

Not-for-profit Journalism in the 21st century

— the example of ProPublica

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Abstract: This article explores the developments and challenges of nonprofit journalism in the 21st century. With the development of Web 2.0 technology, innovative investigative journalism models have emerged in the United States, driving the rise of nonprofit news outlets. The nonprofit journalism business is a nonprofit organization dedicated to exposing abuses of power and betrayal of public trust, and is characterized by originality, expert argumentation, and a positive mission to serve the community. Despite challenges such as funding, independence, and sustainability, nonprofit news outlets are actively growing and playing an increasingly important role in the news ecosystem. To meet these challenges, journalism scholars and industry practitioners need to work together to make the value of non-profit media visible to governments and the public, and to promote mutual support and cooperation among media.

Keywords: ProPublica; Nonprofit journalism; Investigative journalism model

In the 21st century, journalism has become more diverse and abundant, while not-for-profit journalism organizations have emerged promptly. According to the Institute for Nonprofit journalism (INN), data collected from 315 not-for-profit journalism outlets indicated that the not-for-profit journalism industry was expanding, with even more than 20 not-for-profit journalism outlets emerging in 2020 when Covid-19 was raging and commercial media advertising revenues were plummeting. Since everyone is a citizen journalist in the age of digital media, not-for-profit journalism has a unique path to success and extraordinary impact, as well as meeting predictable challenges in the future. ProPublica is a representative American independent not-for-profit journalism outlet.

With the development of Web 2.0 technology, many innovative models of investigative journalism have begun to emerge in the U.S., causing these changes to stem mostly from the gradual rise of not-for-profit journalism media. Not-for-profit journalism refers to the actual business of journalism as a not-for-profit organisation rather than a for-profit organisation (Lewis 2007)^[1]. Initially, they tended to focus on investigative and analytical journalism rather than focusing on breaking journalism. Nowadays, not-for-profit journalism encompasses many genres of journalism characterised by originality, expert arguments and a positive mission to serve the community (Ibrisevic 2019)^[2]. According to Sue Cross (2018), who is the director of the Institute for Not-for-Profit Journalism, there are now around 270 not-for-profit journalism websites in the US that are growing at a rapid pace. In addition to the US, a growing number of not-for-profit media outlets are entering the public eye globally. A report published in 2013 by the Centre for International Media Assistance (CIMA) indicates that the number of not-for-profit media outlets focusing on investigative reporting is growing globally. While Europe and the United States still dominate, places like South America, Asia and Africa are starting their own practices. The emergence of centres within the not-for-profit media such as ProPublica, which have been pushed to the top by media commentators (Carvajal, García-Avilés & González 2012)^[3], and the fact that the ProPublica journalism website has won the Pulitzer Prize four times, suggests that the not-for-profit model of investigative journalism in the USA is changing its original mode of operation and making progress in exploring new models of reporting. ProPublica (2019) is a not-for-profit journalism organisation founded in 2007^[4]. It aims to expose abuses of power and betrayal of public trust by governments, corporations, and other institutions, and also harnesses the moral power of investigative journalism to drive change through sustained attention to wrongdoing. But the financial crisis of 2007-2009 hit the advertising industry, the primary source of revenue for traditional media, hard worldwide, resulting in the loss of tens of thousands of journalistic jobs; with the advent of the digital media era, advertisers are more willing to place their advertisements on internet platforms (Birnbauer 2018 p1)^[4]. With the development of the times and the diversification of media forms, not-for-profit media is no longer a new phenomenon in the media ecology but is gradually moving from the margins to the foreground and starting to change the journalistic ecology.

In the past decade, the emergence of non-profit news organizations and news websites in the United States has been a challenge. In Europe and the United States, the creation of not-for-profit media was part of the original intention to eliminate the commodity nature of journalism and to maximise its service to the people^[5]. The background to the formation of the Associated Press in 1984 was the war with Mexico, and in order to reduce the cost of reporting on the conflict, five newspapers in the United States decided to form this co-operative organisation to share the information available to their respective journalists (Shmanske 1986)^[6]. This saved the media from having to do repetitive reporting, protecting the public's right to know and saving on manpower and expenses. The not-for-profit media is also subject to more rigorous scrutiny than the commercial media. The production of reports is required to be in the public interest and not a deliberate distortion of facts to suit specific readers. Many not-for-profit journalisms focus on reporting and explaining complex issues, working on high-quality coverage of issues. Just like ProPublica (2019) has been focusing on stories that have the potential to inspire real-world impact. Not-for-profit media tend to do the type of journalism that traditional media are reluctant to touch, such as expensive investigations, explanatory articles on fringe issues or critical reporting^[7]. ProPublica (2023) has partnered with 281 journalistic organizations to publish reports since its inception, and it has partnerships with The New York Times and This American Life, as well as with not-for-profit organizations such as The Marshall Project and The Texas Tribune (Birnbauer 2018 p148). ProPublica's willingness to commit resources to support the operation of local journalism agencies stems from a concern for the public interest and thus supports the development of a sustainable journalism ecosystem^[8].

While not-for-profit journalism is growing exponentially, even in the U.S., which has the largest amount of not-for-profit media outlets, it is still not mainstream and faces many challenges in the future^[9]. In the first place, applying for not-for-profit status can be challenging. Outdated legal frameworks are not conducive to promoting digital journalism, which is a broad challenge for not-for-profit journalism organisations. Even in the United States, the fastest-growing country for not-for-profit journalism, there are complex qualifications to apply for, let alone in other countries where traditional media is dominant^[10]. In addition, doing journalism requires money, and doing it well requires even more. Since foundation funding and individual donations account for a large proportion of all income for INN member organisations in 2023, this means that they still face issues of sustainability and independence. Non-profit media need to maintain favourable relationships with their funders, otherwise these relationships may end if irreconcilable differences arise. Many not-for-profit journalism centres have moved beyond the start-up phase when foundations leave the recipient^[11]. Yet most not-for-profit journalism organizations remain heavily dependent on foundation funding even after 5-7 years (Birnbauer 2018 p200). With the expansion of the number of not-for-profit media centres, competition for foundation funding has intensified^[12]. In particular, some traditional media outlets such as The New York Times has also begun to establish not-for-profit structures for attracting philanthropic funding to support journalism (Birnbauer 2018 p200). Foundation funding for journalism is also very skewed across the world. The data show that United States journalism receives 92% of global funding for journalism media, while only 7% of funding goes to European outlets; elsewhere, especially in developing countries, the amount of funding available is negligible (Karstens 2017)^[13]. Furthermore, not only do not-for-profit journalism organisations need access to finances to remain sustainable, but they also need to maintain journalistic objectivity. In the short term, not-for-profit journalism is an innovative model that brings hope to the journalism ecology, but it is challenging to become a sustainable route in a long way^[14]. To meet the challenges, journalism scholars must use research to make governments and the public see the value of not-for-profit media, so that more people are willing to support media development, and it is also necessary for mutual support among media^[15].

The not-for-profit journalism media, which are becoming an influential component of the journalism ecosystem, have the characteristic of being geographically, thematically or formally focused (Wright, Scott & Bunce 2018)^[16]. The road to not-for-profit journalism is paved not with wealth, but with good journalism. Journalism as a public good is well suited to the not-for-profit model, which provides an appropriate and promising tool for the fourth estate in the political, social and economic climate of the modern (Westenskow & Carter 2021)^[17]. Despite all the threats to the development of not-for-profit journalism, the industry is evolving positively. In a pluralistic digital age, it is crucial that different media be aware of their shared responsibilities and use collaboration as a mutually beneficial partnership, rather than being caught up in confrontation and strife.

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