

University of Groningen

## Magda Konieczna - 'Journalism Without Profit: Making News When the Market Fails'

Cheruiyot, David

*Published in:*  
International Journal of Communication

**IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.**

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
2021

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Cheruiyot, D. (2021). Magda Konieczna - 'Journalism Without Profit: Making News When the Market Fails'. *International Journal of Communication*, 15(2021), 403-406. [2021BKR0009].

### Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

### Take-down policy

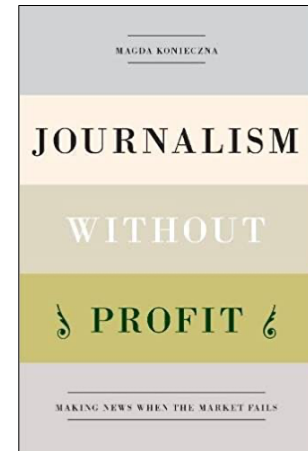
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

*Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.*

Magda Konieczna, **Journalism Without Profit: Making News When the Market Fails**, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018, 264 pp., \$22.99 (paperback).

Reviewed by  
David Cheruiyot  
University of Groningen, The Netherlands

This widely accessible book by Magda Konieczna, an assistant professor of journalism at Temple University in the United States, provides a critical and broad examination of nonprofits in the American journalism landscape. Konieczna employs very rich and insightful case studies of three American nonprofits—the Center for Public Integrity, the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism, and MinnPost—to show the terms of a *new logic* of journalism, the perils of news production outside legacy news media, and the upside of the journalistic reform projects at the periphery of traditional journalism.



***Journalism Without Profit: Making News When the Market Fails*** begins from the standpoint that traditional commercial journalism has fallen short of fulfilling its public service role, and, thus, there is an urgent need for reforms. The reforms are undertaken by these “evolutionaries” (rather than “revolutionaries”) that seek a “fix” to journalism through financial support from tech entrepreneurs, foundations and philanthropists (p. 47). The book, therefore, assesses whether as *journalistic reformers*, these nonprofits reposition the role of journalism in a democracy. It considers these *reformers* as “changing the logics of journalism, creating a space in which public service journalism has real value” (p. 22). The author is, however, conscious of the fact that the questions that these actors raise—when provided the hallowed space for public journalism to operate—are very similar to what we ask about commercial journalism today [i.e., accountability (independence from private interests) and sustainability (the ability to sustain news production)].

It is the interest in the thinking around the “journalism problem” through the lens of these self-proclaimed “reformers” that runs through the six engaging chapters of the book. The thesis of the book is therefore explicit about the reformist agenda in journalism and the possibility of thriving public service journalism. Indeed, at some points in the text, it almost appears as though there is a strong need for theorization of the notion of journalism reforms and what it portends in understanding journalism as an institution and profession.

In the introductory chapter, the author carefully draws attention to the initial journalistic democratic reform projects (i.e., civic and public journalism of the 1990s) that failed because the proponents did not provide a clear pathway as to how journalistic institutions and professionals would respond to the reforms. Despite the failure and the persistence of news organizations to serving commercial interests, journalism still proved to be a functional public sphere—through providing information vital for an active citizenry in democracies as well as platforms for political deliberation.

The author explains that the foundational condition for the emergence of nonprofits is “market failure,” the fact that for-profit journalism—that has relied on a traditional funding model—has consistently under-produced public service journalism (pp. 34–35). While acknowledging journalism’s precarity in times of economic crisis, the author argues that the genesis of the public service shortage is journalism’s “free-rider problem”—where a mass population fails to pay for the news while still reaping from externalities of journalism (p. 35).

The book explains the vicissitude of public service journalism, the ever-changing relationship between journalism’s funding model and the decline of quality journalism, as the conditions that enabled the emergence of nonprofits in America’s media ecology.

Perhaps the book’s most resounding conceptual contribution to journalistic reform agenda is through what the author refers to as *field repair*, which is the view that nonprofits have a mission to transform journalism “*from within*” the institution itself (p. 63). Konieczna argues that nonprofits are actors who acknowledge the logic of journalism but constructively seek change from within the field. Field repair happens in two ways: first through *news sharing* or the production of news that is shared with traditional news organizations, and second, through providing an impetus for legacy media to produce quality journalism. Field repair distinguishes nonprofits from other outsiders in journalism, as through this strategy, they do not seek to dismantle the logics of journalism but rather employ them in their reform agenda.

In chapter 4, the author shows there is a growing recognition in journalism scholarship of foundations’ interest in expanding information resources available to the public rather than the mission to “fix” journalism and its challenges in the 21st century. This point perhaps requires much attention in assessing the foundations’ influence on the core news production process, because this suggests that studying them within a “media ecology” might be too limiting in understanding their implications to journalism today (p. 19).

What becomes clear in the book, however, is that nonprofits hold a constructive view of journalism (that journalism is good for society), but at the same time, the foundations that fund them represent special interests and lack accountability (although the author notes that there are possibilities of intersections of interests of traditional news organizations and foundations).

What, perhaps, is an incisive and in-depth look at nonprofits’ claim to “changing the logics of journalism” is the discussion about the concept of “news sharing” in chapters 5 and 6 (p. 22). News sharing defines the symbiotic relationship between nonprofits and for-profit organizations. There is a multidirectional exchange in news production through collaborative projects between nonprofits and commercial news organizations that involves sharing news content, costs of production, or skills. This relationship is a boon for the reform agenda, as it legitimizes nonprofits and their operations, but also becomes detrimental to instituting public service journalism.

The crux of what the reformist agenda of journalism is about has to do with nonprofits’ dilemma of sharing and collaborating. Sharing is a factor toward normative isomorphism—if nonprofits share news,

then they are constrained to adopt traditional norms and values, while through collaboration, they have more agency in the reform agenda. The question, then, that remains for nonprofits is: Do they share and be different (from commercial news organizations), or do they adopt the norms and values of journalism to have an impact in society (and thus fix journalism)?

In short, some tensions arise when nonprofits conform to the norms of journalism—norms legitimize and reinforce the impact of nonprofits' reformist agenda, but then strangle the same reforms. Nevertheless, the author is not pessimistic, here. In the epilogue, Konieczna captures very well what the book does: It documents an "ongoing evolution" that is tempered by current technological and social disruptions, and that will, in the end, lead to a "stable situation" (p. 207)—a notable optimism about the future of journalism.

Journalism scholars have recently acknowledged that there is an expanding information ecology creating vascular connections between traditional and nontraditional news producers. Nonprofit organizations have to be put in the context of nontraditional actors whose roles and interventions have variously been described as *peripheral*. In particular, Konieczna's idea of "field repair" and "sharing" in the context of peripheral journalism echoes the ideas about *entanglements* (Baack, 2017) or *fusions* (Usher, 2019) that explain the emerging configurations of journalism due to the interdependencies between traditional and nontraditional news producers. From the book's assessment, conventional journalism still appears to have the upper hand in such a relationship. However, these new actors succeed in rocking the "journalistic boat" through the challenging traditional economic logic of commercial media and by imposing themselves as producers of a journalistic product in an imaginary space that is free from market-centered interests.

To journalism scholars, this book will provide a rethinking of journalism and its relevance in democracies today. It has rich empirical evidence of the reformist agenda in journalism beyond the often theoretical and philosophical treatise about overhauling the journalism profession. Further, the author shows the perils of the insider-outsider experimentations toward "fixing" journalism, and the ever-growing shift toward the peripheralization of journalism that is certainly shaping conventional journalism as we know it, and could redefine the profession and the institution in the future.

To practitioners, media observers, and policy makers concerned about the future of journalism, this book effectively shows the "outsiders'" view of disrupted journalism. Nonprofits provide a pathway toward reforming public service journalism during a period of economic crisis and uncertainty. Further, the book shows the malleability of journalism as a profession—how it can be (re)deployed toward promoting social change, even if journalism as an institution is not in itself embraced.

It is, however, important to note that nonprofits have carved a space for reformist and public-oriented journalism, but still suffer from financial strain and dependence on funders. While their reformist agenda is being felt in some areas (e.g., investigative journalism), it is also shaky, owing to a close interdependence with legacy news media.

### References

- Baack, S. (2017). Practically engaged: The entanglements between data journalism and civic tech. *Digital Journalism*, 6(6), 673–692. doi:10.1080/21670811.2017.1375382
- Usher, N. (2019). Hacks, hackers, and the expansive boundaries of journalism. In S. A. Eldridge & B. Franklin (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of developments in digital journalism studies* (pp. 348–359). London, UK: Routledge.