commercial*

Commercial business models are likely to encourage standards for daily operation, given pressures to maintain efficiency. In contrast, non-profit outlets may be freer to focus on abstract professional principles such as ethics and diversity. Additionally, abstract standards are less likely to include specific managerial mechanisms for ensuring compliance.

**H3a:** Standards for non-profit news producers are more likely to focus on professional principles than operative guidelines.

**H3b:** Standards for non-profit news producers are less likely to urge compliance.

Commercial operations are shaped more by external market pressures, making it harder to follow internal standards. As the literature indicates, standards are more likely to develop in contexts "where neither sellers nor buyers [for example, advertisers] have made substantial investments" (Brunsson, 2000: p. 33). Therefore, commercial news producers are less likely to have standards than non-profits.

**H3c:** Non-profit news producers will have a greater extent of standards than commercial news producers.

### *Emphasis on accountability journalism*

*Accountability journalism* focuses on holding powerful actors accountable for their actions and intentions (Mellado and Van Dalen, 2014). This increases criticism of the news outlet, increasing the outlet's perceived need for public legitimacy, and this, in turn, encourages the outlet to emphasize standards (Brunsson, 2000; Deephouse et al., 2017).

**H4:** The stronger the collaboration's mission of journalistic accountability, the greater the extent of the standards.

## **Methods**

Hypotheses and research questions were assessed through a quantitative content analysis of the websites and standards of both local news collaborations (which include multiple organizations) and local digital news startups (single organizations). Both non-profit and

commercial collaborations and non-profit and commercial startups were sampled. News collaborations and news startup sites were sampled because they are emergent, budding news-producer forms and are therefore more likely to seek the legitimacy standards promise. Also, these forms are more likely to have “meta-organizations” as members or supporters.

## Sample

119 news producers were sampled, including 89 collaborations and 30 digital news startups. News collaborations were sampled from the publicly available Center for Cooperative Media (CCM) database, which included 1,004 news collaborations in December 2023, the time of data collection. These data are collected, cleaned and curated by the Center for Cooperative Media (CCM) at Montclair State University in New Jersey, U.S. The Center is an academic and professional hub that has tracked and supported news collaborations around the world for over 10 years. Self-reported data are gathered via an online survey, promoted by the Center. The database’s representativeness is unknown, but it is the most comprehensive database of news collaborations available.

By far, most collaborations listed in the database were no longer publishing or were not intended as ongoing operations. In total, the 89 news collaborations included all that were (a) local/regional in focus; (b) currently publishing and accessible; and (d) “ongoing and open-ended” operations rather than finite “one-time” projects (Stonbely, 2017). Focus of collaborations ranged from urban or regional civic life to specific issues. Around half ( $n = 46$ ) have at least one non-media member or “community partner.” Some examples:

- A collaborative focusing on Great Salt Lake in Utah has 13 legacy media partners that cover the area and nine “community partners,” including, for example, local colleges and a non-profit film center seeking to “raise [local] critical awareness.”
- The Charlotte Journalism Collaborative focuses on news in the city of Charlotte, NC. Members include three legacy media, an investigative non-profit, three commercial outlets serving local ethnic/identity groups, a public library, and the Charlotte Urban Institute, an “applied research and community outreach center.”
- 12 collaborations were led by public radio stations, ranging from 3 to 7 members each. A typical example: The Midwest Newsroom collaborative operated by a public radio station in Kansas City includes four other public media outlets and a local university.

Only collaborations in the U.S. were sampled. We made this decision because U.S. collaborations are more thoroughly represented in the database and because cross-national variability would introduce causal factors that take us beyond the scope of the already complex literature of standards and inhabited institutionalism.

Local digital news startups were also sampled in order to provide a wider range of emerging local media forms. Startups were selected in a convenience sample from all startups that were members of the collaborations. Some examples: Indiana Capital Chronicle, a non-profit news outlet investigating state government, policy and elections;

Manchester Ink Link, a commercial startup covering the city's civic and social life; and New Jersey Spotlight News, a non-profit outlet covering statewide news.

### Content analysis

The two authors coded content on news producers' websites, including the standards. First, four informal codings of 4-5 sites were conducted to increase agreement; coders talked through differences and the protocol was revised to improve clarity. Next, a formal intercoder reliability test was conducted on a random selection of 23 sites (~20% of all 119 outlets). Pearson's  $r$  correlation coefficients were above 0.90 for the two continuous variables (Number of standards,  $r = 0.99$ , and Number of standards relevant to the site,  $r = 0.92$ ). For the other variables, all but three *Kappa* coefficients were over 0.75. These three – emphasis on *accountability*, site *focus*, and how standards were *developed* – were recoded with a new sample of sites. After recoding, coefficients for all but *accountability* (0.66) fell above 0.70. Results based on this variable should be interpreted with some caution.

### Measures

*Dependent variable measures.* Drawing on Brunsson and Jacobsson (2000), *standards* are defined as “rules, guidelines, principles, values or goals” that are normative rather than descriptive in nature and that provide parameters for active intent to pursue normative aims. Standards are not merely verifiable factual and descriptive statements, and past tense indicates a statement is not a standard. Coders searched for sets of individual rules, guidelines, principles, values or goals that indicate active intent toward betterment or maintenance and that include aspirational, guiding, commanding or instructive statements. The entire site was searched for standards, with special attention to homepages and homepage menus, “About” or “Mission” pages, and pages on funding.

*Extent of standards* was measured in two ways. The first is at the *set* level: the number of sets of standards per website as well as the mere presence of sets (Yes = 1, No = 0). A set of standards includes an overall organizing header/label over an itemized or narrative list of individual standards; sets are distinct from one another set if not positioned adjacently. 82.4% of news producers have at least one set of standards, and the mean is slightly more than one set per site ( $M = 1.27$ ,  $sd = 0.86$ ).

The second measure of extent of standards is *number of individual standards* per site, measured by counting individual statements of standards. Individual standards were counted as stand-alone sentences, phrases or paragraphs. For example, one set of standards could have six bulleted sentences, each describing a different standard. For this variable, the extreme score of one outlying case was changed to the nearest other value in order to bring skewness and kurtosis scores into acceptable range ( $M = 14.67$ ,  $sd = 19.60$ ).

*Abstraction* of standards was measured by the number of sets of standards that focus on conceptual guidance rather than the mechanisms of daily operations. Specifically, these were sets of standards focused on the conceptual areas of ethics, community engagement and diversity ( $M = 1.55$ ,  $sd = 0.95$ ). Non-abstract standards included standards for daily

operations and for quality of news-production processes: Examples are provided earlier in the explanation of H1b.

*Relevance of standards* was assessed as percent of a collaboration's individual standards referencing the particular mission, topic and/or location of the news producer. An example: a news collaboration reporting on urban poverty includes a standard for appropriate language journalists should use when referring to poverty ( $M = 56.83\%$ ,  $sd = 35.73\%$ ).

*Urging compliance* was measured as any apparent expectation of compliance or mention of consequences for not complying with standards (Yes = 41.78%, No = 58.22%).

*Independent variable measures.* The independent variable *organizational size* (H1) was measured by the number of members in each news collaboration ( $M = 18.49$ ,  $sd = 25.53$ ). Additionally, whether a site was a collaboration ( $n = 89$  [74.8%]) or an individual digital startup ( $n = 30$  [25.2%]) was used as a (less granular) measure of size in analyses of *all sites*: This is because each startup is made up of one member (itself), and all collaborations have multiple members (at least two).

*Longevity of news producer* was measured as number of years in publication, provided on the CCM database and cross-checked on the collaboration site. Origin year for startups was obtained from their sites ( $M = 6.81$  years,  $sd = 5.19$ ).

*Presence of non-news producers* was measured dichotomously as whether or not collaboration members included non-news producers (e.g., journalism or non-journalism meta-organizations, civic/community organizations, etc.,  $n = 47$  [39.5%]).

*Non-profit producers* were operationally defined as news producers having a 501(c)(3) status—i.e., designated by the U.S. government as a non-profit and therefore tax exempt—and funding from charitable sources ( $n = 70$  [58.8%]). Commercial sites were defined as news producers without 501c3 status with funding from market-related sources: for example, advertising, and/or subscriptions ( $n = 49$  [41.2%]).

The measure of *accountability* in the news producer's mission was informed by the definition of accountability in Mellado et al. (2014): The existence of overt or implied statements about the news producer's obligations or efforts to challenge or question individuals or groups of power. ( $n = 49$  [41.2%]).

## Findings

Before exploring findings on hypotheses, we provide descriptive statistics. As mentioned, 82.4% of the sites had at least one set of standards. Of these, 47.1% had one set, 26.1% had two sets, and 9.2% had three or more. The 119 news producers in the sample had a total of 146 sets of standards (some outlets had more than one set). Each of the 146 sets of standards was coded for a primary and a secondary focus, with the following percentage breakdown for focuses across all standard sets: Community engagement = 20.55%; Operational purposes = 19.85%; Ethics = 18.80%; News production quality = 14.04%; Diversity = 13.36%. Among non-profit news producers, 88.6% had at least one set compared with 73.5% of commercial news producers.

One finding that goes to the heart of inhabited institutional theory is the prevalence of *non-news* producers. 44% of sites with standards cited non-news producing meta-organizations as sources for standards. Commonly cited media meta-organizations included the Institute for Non-Profit News ( $n = 13$ ), Society for Professional Journalists ( $n = 10$ ), and Solutions Journalism Network ( $n = 7$ ). LION Publishers (a network for digital startups), the Local Media Association, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and the Center for Cooperative Media (CCM) were cited several times.

Finally, institutional approaches predict some practices will be adopted in a skin-deep way—more for the sake of legitimacy than calculable benefits. Findings showed some evidence for this expectation: 57.7% of news producers with standards indicated no expectations of compliance, 64.3% of homepages signaled no overt evidence of standards, which may have been buried within the sites (indicating standards are perfunctory), and an average of 43.0% of individual standards were not notably relevant to the outlet's particular mission or locale.

Next, hypotheses are assessed. OLS multiple regression was used where dependent variables are ratio or interval level, and logistic regression was used for dichotomous dependent variables. Variables met assumptions of multiple regression. Dependent variables have standardized scores of skewness within  $\pm 2$ , and kurtosis within  $\pm 7$ , indicating normal distributions. Only one variable, *number of individual standards*, fell outside these ranges, and the value of an extreme outlier was changed to equal the closest value not determined to be an outlier by the box plot, bringing scores into acceptable ranges. Independent variables showed no multicollinearity as no bivariate correlations between independent variables reached  $r = 0.80$  (highest was  $r = 0.47$ ). Finally, we note that the thoroughness of the CCM database is unknown, and the sampling of digital news startups was a convenience sample. So, significance (parametric) testing is used, but only to conventionally indicate noteworthy relationships.

The first hypothesis (H1a) predicts that the larger the news producer, the greater the extent of standards (existence and number of standards) on the site. This hypothesis was not supported, but some findings on control variables are worth noting. OLS multiple regression was first used to test effects of news producer *size* on *extent of standards* for news collaborations only. In this analysis, size was operationalized as number of collaboration members, and extent of standards was operationalized as number of sets of standards. Four control variables were included: *longevity* (age) of news producer, *non-profit vs commercial*, presence of *non-news producers*, and importance of *accountability* in the news producer's mission. Only the control variable *accountability* reached significance.<sup>1</sup>

In an analysis of all news producers (collaborations and digital startups), the extent of standards (number of sets of standards) was also regressed on predictors, including the dichotomous predictor *collaboration vs. digital startup* rather than *size*. This predictor also failed to reach significance. The control variable *accountability* again reached significance ( $\beta = .36, p < .001$ ). In a logistic regression, size also failed to significantly improve the odds that a news producer would have standards. However, the control variable *longevity* was significant, meaning that newer sites are slightly more likely to

have standards than older sites (*OR* [odds ratio] = 0.86, 95% *CI* [confidence interval] = 0.77-0.97) (See Table 1).

Extent of standards was also operationalized as *number of individual standards* rather than number of sets of standards. In an analysis of collaborations only, *size* did not significantly predict. In an analysis of both collaborations and digital startups, startups had significantly more individual standards than collaborations ( $\beta = -0.24, p < .05$ ); however, this finding contradicts the prediction that larger organizations will have more extensive, elaborated standards, and so again, H1a is not supported. We also note the relevance of the control variables. *Non-profit news producers* have significantly more individual standards than commercial outlets, and news producers that emphasize *accountability* also had more standards (See Table 2).

**Table 1.** Logistic regression analyses of variables predicting whether or not news producer has standards. Yes = 1, No = 0 (all news producers, *N* = 119).

Variable	Standards vs No Standards				
	B	SE B	Wald $\chi^2$	<i>p</i>	OR*
Collab vs digital startup	-1.82	.92	3.90	.048	.16
Longevity of news producer	-.15	.06	6.31	.012	.86
Presence of non-news producers	.21	.65	.11	7.41	1.24
Non-profit vs commercial	1.24	.62	4.06	.044	3.45
Accountability as mission	2.13	.80	7.14	.008	8.45
Nagelkerke <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.32				

Note: Have standards = 1, No standards = 0; Collab = 1, digital startup = 0; Non-profit = 1, commercial = 0.  
 \*Odds ratio, or Exp(*B*).

**Table 2.** OLS multiple regression analyses of variables predicting (a) number of sets of standards and (b) number of individual standard statements (all news producers, *N* = 119).

Variable	Number sets of standards			Number indiv. standards		
	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	$\beta^a$	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	$\beta^a$
Collab vs digital startup	-.37	.33	-.12	-10.66	4.46	-.24*
Longevity news producer	-.01	.03	-.03	.41	.34	.11
Presence of non-news producer	.20	.29	.07	7.03	3.91	.18
Non-profit vs commercial	.27	.26	.09	9.07	3.45	.23*
Accountability	1.01	.25	.36***	14.12	3.34	.36***
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.15			.23	

Note: Collab = 1, digital startup = 0; Non-profit = 1, commercial = 0. *p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.  
<sup>a</sup> $\beta$  = Standardized beta coefficients. These control for other predictors and are reported in paper.

The second hypothesis (H1b) predicts that the standards of larger news producers will focus more on abstract principles (ethics, diversity, community engagement). This predictor proved insignificant; therefore, H1b was not supported.

RQ1 asked if there was a relationship between news-producer *longevity* and the likelihood of having standards that are *particularly relevant* to the producer's purpose or mission. OLS multiple regression analysis revealed no significant relationships, and so results provide no evidence that news-producer longevity influences how relevant standards are.

H2a proposes that collaborations with *non-news producers* as members will more likely adopt standards created by non-news producers. Logistic regression analysis revealed no significant relationship; therefore, H2a is not supported. H2b was also not supported: Presence of *non-news producers* in collaborations had no influence on the likelihood that standards would *focus on abstract professional issues*. However, the control variable *accountability* was significantly related to a focus on abstract issues, which suggests that collaborations that are more focused on holding power accountable are somewhat more likely to focus on abstract standards and less likely to focus on technical, operative standards.<sup>2</sup>

The next set of hypotheses (H3a – H3c) focus on influence of having *non-profit business models*. H3a was not supported, as non-profit news producers were no more likely than commercial news producers to focus on abstract issues in their standards. However, there was support for H3b, which predicted non-profit news producers will more likely urge *compliance* with standards. The predictor non-profit versus commercial (chi-squared (1) = 4.65,  $p < .05$ ) was statistically significant in predicting the odds that compliance will be urged. Specifically, the odds of finding expectations of compliance are 2.86 times greater at a non-profit collaboration than at a commercial collaboration (*OR* [odds ratio] = 2.86, 95% *CI* = 1.10-7.43) (See Table 3).

H3c predicts a greater extent of standards for non-profit news producers than for commercial news producers. When number of sets of standards was regressed on the *non-*

**Table 3.** Logistic regression analyses of variables predicting whether or not news producer urges (manifestly expects) compliance with standards. Yes = 1, No = 0 (all news producers with standards,  $N = 97$ ).

Variable	Urge standards compliance or not				
	B	SE B	Wald $\chi^2$	$p$	OR*
Collab vs digital startup	-.04	.59	.01	.941	.96
Longevity of news producer	.07	.06	1.57	.211	1.08
Presence of non-news producers	-.58	.53	1.24	.266	.56
Non-profit vs commercial	1.05	.49	4.65	.031	2.86
Accountability as mission	.38	.44	.75	.388	.62
Nagelkerke $R^2$	.15				

Notes: Collab = 1, digital startup = 0; Non-profit = 1, commercial = 0.  $N = 97$  because analysis omits news producers with no standards. Odds ratio, or  $\text{Exp}(B)$ .

*profit* vs. *commercial* variable, the hypothesis was not supported. However, a logistic regression analysis showed that being a non-profit does significantly improve the odds of having standards at all (chi-squared (1) = 4.06,  $p < .05$ ). Non-profits are 3.5 times more likely than commercial outlets to have standards ( $OR$  [odds ratio] = 3.45, 95%  $CI$  = 1.04-11.53) (See Table 1). Also, when number of individual standards was regressed on *non-profit* vs. *commercial*, H3c was supported: Non-profit news producers had significantly more individual standards than commercial news producers, and this was the case for both collaborations and digital startup sites ( $\beta = 0.23$ ,  $p < .05$ ) (See Table 2). This result also held up in an analysis of collaborations only.<sup>3</sup> Thus, H3c received mixed support.

H4 predicted that news producers with a stronger mission of *accountability*, that is, holding the powerful accountable, would have a greater *extent of standards*. The hypothesis received strong support. *Accountability* was a significant predictor of the number of sets of standards for all news producers (collaborations and startups) ( $\beta = 0.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and of the number of individual standards for all news producers ( $\beta = 0.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ) (See Table 2). Logistic regression analysis showed that *accountability* was a strong predictor of the dichotomous variable *standards or not* (chi-squared (1) = 7.14,  $p < .01$ ). Specifically, the odds of a news producer having any standards is 8.45 times greater when the news producer indicates an intention to hold the powerful accountable ( $OR$  [odds ratio] = 8.45, 95%  $CI$  = 0.62-3.45) (See Table 1).

## Discussion

80% of news collaborations and startups in the sample have standards, evidence that supports the literature's claims that, as a form of organizational control, standards are easy to adopt and adapt (Brunsson, 2000). The type of news producers in this study may help explain the high percentage. Newer organizational forms need legitimacy, which standards help provide (Brunsson, 2000; Deephouse et al., 2017; Djelic and Hond, 2014), and collaborations and digital startups also tend to have less hierarchical organizational control, making them fertile ground for standards (Brunsson, 2000).

The study's results reveal a number of factors that encourage adoption of standards. One is the news producer's mission. Clearly, local news producers that emphasized holding the powerful accountable were more likely to have standards. Literature suggests a possible explanation: Organizations that attract conflict and criticism are more likely to adopt standards in order to protect their public legitimacy (Deephouse et al., 2017), and certainly, going after the powerful can invite conflict and criticism. An alternative explanation, consistent with literature on institutional and professional boundary work, is that standard adoption and accountability journalism may both be motivated by an unmeasured third variable: journalists' professional orientation to public-service journalism. These findings suggest journalists should think carefully about their motives in adopting standards: How much are standards intended to inform or motivate professional practice internally and how much are they intended as external signaling of a professional orientation?

Results also suggest the local resource environment for local news organizations is more important in explaining standards than are organizational characteristics that affect

agency, such as organizational size/complexity or the characteristics of collaboration members. News outlets that were less dependent on the local market and more oriented toward professional values and practices were more likely to have standards, to have standards with depth, and to expect compliance. Here again, we see findings that are consistent with the concept of institutional boundaries.

Inhabited institutionalism holds that the adoption, use and qualities of standards are traceable to social actors, but results here provide mixed support for this assumption. There was little evidence that institutional actors such as journalism meta-organizations or civic organizations influenced decisions of local news producers directly, in granular, instrumental ways. However, results do suggest that meta-organizations, such as the Institute for Non-Profit News and the Solutions Journalism Network, are having a broad influence at the level of the institutional field. These organizations have produced a diversity of standards for a fragmented local journalism field. However, these standards are only made available to local news producers rather than imposed on them. This finding suggests a difference between the local journalism industry and other industries that require lockstep operational standards across organizations and therefore require institutional actors to mandate these standards. For many local news outlets in this study, loose alignment with multiple broad, abstract principles seemed sufficient.

Potentially, such a diverse standards environment could offer benefits, affording new ways of thinking and new paths for local news producers that apply these standards with thoughtful intentionality. However, findings indicate broad, field-wide standards were not often tailored to local needs. According to the standards literature, such a situation may be problematic as a multiplicity of loosely applied abstract standards could cause confusion for organizations (Djelic and Den Hond, 2014). Our descriptive findings seem consistent with the literature on inhabited institutionalism, which predicts organizations may overtly adopt standards for the sake of pursuing outward legitimacy but may then distance, or decouple, standards from the organization's local context and local purposes (Wedlin and Sahlin, 2017). More than 40% of individual standards were broad and not particularly relevant to the local news producer's mission or locale. Across the sites of the news producers with standards, only a third of the sites' homepages visibly portrayed or linked to standards, and close to 60% of sites indicated no expectations of compliance. These results are suggestive of decoupling between standards and daily practice, but we can learn only so much from an analysis of news site content. Data from journalists, news managers and/or newsroom observation would be needed to draw more definitive conclusions.

To the degree that decoupling is taking place, it may be a growing phenomenon. We say this because the news producers in our sample are newly emergent, they have only recently started developing professional principles, and they are doing so in an environment flush with the many sets of principles emerging from national-level meta-organizations like the Center for Cooperative Media and the Institute for Non-Profit News. Older news producers may be more grounded in their local community contexts and less oriented toward guidelines emerging from the growing network of national-level institutional actors.

The study has some limitations and question marks. First, we note that no claims can be made beyond the sample. It is unknown how thorough the CCM's sampling frame of

collaborations is, and the sample was also limited to U.S organizations. Comparison across media systems would be one logical next step. Second, the study's claims cover only publicly manifest standards: It is possible some news producers have standards they chose not to publish. Third, we defined "standards" broadly. Future research that defined standards more narrowly—i.e., as including only lists of specific, prescriptive statements—could increase variability of the *extent of standards* across sampled organizations.

Content analysis relies largely on manifest content and provides no direct evidence about human decision-making behind standards adoption and development. A logical next step would be to survey or interview decision-makers and examine the individual and organizational thinking behind decisions to (e.g.) adopt third-party standards, omit compliance requirements, or bury standards within a site.

In general, findings indicate that an outlet's accountability mission, non-profit status, and organizational youth predict an embrace of standards. Also, there is evidence of institutional decoupling of standards from local daily practices across all sites—i.e., evidence that outlets are pursuing standards in order to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the field's growing professional meta-organizations, and not just to govern their local news decisions. We note that such decoupling of standards could undermine news outlets' efforts to strengthen ties with local citizens. Research suggests news-community ties are strongest and most meaningful "where journalists identify and are identified with the community" (Lowrey and Daniels, 2017: p. 337).

A picture emerges of young organizations, many non-profit, adopting standards "off the shelf" from third parties rather than fully integrating them into their news operations, and of standards being bypassed by commercial outlets and by outlets that produce less confrontational news content. This picture suggests news producers should be intentional about standards adoption, especially as more third-party actors frame the field's normative environment. Journalists and managers should ask how much the standards they adopt reflect the mission and needs of third parties, and how much the standards reflect the mission, values, and operational needs of their particular news outlets and local communities. This picture suggests they should think about best ways to integrate standards meaningfully into daily practice so that standards are a living, useful document and not merely a checked box. It also suggests journalists and managers at local commercial and soft-news outlets should think more deeply about standards—their work also requires ethics, diversity, community interaction, and efficient operations.

### **Author contributions**

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: study conception and design: both authors; data collection: both authors; analysis and interpretation of results: both authors; draft manuscript preparation: both authors. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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## Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

## Notes

1. ( $\beta = 0.39, p < .001$ ). Collaborations-only analysis is not shown in a table.
2. ( $\beta = 0.24, p < .05$ ). Regression predicting an abstract focus for standards is not shown in a table.
3. ( $\beta = 0.20, p < .05$ ). Collaborations-only analysis is not shown in a table.

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