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Saving Journalism
What Can We Learn from the Rest of the World?

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The Fifth Edition of Saving Journalism

On March 19–20, 2026, Columbia World Projects, Columbia SIPA's Technology Policy and Innovation Concentration, and McGill University's Centre for Media, Technology and Democracy convened their annual *Saving Journalism* conference, titled “Saving Journalism: What Can We Learn from the Rest of the World?,” at Reid Hall in Paris, France.

Founded in 2021 by **Anya Schiffrin**, Senior Lecturer at Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs, and **Taylor Owen**, Beaverbrook Chair in Media, Ethics and Communications and founding director of McGill's Centre for Media, Democracy and Technology, the conference showcases new research and policymaking aimed at supporting quality journalism around the world.

Across panels and workshops, experts examined how platform dominance, shifting ownership structures, and the rise of artificial intelligence are reshaping the media landscape and the sustainability of journalism. Discussions centered on increasing market concentration, weakening revenue models, wavering audience trust and engagement, and the resulting pressures on public-interest journalism. Alongside diagnoses of the issues at hand, sessions explored existing and emerging policy responses, including public funding mechanisms like digital taxation, and new regulatory approaches to platform power. This brief distills key insights from those discussions.

Takeaways

The political economy of journalism is rapidly transforming.

Journalism's future depends on the ownership structures and economic incentives that shape news production. Comparative analysis underscores the limits of market-driven media ownership models and points to the need for mixed systems that strengthen the roles of the public and civil society, particularly as concentrated ownership can amplify partisan narratives through platform-driven, short-form formats.

AI weakens ties between journalists and audiences.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping the information ecosystem by absorbing and reproducing journalistic content without clear attribution to or compensation for those responsible for the underlying work. As AI systems replace traffic rather than distribute content, they disrupt the link between producers and audiences, raising urgent questions about sustainability, accountability, and the future value of original reporting.

U.S. media policy remains fragmented.

In the United States, state-level experimentation, from tax credits to public funding, offers uneven progress. Public media, while not as widely consumed in the U.S. as it is in Europe, continues to enjoy relatively high levels of public trust but faces ongoing challenges in attracting and retaining audiences. On the whole, existing regulatory tools remain limited, leaving U.S. policymakers struggling to keep pace with structural changes in the media landscape.

Policymakers are looking for effective tools to govern platform power.

Policymakers are exploring new approaches to address growing imbalances between platforms and publishers. Proposals include digital services taxes, must-carry obligations, and stronger competition and transparency measures. However, resistance from Big Tech and implementation challenges remain when it comes to ensuring the fairness, global applicability, and long-term effectiveness of these approaches.

Conference breakdown

Panel 1: New Research from Different Disciplines

This discussion examined how media ownership shapes the journalism that gets produced, observing that ownership concentration narrows editorial diversity while mixed ownership models strengthen democratic resilience. At the same time, it highlighted how platform and AI dynamics are transforming the information ecosystem and reinforcing the need to treat reliable news access as a public good.

Media Ownership and Democratic Outcomes

Journalism's democratic function is inseparable from its funding structures. Panelists emphasized that media ownership is not a neutral backdrop but a central determinant of reporting outcomes, providing three ways to assess ownership: whether owners act in the public interest, how concentrated media markets become, and how ownership influences editorial decisions.

New York University Professor **Rodney Benson** presented findings from his latest work, which provides comparative analysis of four ownership models: market, private, civil society, and public. Each produces distinct editorial profiles and democratic trade-offs. Market-driven outlets often prioritize shareholder returns over public-interest reporting, while privately owned organizations may be less constrained by investors but remain vulnerable to political and economic influence. Civil society organizations frequently produce high-quality investigative journalism but face chronic funding challenges and limited reach. Public media can combine broad accessibility with high-quality reporting when backed by sustained state investment.

No single model is sufficient, Benson concluded. Democratic media health depends on a calibrated combination of each, with stronger roles for public and civil society institutions. "The key is to get the right mix of media ownership, with more civil society, more public, less private and much less market-based ownership."

Focusing on the rise of short-form video in a highly concentrated media market in India, **Felipe Lauritzen**, former visiting scholar at Columbia Business School, broke down how changes in media ownership influence news selection on short-form video platforms. Using a difference-in-differences design across a large dataset of video content, he observed that post-acquisition, short-form content significantly increased mentions of ruling political actors while reducing coverage of opposition parties. This provides evidence that ownership directly shapes editorial decision-making, particularly in digital formats where distribution is governed by algorithms. As consumption shifts toward short-form content, the effects of ownership concentration are likely to become more pronounced.

Access to News and Information Inequality

Declining news consumption among younger audiences was addressed by looking at experimental evidence on access and media literacy interventions. Professor of Economics at Sciences Po Paris **Julia Cagé** presented findings from a large-scale randomized study in French high schools that tested the effects of free digital subscriptions and classroom-based media literacy programs.

Participating students demonstrated greater demand for reliable news, improved media literacy and lower rates of misinformation sharing. While overall knowledge gains were limited, the intervention significantly reduced disparities in access to and engagement with reliable information across socioeconomic groups. This suggests that improving access can narrow gaps in engagement with reliable information even when knowledge outcomes remain uneven. Framing information as a public good, Cagé underscored the need for sustained public investment to ensure equitable access.

AI and the Degradation of the Information Ecosystem

The panel concluded by examining how AI qualitatively differs from earlier technological disruptions to journalism. Unlike social media platforms that aggregate content, AI systems substitute for it by synthesizing and presenting journalistic content directly to users, severing the economic link between content producers and consumers.

Columbia Ph.D. Candidate **Maxim Ventura-Bolet** and University Professor **Joseph Stiglitz** presented a paper arguing that this shift fundamentally alters the incentive structure of information production. Because low-quality content is cheaper to produce than high-quality reporting, AI's incentive architecture systematically rewards misinformation and drives a decline in information quality, generating information environments that range from partially reliable to entirely untruthful. In the absence of accountability mechanisms, risks to both information integrity and the economic sustainability of journalism are amplified.

Panelists stressed that policy responses ought to focus on rebalancing incentives. Taxing AI platforms could fund public-interest journalism and address structural imbalances. Other recommendations included stronger liability frameworks for misinformation and algorithmic transparency requirements. "In the public sphere the price of truth is hard to get to," the panel's moderator, **Arjun Jayadev**, concluded. "We need to think about new institutional arrangements that stabilize the production of high-cost and high-value journalism. This will include a diversity of ownership structures. This is a civilizational issue."

Panel 2: Will Journalism Survive AI?

This panel assessed how AI systems reproduce journalistic content without attribution, weakening traditional revenue models and reinforcing structural vulnerabilities in news production. As power asymmetries between tech companies and news publishers deepen, policy responses are converging around statutory licensing, stronger copyright enforcement, and collective coordination to restore balance.

AI as Extraction

How do AI models use and reproduce journalism? **Taylor Owen** presented findings from the "AI News Audit", a comparative study of Claude, Gemini, ChatGPT, and Grok. The audit focused on three dimensions of models' engagement with news: how they ingest journalistic content during training, how they reproduce that content when prompted, and how they attribute news. Across systems, journalistic content is extensively replicated, including named sources, anecdotes, and specific details, even from paywalled content. Attribution is largely absent from final outputs, despite models identifying the original newsroom when explicitly requested in 74–97% of cases. Model behavior also varies widely: Grok and ChatGPT generate inaccuracies more often when prompted about recent events taking place after their training cutoffs, while Claude was more likely to decline to answer when reliable sourcing was unavailable.

"This is a materially different problem than what we dealt with in social media," Owen noted. "Social media is about power imbalances. This is about journalism being ingested inside models with zero attribution or potential for commercialization. The policy solutions we've been discussing regarding social media might not be perfectly analogous to this situation. The Online News Act in Canada is not the right tool to extend to chatbots. Copyright, we'll see it play out in legal cases, but it'll take a while to resolve. Statutory licensing and mandatory attribution are probably newer, baseline solutions."

Presenting his latest work with **Anya Schiffrin**, University of Houston Assistant Professor of Finance **Haaris Mateen** argued that AI systems increasingly rely on journalistic content while providing little attribution or compensation to the news organizations that produce it. This creates a direct substitution effect: if outputs replicate reporting, the incentive to access original sources diminishes. Yet the core value of journalism—original reporting, fact verification, and editorial judgment—is costly to produce and difficult to sustain under current conditions.

Referencing Kenneth Arrow's description of knowledge as a "fugitive good" whose value is driven by decentralization and plurality, Mateen outlined three interrelated challenges. The first is technological, as users rarely distinguish between AI-generated responses and the reporting on which they are based. Second, existing legal frameworks are insufficient, as copyright and licensing frameworks were not designed for this form of large-scale content use. The final challenge is economic, with publishers lacking effective means of pricing their content and measuring harm wrought by AI systems.

Industry Responses and Policy Pathways

Speakers agreed that publishers lack leverage in negotiations with AI firms, particularly in the absence of strong regulatory backing. Copyright enforcement remains uneven, especially in Europe, where governments are reluctant to constrain AI development. Even so, several participants argued that statutory licensing agreements are vital, precedent-setting tools, and large publishers play a key role in establishing compensation benchmarks for future deals across the industry. Referencing *Le Monde's* internal revenue-sharing model, which allocates a portion of AI-related revenue directly to journalists, one panelist raised internal tensions within the industry: while some publishers pursue licensing revenue, others are simultaneously exploring ways of deploying AI to reduce newsroom costs.

In the U.S., another speaker noted, litigation will be central to determining the boundaries of permissible use and compensation structures. At the same time, there are alternative strategies, including leveraging large infrastructure actors like Cloudflare when legal solutions are insufficient. In a lightning conversation which immediately followed, **Anya Schiffrin** interviewed a representative from Cloudflare who discussed how the company assists publishers in getting payments from AI crawlers. The conversation focused on "pay per crawl," a service that prevents bots from scraping websites without first paying for content. The technology aims to give power back to publishers in content negotiations and is automatically provided to customers.

As these services develop, several conference attendees stressed that Cloudflare is likely to demand a cut from publishers. Cloudflare exists in a cybersecurity space with few competitors, making the "If you feel we take a big cut, go somewhere else" approach nonviable. While pay-per-crawl challenges the dominance of technology companies, it locks in users without an alternative. This allows Cloudflare to collect a sizable share of the deals that publishers desperately need, simply shifting power from one platform to another rather than rectifying the underlying harm. This reminds us, several cautioned, that private-sector incentives do not necessarily align with the procurement of a public good like verifiable information.

Panel 3: A View from the U.S.

State-level experimentation is emerging as a key driver of media policy innovation in the United States. This panel examined how those innovations are unfolding and why public media has retained audience trust despite challenges in identification and engagement. Speakers reframed journalism as civic infrastructure to highlight its value beyond markets, and identified understanding audience behavior as central to the sector's sustainability. Meanwhile, regulatory tools in the U.S. are fragmented and limited, struggling to keep pace with national media transformations.

State-Level Solutions, Trust, and Audience Engagement

With federal media policy largely at a standstill, speakers pointed to state governments as the primary source of experimentation. Journalist employment tax credits in New Mexico, New York, and Illinois represent meaningful, "bread and butter subsidies" that have garnered unexpected bipartisan support.

Public media surfaced as another bright spot. Despite federal funding cuts to NPR stations, public media retains broad, cross-ideological support, with audiences expressing personal attachment even when they disagree politically with some of their local station's coverage. Concerns over station "bias" all but disappear when local lawmakers encounter the practical value public stations provide when broadcasting critical updates about public health, environmental, and economic emergencies. For instance, a Wyoming Freedom Caucus attempt to defund the lone public broadcaster was hard to square with its role as the primary point for emergency alerts, and ultimately proved unsuccessful.

This trust has translated into financial resilience. Local affiliates have raised funds to sustain their operations, in part because communities see these outlets as critical civic infrastructure. To further strengthen these relationships, speakers suggested expanding engagement by creating "permission scripts," or ways for audiences to see themselves reflected in media. Among efforts to better understand information-seeking patterns and craft policy and sustainability strategies for independent media, panelists pointed to the recently-launched audience behavior observatory at Harvard Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy as a particularly promising development.

Regulatory Limits and the Future of Media Oversight

The conversation concluded with appraisals of whether current regulatory tools in the U.S. are equipped to address today's media environment.

One panelist spoke of the limits and the recent misuse of media regulation, noting that much of the U.S. regulatory framework was developed for broadcast media, which is a shrinking share of the media landscape. He also raised concerns about the Federal Trade Commission's recent media merger approvals and its ability to oversee the media sector effectively, particularly with respect to monitoring bias and collusion, citing its investigations into NewsGuard and Apple News. At the same time, existing tools, such as news distortion rules — allowing regulators to fine broadcasters or revoke licenses when stations intentionally engage in "rigging" or "slanting" of news — are rarely enforced and, when they are invoked today, are used to attack the press.

Panel 4: New Frontiers in Policymaking

The final panel featured promising proposals from across the globe to support journalism, with emphasis on digital services taxes (DSTs) to address structural imbalances and generate revenue, as well as must-carry requirements to ensure AI models can access and train on verified, high-quality information. Although participants disagreed about the merits of individual interventions, there was broad consensus that media policy should center on citizens and their informational needs, rather than prioritizing the interests of institutions or markets.

Digital Services Taxes and Platform Accountability

One recurring theme was whether Big Tech should contribute more directly to supporting public-interest journalism.

Two panelists shared insights from the Forum for Information and Democracy's paper calling for digital taxes to support journalism. Previous *Saving Journalism* conferences have also assessed the merits of DSTs, which are embraced by many journalists who regard other funding mechanisms — subsidies, copyright frameworks, and bargaining codes — as insufficiently transparent.

This year, advocates argued that because dominant platforms derive significant value from advertising and user data, a portion of that revenue could be directed toward sustaining journalism through public funding mechanisms. "We need to implement the polluter pays principle," one speaker argued. However, sustained U.S. opposition to DSTs makes such taxes unlikely, not least as tech firms are primed to pass the charges on to consumers.

Must-Carry Obligations in the AI Era

Panelists also considered whether "must-carry" obligations — traditionally used to ensure the distribution of public-interest content based on economic and cultural considerations — might be adapted for our current digital landscape.

Director of the Center for Media & Digital Governance **Courtney Radsch** discussed recent work prepared for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) on must-carry regulations. Adopted globally, their relevance now extends beyond broadcast media to platforms such as YouTube, Netflix, and Spotify, and potentially to AI systems as well. In the context of AI, must-carry obligations function as a statistical fact-checking mechanism. “News is important to train the model, and I do think we are undervaluing the utility of having the same content in many outlets,” she said. “It provides us with a good statistical verification of reality.”

As more publishers block AI crawlers from accessing their content, Radsch warned of a growing scarcity of reliable information available to train models, set against an abundance of low-quality or manipulative content. However, adopting these obligations raises a critical question: who should qualify as a “must-carry” and be guaranteed visibility in today's information ecosystem?

Centering Policy Around Citizens

Several panelists stressed that regulation ought to be organized around citizens rather than institutions or markets. Effective policy, one regulator noted, begins by asking: “What problem are we solving for citizens? What unintended consequences might arise? How will regulated actors respond?” They warned against policy shortcuts, criticizing measures that disguise taxation as competition policy: “A tax dressed up as a competition intervention [is] fundamentally dishonest.” Drawing on cases such as Canada, where platform retaliation followed regulatory measures (such as news media bargaining codes), panelists debated the strategic dimensions of policymaking and the importance of anticipating corporate responses.

Platform Dominance and the Advertising Ecosystem

Speakers agreed that tech infrastructure is broken — opaque, automated, and dominated by platforms. In a second lightning conversation between panelists from Check My Ads and the Forum on Information and Democracy, an infinite AI-driven supply of automated advertising was cited as a key force undermining legitimate publishers by enabling the monetization of large-scale, low-quality, false, or harmful content. Simultaneously, audience data is commodified and resold outside publisher control.

Amid a concentrated advertising marketplace centered on Google, Meta, and Amazon, panelists proposed audience data protection alongside content protection, antitrust interventions, including potential divestiture, and greater transparency and public accountability in how ad systems operate. Panelists largely agreed that public-interest media deserves support as a public good, comparable to environmental protection or other social responsibilities. They also recommended encouraging companies and governments to allocate a portion of their advertising budgets to public-interest media.

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Breakout Workshops

New Business Models
Themes: Funding/revenue models, audience relationships

The International Press Institute created its Innovation and Media Business program in response to the current reckoning facing the news industry. A workshop facilitator from the Institute explained that the program helps legacy newsrooms overcome the shortcomings of their business models, which frequently fail to treat journalism as a consumer product, diversify revenue streams, align incentives, or build effective marketing partnerships. To address these challenges, the Institute helps newsrooms analyze audience data and identify user pain points to clarify their value proposition. Newsrooms, the facilitator argued, should ask themselves: “Why are we relevant to our audience?” “Do they know our brand?” “How do we fit into our audience’s media patterns?”

The facilitator pointed to successful examples, including *The Ferret*, a Scottish media platform which allows subscribers to influence investigations, creating a feedback loop that maintains engagement. Although different sectors face distinct challenges, the facilitator stressed that all newsrooms should redesign their business models to put audience interests first.

Grantmaking for Independent European Tech
Themes: Freedom from big tech, digital autonomy, audience relationships

European journalists want digital autonomy from tech giants in Silicon Valley. Their concerns range from a desire for internal autonomy over cloud and data systems to external control over distribution networks. Workshop facilitators from the Dutch Journalism Fund (SVDJ) noted that if European journalists move away from big tech platforms, audiences won’t automatically follow. However, they pointed to Norwegian public broadcasters and NPR as evidence that strong brands can successfully bring audiences along. The challenge is whether governments can create platforms in the public interest that are as engaging and fun as those operated by Big Tech. They pointed to the SVDJ as a source of innovation toward this end. The SVDJ is a government fund that offers grants to create open-source projects and organize communities of practice. Even so, they noted that European organizations face greater difficulty securing late-stage development funding than their counterparts in the United States. In their view, journalism does not lack innovative ideas — it lacks the capital needed to scale them.

National Journalism Funds and Innovative Pooled Funding Mechanisms
Themes: Funding journalism through innovative actors

National journalism funds emerged in response to the contracting of international funding for public-interest journalism. They aggregate capital from diverse sources and distribute it strategically across local media ecosystems. Workshop facilitators from the International Fund for Public Interest Media (IPIFM) highlighted funds launched across the Global South and assessed what these mechanisms can realistically deliver. They argued that these funds serve not only as grant-makers but also as financial infrastructure, unlocking support from technology companies, impact investors, and high-net-worth individuals who want to invest in journalism but lack effective channels to do so.

Country cases paint a mixed picture, with promising traction in the Philippines, Colombia, South Africa, and Indonesia, while many funds elsewhere struggle to scale. Participants raised persistent tensions with this funding model, particularly around editorial independence, donor visibility, and the risk of keeping struggling newsrooms on life support rather than building durable ecosystems. The workshop closed with a call for holistic, multi-scalar approaches that pair fund development with capacity-building and regulatory reform, and encourage the creation of new news outlets rather than simply sustaining existing ones.