Reimagining Canadian Journalism:

A Case Study of News Startups in Montreal

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ABSTRACT

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The Canadian journalism industry has been in a self-described crisis, partly of its own making, for arguably as long as it has existed. With each new technological advancement comes a new wave of self-doubt, and in the past five years, many legacy news outlets have turned to the federal government for financial help. At the same time, a new crop of digital news startups has grown. Their numbers fluctuate, but at least 270 digital-first outlets existed in Canada as of last year (LION Publishers, 2023). These outlets tend to be more independent and less nostalgic about journalistic norms and traditions, forging new approaches to information-gathering and sharing. As trust in news media has generally eroded (Reuters, 2024), many news startups have responded by focusing on hyperlocal or niche information needs, and on direct audience engagement. Some are also exploring philanthropic funding opportunities or seeking out non-profit status, effectively turning the capitalist, ad-revenue-driven newspaper model on its head. Through a series of three 30- to 50-minute podcasts, three Montreal-based case studies – La Converse, The Rover and Pivot – are examined to help answer the question: As Canadian legacy news media crumble, how will the new kids on the block respond? Judging by interviews with the founders of the three news outlets, the next generation of journalism leaders value slowing down to conduct more long-form and investigative reporting; spotlighting voices that have been traditionally marginalized in the media; and, for some, favouring radical transparency over neutral objectivity.

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Introduction

The Canadian journalism industry is in crisis – or so we've been told over and over again in journalism schools and by news outlets themselves. I've always been skeptical of this narrative. When a crisis is prolonged over decades or centuries, and renewed with each new technological development – migrating from print to radio, to television, to the internet to social media and now artificial intelligence – does it really constitute a crisis anymore? Or is this a permanent state of chaos we're operating in and do we need to learn to make do?

When I came to Concordia University in 2022, I hoped to study new ways the industry could innovate, focusing less on its inherent brokenness and more on possible solutions. As someone who has mostly worked in legacy media, I wanted to explore what alternative business models and formats exist, and see if journalism could be more sustainable on several levels – more human-focused, socially conscious, economically viable and environmentally aware. I wanted to learn who was improving on existing models and how their ideas could be emulated throughout Canada. My thinking was that if news outlets could provide improved working conditions for journalists, they would inevitably produce better coverage. Because if we weren't worrying about the safety of our jobs and a proverbial guillotine about to fall, then maybe we could collectively focus our strength on providing public-service journalism.

With an eye to what's improving, I wanted to study the emergence of news startups in Canada, which is giving me, and others, some hope. I consider a startup to be a news organization that's less than 10 years old, with one or more staff covering an information need, such as local news, the arts, sports, etc. Startups are not part of a corporate chain, such as Postmedia, Torstar, Metro or Saltwire, but are stand-alone operations that can be considered independent from other commercial interests. These outlets are typically digital-first operations that are often looking outside of the traditional advertising model to generate revenue. That might include soliciting audience donations through crowdfunding campaigns, applying for one-time grants or seeking out non-profit status so they can offer tax receipts in exchange for charitable donations. I've found some of these news startups are often rethinking journalistic norms like objectivity or keeping audiences at arm's length, and occasionally breaking down barriers to collaborate with readers or other news outlets in an effort to do better journalism. With lower overhead costs and less bureaucracy, digital news startups appear to have more freedom to focus on what, I'd argue, really matters: producing excellent reporting, as well as amplifying the voices of folks who have been traditionally marginalized.

Some of the most well-known examples of these startups in Canada are The Narwhal, a non-profit that reports on environmental issues in Western Canada and recently won the prestigious Michener Award (Balkissoon, 2024); The Discourse, a hyperlocal news site covering three communities on Vancouver Island with a sister site, IndigiNews, focused on Indigenous stories; and The Sprawl, a Calgary-based outlet focused on local news coverage. Other longer-running indie outlets like The Tyee in Vancouver, Canadaland in Toronto and The Coast in Halifax have arguably graduated out of startup status, with more than 10 years of experience under their respective belts, but they maintain the same ethos of independence. For this project, however, I decided to stay closer to home and focus on news startups based in Montreal, which I'll talk about more in the next section.

Working at a news startup comes with its own set of shortcomings. These journalists are forced to work with fewer resources than their legacy counterparts. They often work longer hours for less pay and upend any semblance of work-life balance. They must build a reputation for

themselves and for their fledgling outlets, which haven't yet accumulated institutional trust. And they have to wear many hats, including that of a business manager trying to keep their operations afloat, which can seriously distract from the time and energy that could otherwise be spent doing journalism. Despite these challenges, startup journalists may feel empowered by working independently – or feel alone in a storm of their own making. It can depend on the day.

Besides my own personal desire to explore this topic, this project can contribute to the understanding of a relatively new field in Canada. With legacy media always in a state of flux and news of industry cuts appearing regularly, many more journalists may be considering building their own operations soon. Unfortunately, there is a noticeable lack of qualitative data on news startups in Canada. Many researchers have compiled quantitative lists that state the various players, including the University of British Columbia, Toronto Metropolitan University and LION Publishers. I've read about startup outlets in the U.S. in *Journalism Without Profit: Making News When the Market Fails* by Magda Konieczna (2018), and others around the world in *Beyond Journalism* by Mark Deuze and Tamara Witschge (2020). But there is a serious lack of in-depth research that discusses the outlets in my own country. This is not only a disservice to the Canadian startup journalists who deserve recognition, but also to journalism research more broadly. I hope my research can help contribute to more analysis of the Canadian startup field.

Research questions

By focusing on news startups, I was able to encompass several of my research interests, such as labour conditions in the journalism industry; how alternative and independent media may be succeeding where mainstream or legacy media fail (and vice versa); media and audience fragmentation; new funding models for news; as well as the need for more intersectional diversity in the workforce.

I chose three Montreal-based news startups to spotlight over three podcast episodes: La Converse, The Rover and Pivot. I spoke with founders from each of these news outlets – Lela Savić at La Converse, Christopher Curtis at The Rover and Gabrielle Brassard-Lecours at Pivot – and asked about their own curiosities about the news startup industry, which helped inform my research questions.

Initially, I wanted my questions to be quite broad as part of an iterative process, where I could hone in on more specific follow-up questions later, as I learned more throughout the research. My literature review, as well as the pre-interviews I did with journalists and discussions I had with my supervisors, helped inform my initial research questions, which were:

1. How do these startups plan to disrupt and improve the Canadian or Quebec media landscape?
2. How are they actually doing this in practice?
3. Are these startups' plans sustainable, both on a professional and personal level?

My preliminary research found the three startups were all approaching journalism in somewhat untraditional ways, although The Rover was arguably the most conventional of the three outlets in terms of news-gathering and dissemination; its founder came from a newspaper background and spent almost a decade at the *Montreal Gazette*.

La Converse, a francophone outlet founded and led by Savić, prioritizes collaboration and transparency with BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) audiences, who don't often see themselves portrayed accurately in the media. Savić previously worked in legacy media, which informed her decision to start her own outlet in 2020. "I've worked in many other legacy newsrooms in Quebec in French, and I've also been talking and traveling a little bit outside and looking at what journalism looks like outside of here, but also what journalism for people of colour looks like outside of here. And I think it's just not really normal the way our communities are covered in French-Canadian newsrooms. And so it feels like our voices are not fully taken into consideration and I think there's a need for an in-depth community-powered media serving community," she told me in an interview (May 2024). La Converse also hosts a training academy, L'École Converse, to teach youth about how to do journalism in their own communities. The La Converse journalists and the participating youth use mediums like podcasts and rap music to share the journalism they produce, which subsequently appeal to younger audiences as well. According to Savić, the training academy is the highlight of her week and it's teaching young people to reconcile their relationships with journalism (personal communication, February 13, 2024).

Pivot is a journalism co-operative that's been engaging audiences in French since 2021. They operate a public newsroom portal where they solicit story ideas directly from subscribers and produce them, providing additional value to paying members. In a pre-interview, co-founder Brassard-Lecours told me Pivot is actively working to provide more progressive news coverage than the rest of francophone media in Quebec and that they are betting this openness and transparency about their editorial line will attract readers (personal communication, January 31, 2024). Brassard-Lecours also said finding operational funding was a constant struggle, though being a co-op allows them to access a wider array of options such as grants geared toward social economic projects. She said Pivot frequently applies for grants, but the agencies that hold the money often focus on time-constrained projects, such as a six-month investigation or a one-year pilot program. This poses serious challenges in trying to sustain an organization. Pivot has benefited from the federal government's Local Journalism Initiative (LJI) program, hiring a reporter to cover youth issues. But because this reporter's purview is fairly niche – and needs to stay as such to keep within the LJI criteria – it doesn't leave her much room to explore other topics. The LJI program was also set to expire at the end of March 2024, which left the professional fate of this journalist and hundreds of others across Canada in limbo (Basu, 2024). It wasn't until March 1, 2024 that the federal government announced it would be extending the program for three more years, providing some reassurance (Government of Canada, Department of Canadian Heritage, 2024).

Founded in 2020, The Rover has the smallest team of the three startups, with just two journalists – Curtis, the founder, and a managing editor – working alongside various freelance contributors. The managing editor works limited hours (approximately 10 per week), while Curtis works whenever he can find the time, which is likely more than a traditional 40-hour work week. Curtis said he's interested in mentoring new, up-and-coming writers through The Rover. He is also keen to have more help, especially on the operations side of the business, once he can afford it (personal communication, February 13, 2024). He told me in February that he had been working on The Rover for about 3.5 years, usually seven days a week, and had yet to take an extended break or holidays. (By July, he had finally taken a vacation.) The Rover is an English-language news outlet that occasionally translates its stories to French, and focuses on long-form journalism and investigations, exploring stories it says would otherwise go uncovered in Quebec. At the time of this research, they delivered their news primarily through an e-mail newsletter and through their website. Facebook and Instagram weren't permitting the sharing of

news owing to a fallout with the federal government, who wanted them to pay news sites for their content, which the social-media sites' parent company Meta refused to do (Yousif, 2023).

As I pursued this research, I recognized that my third research question – about a news outlet's professional sustainability – wasn't necessarily the primary focus for my case study participants. Since these startups aren't actively trying to pursue a commercial model or make money hand over fist, focusing explicitly on their finances doesn't make sense. Savić highlighted this discrepancy during our interview, noting:

> None of your revenue avenues in journalism are really sustainable, especially for us, given our mission. We're a non-profit, BIPOC-led media that serves community. Our goal is not to make money. Our goal is to serve people. And I think that that's what people need to understand, right? So if that's our goal, we can't go about funding in the same ways, right? And we also have to make sure that people get that. And I think that's the hardest part. It's hard to make sure that everybody gets that. (May, 2024)

With that in mind, I tried to focus on how the news outlets were serving their audiences and what resources they might require. I examined sustainability from other angles, such as by asking about the journalists' personal workloads or work-life balances; their team-building or mentoring strategies; or other indicators of success they consider for themselves, such as awards recognition or readership milestones. Their answers provided more wholesome views on sustainability.

Methodology

In theory

My research-creation project is qualitative in nature, exploring the complexity of startup culture and how three new(ish) outlets are making a living in a supposedly dying industry. The project was inspired by elements of narrative research, ethnography and case study analysis. My understanding of these approaches comes from James Creswell, notably his books *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (2013) and *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, the latter written alongside David Creswell (2022). While I can see that the three approaches I've chosen are quite different, I think over the course of the series, I considered facets of each approach in my research.

First, narrative research involves "collect[ing] *stories* from individuals … about [their] lived and told experiences" (Creswell, 2013, p. 71), which I did through face-to-face interviews with journalists. I recognized patterns in certain interview answers while I was talking to the journalists at different news outlets, and I was able to acknowledge these in the moment and ask follow-up questions accordingly. When I analyzed material after the fieldwork, I also recognized similar themes and values that overlap between the three workplaces, which helped with scripting and structuring of the podcast series. These collected stories helped me build a narrative throughout the podcast series that describes issues within the Canadian media environment more broadly, while discussing specific working conditions for these journalists.

This leads me to ethnographic research, which typically "focuses on an entire culture-sharing group" (Creswell, 2013, p. 90), though in my case it was a much smaller sample size. Ethnography also "describes and interprets the shared and learned patterns of values,

behaviors, beliefs, and *language*" within the group (Creswell, 2013, p. 90). While I wanted to attempt a kind of newsroom ethnography via participant observation, many journalists no longer work in physical newsrooms, especially those working at digital startups. They are often too busy to engage in close or prolonged observation as well. Therefore, ethnography wasn't entirely relevant to my research.

The case study approach starts with identifying the actors and in this case, I conducted a "collective case study" (Creswell, 2013, p. 99), where I chose three Montreal-based examples to compare, contrast and examine in depth. Part of my reasoning for choosing a case-study approach is that while I've found quantitative lists mentioning hundreds of startup news outlets in Canada, I've found far fewer examples of in-depth, focused study of startups (Guida, 2022; Weinstein, 2023). Somewhat ironically, media coverage of the media is lacking in Canada, with few reporters or programs dedicated to this beat anymore. (A few exceptions do exist: *The Globe and Mail* still has reporter Simon Houpt covering sports media, for example, and Jesse Brown's podcast company Canadaland was founded to provide media criticism. They still do a lot of this work, but have transitioned to providing other Canadian news coverage, too.)

My hope is this project can help provide a better understanding of at least a few news startups, as they continue to take over the country's fragmented journalism landscape. Through constructivist and pragmatic worldviews (Creswell, 2023), I interpreted meaning from multiple participants and considered what may or may not be working in our domestic startup culture.

In practice

I held my conversations with the startup journalists mostly in person, to learn about their work processes and interests. I pre-interviewed each of them for about 45 minutes to an hour, to help structure our more formal interviews later on.

I chose to dedicate an episode to each of the three journalism startups, rather than group the conversations thematically, because I found each journalist had a distinct story to tell. Still, each episode did have a broader theme as well. In La Converse's episode, we talk about the need for diversity in journalism, including working conditions to support families and mothers. In The Rover's episode, we talk about mental-health and well-being, and how working in journalism can wreak havoc on work-life balance. And in Pivot's episode, we talk about funding of news and some of the differences between working for legacy and startup journalism outlets.

Each episode was intended to be approximately 30 minutes long, but they wound up ranging from around 30 to 50 minutes each. Editing the conversations down proved to be more difficult than I'd anticipated; the original recorded conversations were each an hour-and-a-half to two hours long. Although two of the journalists, Savić and Brassard-Lecours, work primarily in French, they were comfortable speaking in English. So I conducted the interviews for this podcast in English, with hopes that it may be able to reach a wider audience across Canada that way. I left in bits of French dialogue or words that were translated in real time, which felt true to Montreal's bilingual nature.

I used a Zoom audio recorder from Concordia for my field recordings and the school's audio-recording booths to record narration. For audio editing, I used Reaper on my personal laptop. I also met with my supervisors on a biweekly basis over the course of the project to discuss updates, plan and problem-solve in real time.

Review of existing research

My literature review ran the gamut from theoretical to practical knowledge, with a special focus on what's going on in the Canadian and Montreal news landscapes. I also included some readings about podcasting and its effectiveness as a medium.

'Beyond Journalism': boundary work and entrepreneurship

The piece of literature that perhaps best encompasses what I wanted to build on through my own research is the book *Beyond Journalism* by Mark Deuze and Tamara Witschge, published in 2020. Deuze and Witschge are researchers based in the Netherlands. They describe 22 case studies they did of digital-first news startups, with a research team that visited 11 countries over a five-year period (2014-18). They found many similarities across their sample, including a desire by the journalists interviewed to work independently and a tendency to speak critically of legacy media. These startup journalists also discussed the precarity and difficulty involved with trying to start something new when serving dual roles as both a businessperson and journalist (Deuze & Witschge, 2020). These two roles have traditionally been separated in newsrooms, usually with advertising departments located on separate floors or wings from editorial divisions. Deuze and Witschge describe how "in recent decades, this 'Church versus State' divide has gradually disappeared, as reporters and editors are increasingly expected to perform dual tasks, take responsibility for the market operations of their employer, and contribute to the bottom line" (2020, p. 116). I'd add that this additional workload could contribute to burnout or stir potential conflicts of interest.

Several of the journalists interviewed by Deuze and Witschge came from legacy media backgrounds before making the leap to startup work, which raises the question of how new or different their approaches at these independent organizations might be (2020). Still, the authors highlight how an old-guard mentality at startups may not be a bad thing. "It is exactly this tension between transformation and reinforcement of values, standards, and practices that provides the productive pressure allowing the startups to function effectively within the field of journalism and to self-identify as critical outsiders" (Deuze & Witschge, 2020, p. 124). This brings to mind questions of boundaries.

Much research has been done on boundary work and who gets to call themselves an insider or outsider in the news media. In her paper "Evolving, Rather than Policing, the Boundary", Konieczna discusses how traditional news outlets prefer "*maintaining* authority and then, occasionally and begrudgingly, *ceding* authority" to newcomers in the industry (2017, p. 2). In her case study of the Centre for Public Integrity, based in Washington, D.C., Konieczna recognizes what she describes as "boundary evolution," where the centre goes from describing itself as having a "quasi-journalistic approach" in 1989, to becoming a non-profit digital news organization "using the tools of investigative journalism" by 2015 (2017, pp. 6–12). We're continuing to see this evolution play out in journalism today as "interlopers are able, despite their relatively weak position, to exert some control over the location of the boundaries around them" (Konieczna, 2017, p. 2).

With power dynamics having shifted so drastically since the onset of the internet and social media, news is no longer a one-way communication stream from journalist to audience member. It has been democratized to the point where anyone can become a news publisher (Knight, George, Gerlis, 2008). Interested parties can act like journalists by using blogging platforms like WordPress or Medium, or social-media platforms like Reddit, WhatsApp or Facebook, where trained journalists also live and work. As New York University professor Jay Rosen put it, "the

people formerly known as the audience" (2006) are now in charge – a fact that is both daunting for journalists and revelatory for those seeking to break the traditional boundaries of journalism.

While anyone may dabble in journalism, it doesn't mean they will stick around for the long haul. Though it's impossible to count how many news startups have come and gone – such metrics don't really exist in Canada or globally – discussions about how such organizations can achieve staying power are important. To return to Deuze and Witschge for a moment, they caution against focusing too overtly on the digital nature of startups, which I tried to avoid in my research as well:

> The term "digital" has become shorthand to address the many changes in the journalistic field, and its widespread use is indicative of the nearly exclusive focus on technology when researching innovation in journalism. We find that change and transformation in journalism – whether relating to core values, associated practices, or ways of making sense of itself – in the digital realm relate to so much more than technology. In fact, one could argue innovation and change in journalism have as much if not more to do with emotion and affect regarding the work and the societal role of the profession than the distinct operations of computer interfaces and machines. (2020, p. 127)

The evolution of trust and audience engagement

One of the most popular topics of discussion in journalism circles recently is trust – or lack thereof. In her book, *How Journalists Engage: A Theory of Trust Building, Identities, and Care*, Sue Robinson calls out trust as "the essential ingredient in any democracy" (2023, p. 8). It's arguably the essential ingredient in journalism as well, which helps fuel democracy. But its recipe in journalism is constantly changing. In 2024, trust has become something journalists need to work for rather than rely on.

Public skepticism with the news media became widespread in North America in the 1960s and 70s around the time of the Vietnam war and the counterculture movement. Theories of objectivity and neutrality were increasingly questioned by skeptical audiences (Brewin, 2013). Journalism professor Michael Schudson of Columbia University suggests public dissatisfaction with the news media grew in the 1960s as "[w]hat journalists upheld as 'objectivity' came to be criticized as what would later be called "he said, she said" journalism, "false balance" journalism, or "bothsidesism" in sharp, even derisive, and ultimately potent critiques" (2022, p. 145). This unrest pushed journalists to develop a more investigative and fact-based approach focused on "holding government accountable" or "speaking truth to power" (Schudson, 2022, p. 145). Schudson argues journalism changed drastically from 1965 to around 1980 or 1990, "never abandoning the ideal of "objectivity" but in practice demanding a more interpretive and less rigid version of it" with "less need to trust journalists, in a sense, because they identify their sources more often" than in past decades (2022, p. 154).

The citizen journalism movement gained momentum in the 1990s and early 2000s (Rosen, 2008). Suddenly, Rosen's "people formerly known as the audience" (2006) were the journalists themselves:

> We're not on your clock any more. … We graduate from wanting media when we want it, to wanting it without the filler, to wanting media to be way better than it is, to publishing and broadcasting ourselves when it meets a need or sounds like fun. (paras. 15–16, 2006)

While the concept of citizen journalism is no longer as popular in the literature, facets of it still exist under new labels. From the 2010s onward, engaged journalism (Batsell, 2015) and community-centred journalism (Wenzel, 2020) have become the industry's next chapters in building trust. Audience members are being invited to collaborate directly with journalists and reciprocal journalism is taking shape in some areas, a notion that suggests "journalism can be re-imagined to realize the full potential of participatory media frameworks" (Lewis et al., 2013, p. 238). But whether all audiences want to collaborate with journalists is another story.

Data regarding trust in journalists is bleak, although institutions in general have been affected by eroding public trust. According to Statistics Canada, just 36.7 per cent of Canadians had a "high level of confidence" in Canadian media in a survey from late 2023. The survey found Canadians were even less confident in the federal Parliament (28 per cent), but had more confidence in the school system (45 per cent), the justice system (49 per cent) and police (65 per cent) (2024). Trust in Canadian media sits slightly higher in Reuters' most recent digital news report, which found 39 per cent overall trust in media on average. Notably, Canadians reported significantly higher trust in French media (46 per cent) than English media (37 per cent) (Newman et al., 2024, p. 121). In both languages, some of the media brands with the highest "trust scores" were local or regional newspapers or radio stations (Newman et al., 2024, p. 121). This bears out in other research that has shown local news can contribute to communities' sense of well-being and belonging (Park et al., 2023), and is generally more trusted than news from national counterparts, at least in the U.S. (Fioroni, 2022).

Robinson argues that if we're to build trust as journalists, it's important to acknowledge that it operates on three levels for audiences, all of which must be addressed (2023, p. 10). First, there is trust in the industry as a whole "whereby audiences trust that journalism as an institution must exist for democracy to thrive" (Robinson, 2023, p. 10). Second, there is trust of organizations or news outlets with proven track records – and possible biases. Robinson uses the examples of Democrats trusting CNN or the *Washington Post* compared with Republicans trusting Fox News (2023, p. 10). In a Canadian context, left-leaning voters may be more aligned with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) or the *Toronto Star*, while conservatives tend to embrace the *National Post* and Global News, at least when it comes to national news. Third, journalists must build trust on an individual level, if they're going to forge relationships with sources and community members (Robinson, 2023, p. 10).

We're at another critical juncture in Canadian media where building trust is as much a part of being a journalist as covering news of the day, fact-checking or producing stories. Yet for some traditionally marginalized communities, including Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC), 2SLGBTQI+ folks and people with disabilities, trust in journalists has never existed to begin with and requires building from the ground up.

Diversity, inclusion and atonement

American civil-rights activist Marian Wright Edelman famously said: "It's hard to be what you can't see" (2016). Her quote seems apt when considering the Canadian journalism industry as, over the course of its history, many people have been hard-pressed to find journalists who looked like them in a system historically dominated by white men.

Over the past few years, the Canadian Association of Journalists, or CAJ, has sought to document this problem through its Newsroom Diversity Survey. Previously, there was no public compiling of race- or gender-based data in Canadian media. By comparison, this type of data has been available through the News Leaders Association in the U.S. since 1978 (News

Leaders Association, n.d.).

What the CAJ has found since its first voluntary survey in 2021 is a discouraging lack of racial representation in Canadian journalism, especially in newsrooms' leadership ranks. The data is likely worse than it seems owing to a lack of participation: In its last survey, only 273 of the 790 newsrooms invited to participate sent in their completed forms, a response rate of 36 per cent (2023, p. 4). That is still an uptick from the 33- and 32-per-cent participation rates of the previous two years, respectively (2021, p. 2; 2022, p. 3).

In the 2023 survey, the CAJ found about 75 per cent of respondents identified as white, while about 5 per cent identified as Indigenous and just under 20 per cent identified as a visible minority (p. 12). Only 2.4 per cent of supervisors identified as Indigenous and 13.2 per cent as visible minorities, while "[a]bout 7 out of 10 newsrooms [had] no Indigenous or visible minority people in the top 3 leadership positions in newsrooms" (2023, p. 12). In terms of gender, women represented more than 51 per cent of newsroom staff, although they were more likely to work in part-time roles than supervisor roles. Men accounted for about 48 per cent of workers, while non-binary folks made up 0.3 per cent (2023, p. 12). The CAJ survey offered optional fields where newsrooms could add data about "LGBTQ+ identity, class, disability, languages spoken and religion" (2023, p. 4). Most newsrooms reported they don't account for these intersectionalities, nor did the CAJ report on the results of this optional data collection (2023, p. 27).

Having data on identity readily available helps advocate for change in the journalism industry's status quo. But numbers alone, provided without qualitative analysis or calls to action, don't paint much of a picture of what it's actually like for visible minorities, Indigenous people, gender non-conforming folks, those with disabilities or many others who have been traditionally marginalized in the industry.

In their book *Reckoning: Journalism's Limits and Possibilities*, Candis Callison and Mary Lynn Young of the University of British Columbia make more substantial calls for systemic change. Callison and Young underscore the importance of Canadian journalism contending with its colonial past as "[t]oo often under settler colonialism, the "fourth estate" has served as the rationalizing propaganda wing of the other three" (2020, p. 204). The "reckoning" they call for requires recognizing journalism's historical wrongs and power dynamics. What Callison and Young suggest is a reorientation to focus on more nuanced and honest self-critique:

> The criticism and/or perceived crisis within journalism have largely been oriented more toward addressing failing economic models, technology, and competition with newer and bigger media platforms such as Facebook and Google. They have not tended to enroll persistent, long-standing questioning of journalism's founding ideals and methods related to who can speak for whom, how and why (particularly in a global world) (2020, pp. 200–201).

This self-critique should include atonement for past mistakes and carelessness, along with actions to do better. To focus on just one community that has been wronged by the media doesn't do justice to all of those who have been hurt. But we can consider how Indigenous people have been treated in Canada as part of a pattern of wrongdoing that includes journalists.

In Canada, Indigenous people have been historically mistreated by white settlers for centuries. Their lands were stolen in the 16th century, and consecutive federal governments have not fulfilled their treaty promises. Today, Indigenous people are overpoliced and overincarcerated

(Government of Canada, Department of Justice, 2023), and Indigenous children are two-and-a-half times more likely to be living in poverty than non-Indigenous children (Macdonald & Wilson, 2013, p. 6). These injustices have often been made worse by the media through incidents of stereotyping, racism and exploitation. In *Seeing Red: A History of Natives in Canadian Newspapers*, authors Mark Cronlund Anderson and Carmen L. Robertson chronicle such examples and contend that "[p]ress coverage is important because it serves as a mirror, albeit imperfect, of public sentiment" (2011, p. 15). One newspaper that recently apologized for its past racist coverage is the *Winnipeg Free Press*, with editor Paul Samyn writing in 2020 "on behalf of the *Free Press*, I am apologizing for the times when our coverage has fallen short, for being blind to those marginalized by the colour of their skin, and yes, for a history that shows we have, at times, been part of the problem, not the solution."

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which investigated residential school abuse and heard from thousands of Indigenous peoples across the country, pushed for the media to do better. They issued three calls to action for media, which included additional funding for the CBC to produce more Indigenous programming; more opportunities for the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) to continue providing leadership on reconciliation; and a call for "Canadian journalism programs and media schools to require education for all students on the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal–Crown relations" (2015, pp. 9–10). According to the CBC's Beyond 94 progress tracker, the first two calls to action regarding CBC and APTN (84 and 85) have been completed, while Call to Action 86 regarding journalism education is still in progress (2023).

Through dedicated media channels like APTN, CBC Indigenous, Windspeaker (based in Edmonton), Media Indigena (Winnipeg), *The Eastern Door* (Kahnawake, Quebec) and Ku'ku'kwes News (serving Eastern Canada) and others, some Indigenous journalists have been able to uplift and scrutinize their own communities. Supporting these and other Indigenous outlets is a step toward reconciliation. More broadly, Canadian journalism still has a lot of work to do on its lack of inclusivity. As Callison and Young alluded to above, much of that work is still ignored in lieu of financial considerations.

Who wants to pay for news? Funding models and government interventions

One of the longest-standing challenges for journalists, both in Canada and abroad, has been how to monetize their work, although some are deciding to eschew a traditional capitalist framework altogether.

As far back as 1922, media critic Walter Lippmann lamented citizens' unwillingness to pay for news, noting that "[f]or this difficult and often dangerous service, which we recognize as fundamental, we expected to pay until recently the smallest coin turned out by the mint" (Allan, 2012, p. 62). More than a century after Lippmann's commentary, the problem has only gotten worse. According to the Reuters Institute's 2024 Digital News Report, just 15 per cent of Canadians pay for online news (Newman et al., p. 121). A 2020 poll conducted by Ipsos Reid found 70 per cent of Canadians "strongly" or "mostly" agree that they will consume only news they can access for free (Johnson, 2022). Another poll last year by Leger had similar results, with 66 per cent of Canadians saying they believe "news should be free and accessible to anyone" (2023). While Canada does have a public broadcaster that's federally funded by our taxes to provide us with news, having only one such resource easily accessible to the public doesn't equate to a robust or balanced media diet.

Historically in Canada and the U.S., even when people did pay for newspapers, that revenue was a small portion of a newspaper's overall income, with the rest having been offset by advertisers who paid to showcase their products in the papers, with hopes of reaching large news-reading audiences. As the advertisers largely migrated away from print to other digital platforms and readers' news-consumption habits changed, dwindling reader and advertiser revenue has not been enough to sustain newspapers.

Although some – notably those working in newspapers – call this financial bind a crisis, other news outlets have opted out of a traditional advertising framework. Some are choosing to build news non-profits or co-operatives instead, relying on charitable donations rather than advertiser funding. Of the 11 outlets in Canada that have gone this route and incorporated as registered journalism organizations (RJOs) federally, at least two appear to be digital-first startups – The Narwhal in B.C. and The Local in Toronto (Government of Canada, Canada Revenue Agency, 2023). But years before RJOs came online, the Public Policy Forum (PPF), an Ottawa-based think tank led by a former newspaper editor, Ed Greenspon, outlined the need for this model and other steps the federal government could take to sustain Canadian journalism – or at least legacy media.

Justin Trudeau's Liberals commissioned a report by the PPF on the state of the country's media landscape, published in 2017. *The Shattered Mirror: News, Democracy and Trust in the Digital Age* unpacked how Canadian journalism outlets were coping and the short answer was: not well. The PPF made 12 recommendations to keep ailing organizations afloat, including more philanthropic support for journalism and changes to the tax system. According to a subsequent report produced five years later, at least six recommendations "have seen or are about to see the light of day in one form or another" (Public Policy Forum, 2022). Two of the most notable are:

1. **"The lowering of barriers to philanthropic support for journalism in Canada"** (Public Policy Forum, 2022).

Since January 1, 2020, Ottawa has allowed journalism outlets to become registered journalism organizations (RJOs) and thereby qualified donees. That means they can issue tax receipts to contributors and accept charitable donations from individuals or organizations. Eleven outlets have done this so far federally, most of them in Quebec (Government of Canada, Canada Revenue Agency, 2023): Coopérative nationale de l'information indépendante, coop de solidarité in Quebec City; Journaldesvoisins.com in Montreal; La Gazette de la Mauricie in Trois-Rivières, Quebec; La Presse Inc. in Montreal; Le Devoir Inc. in Montreal; and Services d'information communautaire de la Vallée de la Châteauguay / Chateauguay Valley Community Information Services in Ormstown, Quebec. Elsewhere in Canada, there are also New Canadian Media in Ottawa; Presse-Ouest Ltée in Winnipeg; The Narwhal News Society in Victoria; The Local TO Publishing in Toronto; and The Canadian Jewish News in Concord, Ontario.

2. **"The creation of a fund to support local journalism, along the lines of what the BBC was beginning to do in Britain"** (Public Policy Forum, 2022).

The Local Journalism Initiative (LJI), begun in 2019, initially provided a five-year funding commitment that "supports the creation of original civic journalism that covers the diverse needs of underserved communities across Canada" (Government of Canada, Department of Canadian Heritage, 2024). The project was recently extended for three more years. To access

this funding, journalism outlets have to register with the government as Qualified Canadian Journalism Organizations, or QCJOs. According to Paul Deegan, president and CEO of News Media Canada, a lobbyist group for Canadian legacy media that also helps administer the program, “there are over 400 LJI reporters across Canada at nearly 300 media outlets serving some 1,400 local communities” (Basu, 2024, para. 6).

More generally, what’s most noteworthy about the PPF reports is their insistence on propping up legacy media outlets that, in many cases, appear to be on their deathbeds. Some have argued the government interventions introduced so far are unfair to news startups. *Canadaland*’s Jesse Brown has repeatedly called the government’s efforts a “newspaper bailout” (2022) and been among their most vocal critics. In a *Canadaland* podcast episode from April, 2022, he laid out some of the deficiencies he sees for startups, such as the fact that they:

> [C]annot get QCJO status or Online News Act status with the CRTC [Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission] to launch a new media company. You need to have an established track record and you need to employ at least two full-time journalists. Freelancers don’t count. And the problem is: In Canada, that is not how innovative news companies have actually started up. A lot of different models have been experimented with, but the most viable one for journalism in this country has so far been sole-proprietor entrepreneurs. (Episode 770, 2022)

It’s not yet clear if the federal government will buoy its existing programs to accommodate news startups or develop new ones. Colette Brin, who chairs the Independent Advisory Board on Eligibility for Journalism Tax Measures, was interviewed for Brown’s podcast wherein he made the above comments. She argued that it’s appropriate that journalism outlets need a track record to obtain government funding. “It’s an innovative program, but it’s not a program to support innovation,” she said, referring to QCJO status (Episode 770, 2022).

A few other players have stepped up to pay for news recently, notably the Quebec government, which has provided some financial support for existing community news outlets in its province (The Canadian Press, 2022, 2023). Plus, Google announced late last year it would provide $100-million annually to Canadian news providers to comply with Bill C-11, the Online News Act, though the money has yet to be distributed owing to debate over how it will be shared (Aiello, 2023; Djuric, 2024).

It’s worth noting that philanthropic funding for news, a popular model already in the U.S., is also slowly creeping north and is so far tending to support innovation. Inspirit Foundation has been among the early Canadian adopters. In a report, Inspirit described five community-focused news organizations it had supported with funding: La Converse in Montreal; The Local in Toronto, a hyper-local digital magazine that receives funding from multiple foundations; Spotlight: Child Welfare, an issue-focused project from The Tyee in Vancouver, which also receives money from its city’s foundation; the Sharing Our Stories project published by *The Eastern Door* in Kahnawake, Quebec, which showcases Indigenous elders’ perspectives; and IndigiNews, a collaboration from Discourse Publishing and APTN, in B.C. (June, 2023, pp. 5–24). Inspirit also helped produce a practical guide to funding journalism for foundations last year, encouraging groups to recognize journalism’s social merits. “Funders are stepping up to support public interest journalism because it is a natural ally in tackling many of the complex issues facing communities, including health and education services, climate change, and social and racial justice” (November, 2023, p. 2).

Another philanthropic example is the Winnipeg Foundation, which has provided funding for a three-year pilot project so that the *Winnipeg Free Press* could hire a Manitoba climate reporter whose work is also shared with The Narwhal. Emma Gilchrist, The Narwhal's editor-in-chief, described this as an "innovative partnership [that] is one of the first of its kind in Canada and marks a new era of collaboration between digital and legacy news outlets" (2022). The Atkinson Foundation has also provided salary funding for reporters dedicated to covering work and wealth as well as democracy at the *Toronto Star* (2018).

A brief look at Canadian journalism research

When it comes to research, Canadian journalism is relatively lacking when compared to many of its international peers, in particular the U.S. and the U.K. This lack of introspection can cause problems when data and facts are needed to make policy decisions and they do not exist. For example, the *Shattered Mirror* report from 2017 describes itself as the first major study of the state of the Canadian news industry since reports from the 1970s and 80s (Public Policy Forum, 2017). Yet similar data is collected, updated and shared annually in the U.S. by the Pew Research Center through its *State of the News Media* (2023) and other reports.

That said, the gap in research on homegrown news startups and entrepreneurialism is glaring but leaves ample room for exploration. So far, the Local News Research Project at Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU) provides one of the best data snapshots of the Canadian journalism industry. Established around 2007, researchers here provide insight on what is happening in local media across the country, largely through crowd-sourced tracking of news outlets' openings and closings. According to their most recent report: "[b]etween 2008 and August 1, 2024, 525 local news outlets closed in 347 communities across Canada" and "387 local news outlets launched" (2024, p. 4).

While TMU's crowd-sourced data show how many news outlets have opened or closed in Canada, there doesn't appear to be a single Canadian resource that consistently tracks the number of existing news organizations. A few other groups have tried to organize lists of news startups as well as lists of existing outlets using various criteria. For example, researchers from the University of British Columbia (UBC), through its Global Journalism Innovation Lab, published a list earlier this year that includes almost 150 "English-language digital-born journalism organizations" from across Canada, all launched since 2000 (2024). In describing their efforts, the UBC team acknowledged that startups "offer a valuable lens to think about journalism as they are generally launched in response to a gap or corrective in the media environment" (2024). Ten of the outlets they found were based in Montreal, but their collection does not account for French-language outlets (although one French-language startup, La Converse, was randomly included).

LION Publishers, a membership organization for independent news publishers based in the U.S., undertook its own scan of the Canadian landscape and found 270 independent and "digitally dominant" outlets last year (Sobowale, 2023). Their findings are also included in the Project News Oasis database run out of the University of North Carolina's Hussman School of Journalism and Media (2024).

While all of these lists are useful for identifying startup outlets and keeping track of openings and closings, they provide little by way of qualitative analysis and don't parse the new outlets' coverage in any great detail. They also require frequent updating, as news outlets open and close, to remain relevant.

Zooming in on Montreal's news media

Montreal has a vibrant media, technology and AI industry, so it seems natural that several digital news outlets have popped up here. Some of the longest-standing are Ricochet Media, started in 2014, and Cult MTL, which began circulation in 2012 in print and online. *La Presse* was one of the first newspapers in Canada to pivot in the digital era; it got rid of its papers altogether in 2017 and shifted entirely online. The French-language outlet also announced it was becoming a non-profit in 2018 and sought and received RJO status federally (*La Presse*, 2024). *Le Devoir*, the province's French newspaper of record since 1910 (Donneur et al., 2020) and *Journal des voisins*, a hyperlocal news outlet focused on the borough of Ahuntsic-Cartierville, are two other more recently-minted federally recognized non-profits.

In its research, UBC listed 10 outlets based in Montreal (Global Journalism Innovation Lab, 2024). They are below along with some observations gleaned from their websites:

1. Narcity/Mtl Blog: Narcity Media is the parent company of MTL Blog. According to their editorial standards page, their mission is "to inform and entertain millennials with meaningful local news and travel stories."
2. Ricochet Media: A news site focused on public-interest journalism with an eye to national, local, Indigenous and international coverage. The site was originally bilingual (publishing in French and English) and co-founded by journalists in Montreal and Vancouver. It no longer publishes in French, but has some staff still based here.
3. The Post Millennial: A right-wing site that describes itself as "one of the largest conservative news outlets in the world" on its website, a claim that is hard to prove (or believe) without some data analytics.
4. The Institute for Inclusive, Investigative, and Innovative Journalism (I3J): Working with students at Concordia University, the I3J is "aimed at generating thoughtful, ground-breaking journalism to develop the future of the industry," it says online.
5. The Breach: A national news site with written content, podcasts and videos that promises "[a] more honest, adversarial approach to journalism" on its about page.
6. The Rover: An English news site (with some French translations) that is focused on "reporting from Montreal, across Quebec and beyond," according to its website.
7. Harbinger Media Network: A nationally focused podcast distributor that considers itself "Canada's community of progressive news media publishers," on its homepage. Harbinger also runs a news-curation site for Canadian digital outlets called Unrigged.
8. La Converse: A French-language local news site focused on transparency and respectful journalism done through building relationships with communities.
9. The Line: An opinion-based Substack that says it's "Canada's last, best hope for irreverent commentary" on X. It appears only one of its staff writers is Montreal-based.
10. Global Research Centre for Research on Globalization: According to its website, the centre is "an independent research and media organization based in Montreal" that is also registered as a non-profit in Quebec.

LION, meanwhile, found 33 independent news publishers in Quebec, including some of the above and the eight following outlets that are based in Montreal (Sobowale, 2023):

1. Cult MTL: An English tabloid focused on Montreal culture, which is published monthly in print. Perhaps better known for its social-media presence and clickbait-style articles.
2. Est Média Montréal: A French-language, hyperlocal digital outlet focused on community news in eastern Montreal.

3. Il Cittadino Canadese: An Italian community newspaper since 1914 that now has digital operations.
4. Journal des voisins: A French-language, hyperlocal community news site and non-profit focused on coverage of the Montreal borough of Ahuntsic-Cartierville.
5. Montreal Community Contact: An English local news outlet focused on Quebec's Black and Caribbean community for the past 27 years.
6. Nouvelles d'Ici: A French, hyperlocal news outlet born in LaSalle and now covering the boroughs of Lachine, Verdun and Sud-Ouest as well.
7. Pivot: A French-language site with a progressive take on news in Quebec.
8. The Nation Magazine: An English magazine and digital news site that calls itself "the only independent Indigenous news source serving the Cree of James Bay."

Five other outlets on LION's Quebec list are also located in the Greater Montreal Area, either on the island of Montreal or just outside of it: The Greek Canadian News, The Laval News and The North Shore News, all based in Laval; Parc-Extension News, based in Laval but covering a north Montreal neighbourhood; and The Suburban, based in Saint-Laurent.

It's important to note that digital-first startups are not the only ones delivering the news in Montreal either. Last summer, I undertook research with Dr. Magda Konieczna to map the Montreal news landscape more generally. We found more than 130 news outlets located on the island of Montreal during our point-in-time analysis (Konieczna & Botelho-Urbanski, 2024). To be added to our inventory, the outlet had to have published original, local, reported content within the past year in any language. We found news outlets publishing in English, French, both English and French, as well as Arabic, Greek, Italian, Korean, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, Turkish and Vietnamese. Besides its diverse ethnic media, Montreal is also home to six universities with various campus media outputs. There were many organizations covering specific neighbourhoods or boroughs, and some focused on topics such as sports or the arts.

Some of the most well-known news outlets, like the *Montreal Gazette* and *CTV News Montreal*, are now shadows of their former selves having been subject to downsizing for many years. Also important are the local CBC and Radio-Canada bureaus, which have massive teams compared to their competitors. Their future funding levels are somewhat uncertain, however, as the amounts could largely depend on a federal government's political agenda. Suffice to say that Montrealers have several journalistic sources at their disposal right now, especially in English and French, even if these outlets may struggle to meet everyone's information needs.

Podcasting's strengths and weaknesses

Podcasts are still a growing medium for many news consumers in Canada. According to Reuters' most recent Digital News Report, 41 per cent of polled Canadians had listened to podcasts in the last month, up from 33 per cent the year before (Newman et al., 2024, p. 121). Per the Canadian Podcast Listener 2023 report, podcast-listening percentages have grown incrementally each year since 2017 among those 18 and up, with 7 per cent listening daily to podcasts, 25 per cent listening weekly, 36 per cent listening monthly and 55 per cent having ever listened to a podcast (SignalHill Insights, TPX, 2023, p. 5). The latter report also considers typical listener profiles and found Canadian podcast listeners tend to be younger, well-educated and affluent (SignalHill Insights, TPX, 2023, p. 7), which poses some concerns about podcasts' general appeal and reach. Many podcasts still don't provide video or transcribed versions of their audio content as well, which limits accessibility for deaf or hearing-impaired audiences.

In terms of storytelling, the rise in podcasting has brought with it a focus on personal narrative journalism that tells intimate and human-focused stories. As Mia Lindgren suggests, podcast producers aren't restricted by print or broadcast deadlines, giving them more room to experiment with length and form (2016, p. 23). Lindgren analyzed how narrative podcasts encourage empathy and adopt some of Rosalind Coward's 10 criteria for confessional journalism: "storytelling strength, originality, audience engagement, research and reporting, complexity of story and form, emotiveness and empathy, craft and artistry, ethical production, public benefit, and impact" (2016, p. 29). All of these can factor into the success of a given podcast and should be considered during the production process.

Among the most popular in the genre is *This American Life* (TAL), which has been doing narrative storytelling work on public radio since 1995 (Abel, 2015, ix). In 2014, TAL's creators produced *Serial*, an innovative, 13-episode podcast series focused on a single criminal investigation that would spark an industry boom. *Serial* ushered in more ambitious projects, money and storytelling that, like TAL, "humanized information and made challenging ideas colorful" (Larson, 2015). These reported podcasts can be incredibly expensive and time-consuming to make – as all good journalism is – and the industry's boom subsequently burst about five years later (Blondiau & Loewinger, 2023). Still, experts like podcast critic Nick Quah don't see the medium going anywhere, as he described during a November episode of *On the Media*:

> The fact remains that podcasting is here to stay. People want this stuff, people want to make this stuff. It's becoming a bigger part of a lot of people's media habits, media diets. This is something that every television studio has already known, every film studio has already known, every music label has already known that there are ups and there are downs. This is podcasting's first big down. I think there's going to be a generation of talent that's going to come out on the other side, all the stronger for it. (Blondiau & Loewinger, 2023)

Reflections on the podcast-creation process

In theory

I wanted to produce podcasts for my research-creation project for two reasons. First, I wanted to improve my own podcasting and audio-editing skills with an eye to working in audio storytelling after I graduate. More importantly though, I wanted to share my research with a wider audience than just academics or journalists, who I'd wager might be more likely to read what could be a 100-plus-page thesis than an average citizen. I think podcasts, particularly those that are shorter, e.g. 30 minutes or less, can appeal to a larger cross-section of people and democratize the academic experience. With podcast listening still on the rise in Canada, it felt like a sensible approach to try to share knowledge in this growing field, too.

There is also a crossover between the people who are more likely to listen to podcasts – younger, more educated and more affluent audiences – and the people who are more likely to pay for news (Newman & Robertson, 2023). So my hope is that podcast listeners may also be interested in learning more about the inner-workings of the journalism industry, which they may already support.

In practice

I found creating the podcasts to be both fun and more difficult to manage, from a technical standpoint, than my previous print journalism work. The process began with in-person interviews and managing the recording equipment – a Zoom6 recorder with two cabled microphones. I've always enjoyed interviewing folks, as was the case again here, but trying to ensure the equipment all worked properly during interviews took me out of the moment several times and sometimes interrupted conversational flow. Listening back to the tape, there were some technical issues that interrupted my listening experience, including microphone-rustling noises that resulted from too much movement or loose cables. But all told, the audio tape was fine at least 90 per cent of the time and my concerns were mostly overblown.

When it came to podcast scripting, I had initially wanted to interview several folks at each news outlet and shadow the journalists as they were doing their jobs, to have more of an observation-based, ethnographic approach. What actually happened was that I pre-interviewed each journalist for up to an hour, and later recorded our formal one-on-one conversations, which were all between an hour-and-a-half to two hours in length. I realized fairly early on in the recording process that my plan to follow the journalists for a longer period of time was impractical both for their and my own schedules. So I pivoted to focus on the stand-alone interviews, with clips and narration interspersed throughout the conversations to break up the dialogue and provide more context when required. In terms of storytelling, I'd argue that following a single character with a compelling narrative was a better choice to help audiences empathize with the journalists and understand their motives. If we're trying to build trust between listeners and journalists, I think it serves both parties to explore a single journalist's story in more depth in each episode, rather than to jump around to tell a larger story about an organization or an industry that is inherently less human.

I started with Savić's script and our conversation about La Converse, which I wrote and edited over the course of about three days. Much of that work was done during one of Concordia's Thesis Boost events in late May, which was a huge help in getting me started and motivated to do this work after my proposal was complete. I found Savić's script to be the most straightforward to write and edit, likely because I had conducted the interview the most recently and it was still fresh in my mind. But I also think part of this clarity is a credit to La Converse because I found their mission to be very well-defined. Savić was extremely experienced with telling her own professional story and explaining why she started and maintains La Converse, to serve and celebrate BIPOC communities. I also attended one of the outlet's community events, their podcast launch for *Pas Tout Montreal*, in May, where I got the room sound heard at the beginning of the podcast. That event really crystallized for me the importance of the community-centered work La Converse is doing, as I saw dozens of people directly affected and moved by their journalism, including the youth co-creators.

My second podcast script was focused on Curtis and The Rover. I found this episode more challenging to write and edit, as there was just over two hours of tape to parse through and our conversation had many directions. The tape's audio quality was less clear as I'd done the interview with Curtis during a rainy car ride for one of his reporting trips in April. While that added interesting sounds and texture to the podcast, it also required paying close attention to things like car-turning signals, windshield-wiper noises, beeping sounds and other ear-turners heard throughout the conversation, so as not to make choppy edits. My hope is that these background noises add depth for the listener rather than distraction.

With the second podcast, I also had to pay extra attention to the sensitive nature of our conversation on two fronts: our discussion of reporting on Indigenous communities and of Curtis's mental-health journey. To address the latter topic, I included a content warning and mention of the national suicide-prevention hotline (988) at the begining and end of the episode, as well as where to find sexual-violence-related resources (endingviolencecanada.org) near the podcast's end. I was not prepared for what Curtis would disclose about his mental-health journey during our interview, which included talk of a past suicide attempt and childhood sexual abuse. It did not come up in the pre-interview, though I could have learned some of this information about Curtis beforehand if I had done a deeper dive into his past writing (Curtis, 2020, 2023). Still, I'm not sure knowing these facts ahead of time would have prepared me for the experience of hearing them first-hand during a conversation about the many stressors in his life. It was an intense moment, but I appreciated Curtis's willingness to be open about his struggles and to discuss them in depth. I hope someone listening to his podcast might be able to find some solace in his vulnerability.

We also discussed Curtis' reporting on Indigenous communities, which I later chose not to include in the podcast after discussion with my supervisors. Although the story Curtis was going to cover on the day of our interview was about an Indigenous community, Kanesatake, it did not feel right to speak about the community or about reporting on Indigenous communities without having Indigenous voices represented as well. In his Reporting in Indigenous Communities guide, journalist Duncan McCue talks about the importance of including Indigenous people in a substantive way in storytelling about them, as well as "thinking of ways to fit in context and history about Indigenous Peoples" in news stories (paras 24-25). I didn't feel as though I had the space in this podcast to accurately cover the background of what was happening in Kanesatake with the illegal dumping – a story The Rover has covered in depth over several years (Curtis, 2024) – nor to discuss the breadth of history that has happened in the community, which included the Kanesatake Resistance (also known as the Oka Crisis) in 1990 that galvanized relationships between Kanyen'kehà:ka protesters and police (De Bruin, 2013). So in this case, I decided to stick with the original format of my series, which was to interview the journalists about their own personal stories and why they created their news startups. I ultimately decided to focus on Curtis' personal story and kept the focus more narrow.

Next, I worked on the podcast about Brassard-Lecours and Pivot. Our interview had been the first one I conducted in early April and I didn't revisit the conversation for scripting and editing again until July. I had forgotten much of what we had talked about by that point and had a more difficult time editing our conversation down to 30 to 40 minutes, because it was less fresh in my brain. I also had to go back and fact-check some points with Brassard-Lecours, both for clarity on my part and to see if the information was still correct months later. She graciously answered my follow-up questions through e-mail and made this process very easy.

As mentioned, the most difficult part of editing this episode was cutting it down to a reasonable length. My first edit was an hour long, but I didn't think this would be a realistic timeline to keep a general audience engaged when talking about journalism funding, so I cut out 10 minutes. I'm still a bit concerned this episode is a bit too focused on inside baseball, so to speak, for a general audience. But I hope that if listeners have the context provided by the first two interview episodes and the trailer already, then this episode will be easy enough to follow. I also put all of my final credits and acknowledgements at the end of this episode, which took some more time but was important to include.

After I'd nearly wrapped up the three interview-based podcasts, I started working on a trailer that would introduce the series. My goal was to have this podcast be shorter, clocking in around

10 minutes or less, and to have it provide a lay of the land for audiences about what's going on in the Canadian media landscape. I managed to create a five-minute trailer, which features snippets from TV and podcast news clips, interview teasers from my three journalist profiles and parts of an interview with Dr. Elyse Amend of Concordia University, where we discussed the state of the local journalism industry. Once listeners have this knowledge base from the trailer, I expect they will be better prepared to understand the startup journalists' interviews and where they are coming from within the larger context of what's going on in the industry.

For all of the podcast episodes, I used Reaper to edit the audio and found a royalty-free song on Pixabay to use for intros, outros and stingers. I also pulled short news clips from the internet using Audio Hijack and did all of the sound mixing myself.

Finally, one of the most difficult parts of the project was coming up with a name for the podcast series. I went with *Reimagining Journalism: The Montreal Edition* after a lot of brainstorming and keyword searches. I wanted to include the words 'journalism' and 'Montreal' in the title, but also leave room to possibly continue this work in other cities. Future episodes could be based in other regions if the project continues.

Reflections on ethics

Going through Concordia's ethics process was new to me. I had never had to seek formal permission to interview people in the past and doing so now required me to slow down and reflect on my intentions with these interviews, which was quite valuable in hindsight. I applied for ethics approval in late December and was approved in late February. I had to go back and forth with the department a few times after receiving conditional approval, answering their questions and clarifying my answers. The ethics department ultimately asked that I create five different types of consent forms for interviewees: Form A – for journalists; B – for non-journalists; C – for those in the field; D – for parents; and E – for minors. I translated forms D and E into French as well, with the intention of interviewing a French-speaking teenager with her mother's permission for the La Converse podcast. This interview didn't pan out in the end and I only ended up using forms A and B. I didn't know at the time of drafting these ethics forms how the structure of my podcasts was going to play out, so having all of the options for interviewees available to me was helpful but not necessary in the end.

One of the ethical dilemmas I've always had as a journalist is how much of the information in my stories to share with sources ahead of publication. Coming from a mainstream media background, the answer was usually none. We would not want our sources to influence or edit a story to their liking. But in more recent years, as the industry and journalism schools have started to place more emphasis on trauma-informed and less extractive journalism, this old-school way of thinking is starting to rescind. If there are power imbalances between journalists and their sources – especially those who may be in harm's way or those who have traditionally been marginalized – I think it's important to pre-emptively discuss with sources what you are going to publish from them whenever possible. Not only does it help build trusting relationships, but it can also help avoid errors by returning to the source before publication. In my interview with Curtis from The Rover, he spoke about why he sometimes shares stories with his sources before publishing. For him, the decision sometimes relies on the status of the working relationship:

> [I]n some cases, we have such a longstanding relationship that I know what's – I know where the red line is, and I don't even go close to it. But in newer relationships, I like to

> let the person know that they have the option to maybe take something back, or that they have the option to maybe look over a quote before it goes to print, which are big no no's in journalism school. But on really sensitive stories like these, if you run the wrong thing, or if you put someone in a dangerous position, you know, they're not going to talk to you again. So I get that it's important to hold up this kind of imaginary holy rule of journalism, but yeah, I think it's important to unpack some of the things you've spoken about with the sources to the sources before it gets printed so that they know they're not, you know, they're not going to be – there are no surprises. They're not walking into a trap, they didn't accidentally humiliate themselves, that's so important. And you don't really see a ton of that at newspapers and on TV and in the radio. People just kind of get what they can and they go. (interview, April, 2024)

I chose to share all of my podcasts with their respective interviewees before sending them to my thesis committee for final approval. As I'm just starting to build working relationships with these other journalists, I think it's important to build trust with them and be transparent, letting them know the podcasts can be edited or changed to suit their comfort levels. There may be other times in my career where this type of checking in isn't possible, probably because of looming deadlines. But for this project, I was lucky to have relatively long timelines to work with and the ability to check in with my interviewees multiple times before publication to keep them up to date on my progress.

There were other ethical stances I saw the journalists I profiled take that I would like to highlight as well, moves I thought demonstrated thoughtfulness toward their sources and audiences. At La Converse, journalists follow their own set of newsroom values, or ethical rules, which are laid out on posters hanging near the reporters' main workstation. On the wall, there is also a set of questions reporters should ask themselves before setting out on interviews. These four questions (translated from French) are:

- Who am I serving with my reporting?
- Why am I doing this reporting?
- How is my reporting serving or helping people who are experiencing the situation?
- What are my limits? And how can I overcome them?

In my interview with Savić, she spoke about the importance of not inflicting harm as journalists and how this has factored into her hiring process: "I really strictly chose people who are invested in community, who have community knowledge rather than have journalistic knowledge, and essentially I've been teaching them the journalistic knowledge, which I find is much easier than teaching somebody how not to be harmful, right? So that's essentially been the approach," she said (interview, May, 2024).

At Pivot, journalists have chosen to be fully open about their progressive views, rather than hide behind a veil of neutral objectivity, as Western journalists have historically done. "[W]e continued our editorial line, which is really progressive and we're very transparent about that – even though we have some critics and, you know, some mainstream media always tell us that we're doing activism journalism, which is not the case. But no media is neutral anyway, but we made the bet of being transparent about what we do and where we stand politically," Brassard-Lecours said (interview, April, 2024). She spoke about how Pivot's journalists must still respect an ethical code as well, which can conveniently be found on their website (Pivot, 2023).

I came to admire these journalists' approaches and in some ways emulate what they are doing in terms of slowing down the journalistic production process with this project. Still, I was nervous to share the draft versions of each podcast with its respective journalist and worried they would not agree with or appreciate my interpretations of their work. In the end, I have only received one request for a minor edit, which was easy to grant, so my fears were unfounded. I believe this more collaborative approach to journalism is critical to its survival. To rebuild trust in journalism – even among journalists – we need to be open to working with, and not on behalf of, communities.

Future impacts

Although my sample of startups is quite small, I did notice some cultural similarities between the three Montreal outlets, which could be interesting to explore on a larger scale. All three of the startups seemed less worried about hitting deadlines or filling certain content quotas, two issues I've seen often in mainstream media. Their emphasis was instead on amplifying voices that aren't traditionally heard in news stories, which can involve taking more time to find such folks and to build relationships. These journalists also told more long-form stories, which were reported from several different angles. Their willingness to slow down their reporting process may produce fewer stories overall, but ultimately the stories they publish may be more beneficial and impactful for audiences. A content analysis and more research would be required to determine any real-world impacts or consequences of their journalism, and whether the Montreal startups working methods are similar to those of other news startups across the country.

I see value in continuing research on journalism startups as they appear – at least to me – to be the future of journalism in Canada. As the journalism industry is fracturing from a few legacy players into hundreds of smaller news startups, I hope this project can contribute to the understanding of a relatively new field in Canada. And although the fractured media landscape brings a number of headaches – concerns about mis-, dis- and mal-information, for one thing, as well as questions about professionalism among the many people who now call themselves journalists – the fragmentation of public attention is not a bad thing. Canadian news coverage is slowly diversifying to include many more voices from traditionally marginalized communities, both in stories and in the production cycle. And this cultural reset might just save the journalism industry from itself. If stories and producers can start to look and sound like the audiences they claim to serve, they may still have the chance to remain relevant. For too long, corporate greed and sameness kept Canadian newsrooms overwhelmingly pale, male and stale. So while I, and others, see a need for legacy media to still exist (hopefully after some soul-searching and reform), startups have a clean slate to try to build something new and better. As Brassard-Lecours said in our interview:

> I think there's space for everyone. I think some mainstream media are really, they really have a lack of imagination for innovation. Honestly, if I had a third of the budget of CBC, the things I'd do would be amazing and I don't get why they don't, you know, go. It's not that hard. I made it. I made two media [Ricochet and Pivot] and it's working and it's not that hard. And I don't have like a quarter of the budget that, you know, a media like CBC has. (April, 2024)

In an industry with so much historical baggage, new players who are reimagining Canadian journalism are key. We need to observe and scrutinize these new entrants as much as the old

guard, with hopes of shifting from a crisis-driven journalism narrative, to a more solutions-oriented mindset.

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Appendix

The following pages include transcripts of the three interview episodes and the trailer for *Reimagining Journalism: The Montreal Edition*.

Trailer: Reimagining Journalism: The Montreal Edition

(Run time: 5:07)

Narration: Canadian journalism is in crisis. Now where have I heard that one before?

Clip 1 (Catherine Tait, CBC): I can just reassure the committee members that our industry is in crisis…

[SFX: TV static]

Clip 2 (Mattea Roach, The Back Bench): And more than anything, you'll be a part of the solution to Canada's journalism crisis by…

[SFX: TV static]

Clip 3 (Adrian Ghobrial, CTV News): Canada's traditional media sector is in crisis due to changing consumer habits…

[SFX: TV static]

Narration: I'd argue the actual story is not so black and white. I'm Jessica Botelho-Urbanski. I'm a researcher based in Montreal. And I previously worked as a reporter in Winnipeg, covering local news and politics.

[beat]

These days, I'm more interested in covering journalism itself. Despite all the headline-grabbing news about journalism's problems…

Clip 4 (Rachael Thomas, Conservative MP): You just laid off 6,100 employees in the last eight months…

[SFX: TV static]

Clip 5 (Prime Minister Justin Trudeau): This is a garbage decision by a corporation that should know better.

[SFX: TV static]

Clip 6 (Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre): You're a tax, you're a tax-funded mouthpiece to the PMO. That's the reality.

Narration: …there isn't a lot of coverage about what's new or improving. I'd like to help change that.

[beat]

We've lost more than 500 news outlets in Canada between 2008 and August 1, 2024. But over that same time period, researchers found another 387 news outlets had launched. We don't hear about those success stories as often.

In this podcast series, we'll focus on Quebec's news landscape and talk to three journalists who have started their own news outlets here in Montreal. I wanted to know why they're going this route, instead of working in legacy media, and how they're approaching journalism differently.

Dr. Elyse Amend is a journalism professor at Concordia University. And for her, there's some obvious differences between these new digital startups and their more old-school counterparts.

Elyse: There's a lot less of a tie to how things are supposed to be done. A new story has to look this way. You have to talk to these people. You have to, like, ignore these voices so that you can get the important people in and that kind of stuff. I think that's really interesting. I also think it's not as scary or dangerous or I don't even know what word to use. Or frowned upon, I guess, to be like, overtly political. [laughs]. Overtly political, or just like, state your values up front.

Narration: These new outlets are straying away from the pack when it comes to coverage, too. For the most part, they're less focused on news of the day and working more on in-depth, long-form stories.

Elyse: I actually think it's, it's great, because if you looked, I mean, even if you look at the traditional mainstream media, however you want to put it. Nowadays, it's like the same news. It's the same stories. Um, it's the same people being interviewed, and oftentimes, very similar, uh, you know, photos, very similar clips, but maybe from a different angle depending on where your video person or photographer was standing. Whereas at least the ones that I really focus on, the digital outlets, are kind of carving out their own specialized niches, right? Like, it's not just, okay, we're going to be telling you the news of the day. It's, uh, what I'm seeing a lot of is, you know, more long-form, sometimes more investigative, um, definitely a lot of stuff that is looking at stories that aren't being told.

Narration: Over three episodes, I'll talk to founders from La Converse, a francophone news outlet serving BIPOC communities…

Clip (Lela Savić): It feels like our voices are not fully taken into consideration and I think there's a need for like, an in-depth community-powered media serving community.

Narration: …The Rover, an English news outlet focused on long-form, investigative reporting…

Clip (Chris Curtis): That's what we're running on right now: fumes. And, uh, we have a lot of momentum, but I'm fucking exhausted.

Narration: … and Pivot, a French-language, journalism co-op that's unapologetically progressive.

Clip (Gabrielle Brassard-Lecours): Even though we have some critics and, you know, some mainstream media always tell us that we're doing activism journalism, which is not the case. But no media is neutral anyway.

Narration: These are just some of the folks reimagining journalism in Canada. And these are journalists who are reviving a – supposedly – dying industry. You can find and subscribe to Reimagining Journalism: The Montreal Edition, wherever you get your podcasts. And make sure to share them with your friends who love Canadian journalism, too. Especially those who may be in need of a pick me up.

Elyse: The myth of journalism dying has been going on since journalism became a business, right? Like, oh, it's gonna die. Uh, and, like, we're still around, uh, it looks a lot different. And even if, I don't know, a hundred years from now, it's so unrecognizable from what it used to be or from what it is now, like, journalism, it's about storytelling, it's about connection, and it's about connecting people with each other.

Narration: That's Reimagining Journalism: The Montreal Edition. Coming soon.

[music down]

Episode 1: La Converse

(Run time: 37:19)

[sfx of crowded room]

Narration: Dozens of people are coming together here to celebrate a new piece of journalism. We're in a newsroom that's filled with plush couches and comfy chairs. There's a studio beside us, covered with astroturf on the floor, and big pillows that beg you to lie down. There's a crib for a baby in the office. And diapers and a change table in the washroom. Not to mention a giant

buffet of food – I'm talking about a feast fit for a queen here – with at least 30 homemade dishes.

[sfx down, music up]

Narration: At La Converse, this is the reality of what doing community-centred journalism looks like. Inviting the community into your space. And making them feel at home. I'm Jessica Botelho-Urbanski and this is *Reimagining Journalism: The Montreal Edition*. And on today's episode, we're talking about La Converse.

This French-language news startup is based in Montreal's Little Italy neighbourhood. And it practices what founder Lela Savić calls "dialogue journalism." It's journalism that prioritizes conversations with people – not deadlines, and not a 24-hour news cycle. On the day I visited La Converse in April, they were launching a new podcast series called *Pas Tout Montreal*, which translates to Not All Montreal.

[music down, clip up]

Clip (Pas Tout Montreal): C'est pas tout Montréal qui a la même vision de la réussite. C'est pas tout Montréal qui vit les mêmes problèmes, les mêmes valeurs. C'est pas tout Montréal qui le comprend, qu'est-ce que je vis moi, ce qu'on vit nous. Pas tout Montréal qui aime Montréal. Pas tout Montréal qui vit ça. Pas tout Montréal qui le vit.

Narration: The podcast stems from a project called L'École Converse, or the Converse School. At weekly sessions, Lela and her staff help train young people on the basics of journalism and storytelling. In the series, you hear stories from youth about their experiences growing up in Montreal. There's some good, some sad and a lot of honesty and vulnerability. *Pas Tout Montreal* is available wherever you stream podcasts, and it's definitely worth a listen. So when I sat down with Lela a few weeks after that event, I started by asking her about how it went.

[music down]

Lela: Oh, I think it went super well. It was super fun. I think the youth were really happy and, uh, it was exactly what I wanted. Like, I want it to be really cozy and intimate and I think that's, the, the people we had in the room are also reflective of, like, what our vision is and how, how that fits with, like, the communities we want to serve. I think it was really cool.

Jessica: It felt very warm and like, a lot of love in the room.

Lela: Yeah.

Jessica: That's great. Well, I should backpedal a little bit and say that's part of L'École Converse that you've been working on for a few years now.

Lela: Yeah.

Jessica: When you started L'École Converse too, you're helping train younger folks on journalism and kind of reshaping their relationship with journalism, too, it seems like. And even themselves, in listening back to the podcast. They were learning a lot about themselves.

Lela: Yeah.

Jessica: Is that what you had envisioned going into l'École Converse?

Lela: I don't ever envision anything going into the Converse School. I, essentially, it's formed by youth, so they guide us. And then we work with them. And that's I think the beauty with working with youth is that you let them take you somewhere together. But having done it quite a few times, there's always a difference between who they are when they walk in and who they are when they walk out and how much they confide. And we did a, we just started a new Converse School last week, two weeks ago. So it's very therapeutical. I just, somebody was telling me that it, it really feels like group therapy sometimes [laughs]. So yeah, there's a lot of intimacy, I think, in the way we do things and that's what we want. Like, there's a lot of intimacy in our journalism as well, and there's a lot of intimacy in the podcasts we do.

Jessica: For sure. And like, just the medium itself, too, lends itself to being more intimate and um, yeah, more kind of introspective.

Lela: Yeah.

Jessica: And same with the space, I would say. You're one of the few startups I know that has a physical office space, too. And is that a priority for you to have that, that space?

Lela: I think that it's really important, especially with the communities we serve, for us to have a space, and a really beautiful space, that's like *valorisant*, I can't find the name in…

Jessica: Empowering?

Lela: …empowering. Yeah. Because very often when we think of like, independent media or especially in Quebec, it's like three folks and they're in their basement that are doing things and it's like it's not perceived seriously. And I think that for us, especially with the vision we have and the work that we do, it's like, no, no, no, no, no. Like, this is actually a thing. And some people, when they come here, they're like, 'oh, I didn't know it was this nice. Oh, I didn't know it was this big. Oh, this is actually a thing!' And I think it's nice. It's also really empowering for us. You know, it's like we're a BIPOC-led media, we're serving community, but we actually care about our space, right? And I think that's something that is important. Very often we think of certain media and it's like, oh it's very alternative and I hate that word [laughs]. It's not given the importance it has and not only is it important politically for us to have the space, but also for the representation and the well-being of the communities we serve to be like, well, no, no, no, like

we, we are important enough and we do matter. So it's always like, it's a little bit of like, revaluing communities that have been disenfranchised by media.

[music up]

Narration: Lela launched La Converse in 2020. She had previously worked as a journalist for mainstream media like Radio-Canada, *La Presse* and *Metro News*. And her frustration with legacy news outlets helped inspire her career move.

Lela: I wanted to build a news outlet that's community-focused and BIPOC-focused and community-powered and everything we do, without putting labels on it, because essentially I think that I've worked in many other legacy newsrooms in Quebec in French. And I've also been talking and traveling a little bit outside, and looking at what journalism looks like outside of here. But also what journalism for people of colour looks like outside of here. And I think it's just not really normal the way our communities are covered in French-Canadian newsrooms. And so it feels like our voices are not fully taken into consideration and I think there's a need for like, an in-depth community-powered media serving community. So essentially, yeah, that's it. Like, there was a big gap in Quebec and um, there are other media doing similar work to us in the rest of the world. Uh, and I was like, well, we need a place where all of these voices can be heard. When I was in university, my colleagues who were also racialized were not getting jobs, whereas the white students, who were often even younger, were already having jobs, forget internships. And we were having trouble accessing opportunities. So I saw that something was definitely wrong. And so, yeah, that was the reason I started it.

Jessica: Mmhmm. When you're talking about the other examples elsewhere in Canada or around the world, like what kind of outlets do you look to for inspiration?

Lela: I think, uh, well, in Canada was The Discourse, which I thought was quite cool. At the time, they had a gender reporter, and I was like, 'who has a gender reporter?' That's so cool, right? And I thought that was quite inspiring. I really liked their work. Um, so that's, uh, essentially it in Canada that was really propelling I felt. I think the National Observer was doing quite a good job as well, but they're mostly focused on the environment. In the States, you have so many of them that are doing excellent work: City Bureau, Outlier [Media], MLK50, et cetera, et cetera. All of these really cool media that are really, you know, entrenched in community. In Europe, you have Balkan Insight, which do excellent work, and I actually went to an investigative journalism seminar with them in the Balkans, and that's where I discovered their work. And, like, you know, they have, like, transition reporting, and it's really focused on human rights. And actually at some point I was like, I'm just gonna move back to Yugoslavia and be a reporter there. But I couldn't do that, because I had a child that was small, and I was like, okay. Well, I still do. Now I have two. [laughs]. So, and I was like, I really didn't feel like it was an option for me and a possibility. But I just felt, like, frustrated, you know, by, like, I have 23-year-old colleagues that are doing stories on the corruption of the president of Azerbaijan, and I could barely do a *fait divers* about, you know, the person who died on the street, you know. And so it felt like this human-rights reporting, which we see elsewhere: There's great

initiatives in Poland, in Moldova, in, you know, uh, Eastern Europe, essentially, in many countries in Africa as well, South America, you'll find in Global South as well, really good journalism. Uh, in Georgia, they have fantastic fact checking. Uh, you know, in Greece as well. And so I think that people in Quebec are extremely limited in their vision of what journalism is and what it should be. And when you look at other colleagues around the world doing it, that was really, 'no, no, no, this is actually the kind of journalism I want to do.' It's just that at some point I was like, 'do I even want to do this?' And I was like, 'yes, I know I do. I'm just not in the right physical space.' So I was like, I have two options. Either I leave Quebec. Either I create an outlet. And leaving Quebec was not an option for me. So I ended up doing it.

Jessica: I'm glad you did though, because leaving would almost be a giving up in a sense and now you're bringing what you wanted to see to Quebec, which is super powerful. Do you feel like the coverage in English media in Quebec is better or more, um, appropriate? Appropriate is not the right word, but more truthful of BIPOC communities?

Lela: Definitely.

Jessica: Yeah.

Lela: I think that if you look at the coverage of Radio-Canada versus CBC, it's a completely different Montreal. And even if you go in the newsrooms, the people at CBC Montreal and the people at Radio-Can have nothing in common [laughs]. Uh, like I remember the first time I went to CBC Radio-Can, on one side of the wall, there was Radio-Can and on the other side it was CBC. And CBC had like an Indigenous anchor and a Black person and a Southeast Asian person, and I get into their offices and everybody's an immigrant essentially, right? Or a person of colour. Uh, not everybody but almost everybody. And then I go to Radio-Can, and there's, everybody's French-Canadian. There's not even Polish people, forget people of colour [laughs]. Or like Italians and Greeks. Everybody's white, French-Canadian, or French from France, right? So it just felt like, 'oh my God, this is really not the world that I live in.' It was quite shocking. So just in terms of representation, that's a shock. And then whenever I go as a reporter and whenever I'd cover stories, when I was at *Journal Métro* and even *La Presse*, like I kind of built myself a reputation for being the reporter that covers diversity, because those are stories that I care about. And I would show up to a news conference, and I would be the only francophone reporter. All the rest of the reporters covering race were mostly Global, CBC, the Gazette, and there was no other francophone media than me, uh, whenever I would go to places. So I feel like that's already telling of who cares, right?

Jessica: Yeah.

Lela: And then you could see in the coverage. I mean, the coverage of Slav, Kanata, um, the N word, like how those stories are being covered. But also in terms of gun violence, the way those stories are covered. Sometimes the people are francophone, they're not just anglophone communities. Like, so the excuse of like, 'well, they speak English, so we have better access.' Sometimes it's more like, human. I don't know how else to say it.

Jessica: Yeah.

Lela: I know that even myself, like, as a Roma person, whenever I was like, thinking of being heard, or like, making sure some issues in our community were heard, I would direct people to anglophone media rather than francophone, because I knew the coverage would be much more sensitive.

[music up]

Narration: On the wall at La Converse, near the main hub of work stations, is a list of newsroom values. La mission avant tout – or the mission before everything? Serving marginalized communities. Lela has also included a list of questions on the wall, which journalists can ask themselves to make sure their work is on the right track.

First of all: Who am I serving with my reporting?
Second: Why am I doing this reporting?
Third: How is my reporting serving or helping people who are experiencing the situation?
And last: What are my limits? And how can I overcome them?

Lela had 10 people on staff as of June 2024. I asked her how she found those journalists, people who were on the same wavelength as her. And her hiring process, while not traditional for journalism, makes a lot of sense to me.

Lela: Well, I was very selective with who I let in. Um, I think that's pretty much it. [laughs]

Jessica: Yeah.

Lela: You know, when I first launched, there was a lot of people who wrote to me. They were like, ‘I want to work for you.’ And to be honest, it was mostly white people. And I didn't create La Converse for people who could break at Radio-Can tomorrow morning also. Like the goal was also to make space for voices that are unheard, right? And so I really strictly chose people who are invested in community, who have community knowledge rather than have journalistic knowledge, and essentially I've been teaching them the journalistic knowledge, which I find is much easier than teaching somebody how not to be harmful, right? So that's essentially been the approach. Now we've got to a stage where we've hired other reporters of colour who are elsewhere, who have worked elsewhere. And it's been quite great. But generally speaking, when I launched, there was essentially barely any reporters of colour that were available in freelance, and it's still the case like as freelancers, there's not a lot of reporters of colour available, right there in French, right? And the ones who are there, well, they're not necessarily freelance. They work in big legacy media so I can't, I couldn't compete with those salaries. And so the approach has been essentially to start by training them.

Narration: Lela's mom, Rosita, also works at La Converse as the operations coordinator. Her son, who was about nine months old at the time of this recording, is often around, too, and he's casually referred to as the CEO. In my past newsroom experiences, seeing children around has been rare. But it's something La Converse has made room for.

Lela: I gave birth in June and, uh, we close in July, so that was a blessing. And then I took an extra month and I came back to work in September with my baby. Um…

Jessica: That's a very short mat leave!

Lela: …it is. Um, and then baby's been in my office, so he has a crib and a lot of necessities in the newsroom. And, uh, he's, uh, yeah, working here with us almost every day. So it's been nice to be able to do that. And to also have an entire team behind us who's welcoming of my baby crying and maybe me giving him to them sometimes and, you know, be inclusive of that. Yeah, I think it's really important to be able to be a journalist and a mom at the same time, right? Especially at the beginning, I was like, 'well, how am I gonna manage this with the business?' And I remember I spoke to someone at Poynter Institute when I was in a leadership training and they were like, 'well, you don't have to choose between your family and your business.' And I was like, 'Huh, right, I don't.'

Jessica: Yeah. And I'm sure you haven't had a ton of folks in your same situation to look up to in…

Lela: No.

Jessica: … in local journalism or journalism in general either, right?

Lela: I think it's a subject that's never talked about, like motherhood and journalism and being a parent in the space, being a mom, being a woman, right? Um, when I was at this Poynter Institute, it was a leadership academy for women in media. And we were like, what, 30, 40 women. And at the end, everybody was crying as to what's your next move professionally. It was supposed to be like a leadership thing, and it ended up being a group therapy, because everybody was like, 'I want to have a hobby. And I want to be a parent. And I want to be able to be more present.' You know, it seems like journalism encourages you to not have a life. Uh, and it's almost encouraged, right? It's like to not have a life outside of being a journalist, and I think, um, it's toxic.

Jessica: It is.

Lela: Um [laughs].

Jessica: I'd second that.

Lela: It's toxic and it's not inclusive. And when we talk about diversity, we'd never talk about the intersection of diversity and motherhood, right? Especially when it comes to women, like immigrant women, women of colour. We tend to have kids more often and more kids in general. Right? And so I've seen a lot happening like in my field where like, um, people would tell me, 'well you should be single if you want to be a reporter. This is not a job for somebody who has kids.' But I've also seen other moms being offered things that are not compatible with a work-life balance? Like, can you be available at two in the morning? No, I cannot. Can you move to Regina? No, I can't. But I think that like, yeah, that was kind of the message is like, you can't really be a parent and be a journalist and be successful. And um, I don't think that's true. I don't think you should have to choose between motherhood and journalism. I think you should be able to do both. Uh, it's just adjustments and understanding that no, I'm not going to work on weekends and you don't have to work on weekends. And you can not work at night and you could leave earlier if you have to pick up your kids, and be off on spring break, and all of these things. So I think that when we talk about women and leadership and journalism, it's a very absent conversation.

[music up]

Jessica: We've touched or kind of gone over a little bit, the extra challenges of you were a journalist and now you're a newsroom manager. How have you found that transition to be?

Lela: Really hard.

Jessica: Yeah.

Lela: Yeah, it's a nightmare. [laughs]

Jessica: How are you, how are you coping?

Lela: I'm not coping, I'm doing. [laughs]

Jessica: Yeah, the Nike mantra. Just do it. [laughs]

Lela: Yeah, um, it's hard. It's really hard because, um, journalism is about serving community. And it's a very, like, I mean to me it's a very, like, empath job, right? Which, um, that's kind of my personality. So it's like, how do I help people? And how do I serve people? And how do I uplift voices and listen even when, like, nothing is black and white, right? Like, even with people who are perceived to do bad things, you find the good in them. You find, I mean, as a journalist, you find the good in everything, right? I think.

Jessica: Or you look for the gray, in the black and white.

Lela: Or you look for the gray. You look for the gray. So, and you do accountability and et cetera. So it's a very stimulating job where it's very selfless. Management is making sure people do their job [laughs]. So that's not the same kind of skills.

Jessica: Yeah, there's a bit of empathy there, but it's a little bit more sternness.

Lela: It's, yeah, it's a lot more sturdy. And I think, like, the hard thing for me is to find my voice as a manager, uh, especially given I work with communities I care about and people that look like me and I want to serve. And so I think that's been really hard and nobody tells you this when you are deciding to start a media, you know, how hard management and that route to manage, and to leadership, to becoming, um, executive director, essentially, right? It's not, it's not just being an editor-in-chief. And you know, it's like, leadership is not just revising stories and assigning people stories. It's a lot more than that, right? And um, finding a voice that fits my identity but also my vision, I think it's not easy. Especially given the advice that's usually given in leadership that's like, very like, be cold and heartless essentially [laughs]. And have really strong distance and boundaries. And I come from a culture that's the opposite of that. So I think that's been really hard. And I'm not saying it's easy now. I think it's better. It's been a lot of coaching and a lot of discussions and a lot of trial and error to be honest.

Jessica: Yeah. Can you think of an example maybe of something you did starting out as a leader that you might not do now or some, a lesson that you've learned?

Lela: There are so many lessons I've learned. I think the main one is like boundaries, right?

Jessica: Mhmm.

Lela: And, oh, look, this one is really important, the power imbalance. Like, when you're on the other side as a journalist, like, you know, you congregate with the reporters, you talk, you develop proximity. And then to know that now that I'm a leader, well, whether I like it or not, I'm perceived as that guy. But it's like, you don't see that, right? [laughs].

Jessica: Yeah, that's true.

Lela: So I'm the boss. And so there is a distance for the staff. At the beginning, there was no distance for me.

Jessica: Yeah.

Lela: But there was for them, and they didn't communicate that to me, to some staff. So they were like, 'well, there's a power imbalance.' I was like, 'What power imbalance? I'm chill. We talk about things!' [laughs]. And they're like, 'Well, if I tell you something wrong, you're still the boss. So, you know.' And I was like, 'Oh, okay, I did not see that.' And that took me time to really like be aware of that and like, encourage people to tell me what's wrong and like, just be really conscious of that, right? To know that now you're not part of the team, you're the team leader.

[laughs]. And that's, you could be the chillest person on Earth. That's perceived and received differently, you know?

Jessica: Yeah. You were talking about the roles outside of editorial leadership that you're doing. What else does that involve being ED?

Lela: Well, fundraising, strategy, organization, making business decisions with a non-business mind, I mean per default a little bit, right? And I think that, you know, being a journalist means like, overanalyzing everything.

Jessica: True.

Lela: Right? And sometimes being an executive director is important to overanalyze everything, but it's also to, like…

Jessica: Make decisions.

Lela: ...make decisions, and be like, super organized and, um, you know like, the transition from that role, I think that's something that nobody prepares you for. And then realizing that also the funny part is, like, you start a media because you want to do the journalism that you care about, but you don't really end up doing that. And so…

Jessica: You don't have the time for it.

Lela: …uh, no, because you have to do everything else. And so that's the kind of, a little bit of heartbreak. I think like, people think like, 'I'm gonna start a media' and, especially, you know, mostly people of colour, people that have been marginalized, it's like 'and then the problems are gonna go away.' And it's like, the problems will not go away. They just happen at a different level, right?

Jessica: True.

Lela: And so there is still inequality in funding. There is that power imbalance in those conversations and partnerships and et cetera, and et cetera. And I think, like, you still have to navigate in a white world, whether you like it or not.

[music up]

Jessica: Being a non-profit model, I know you're getting your funding from lots of different sources, right? And trying to diversify that as much as possible to not give your, make yourself beholden to any one source either, right? How – and you don't have to get into your trade secrets or anything here – but how do you strategize around that piece? And how do you diversify your funding?

Lela: Well you have to innovate, and you have to try different things, and that's essentially what I can think of. Like, be a little bit of a step ahead. Like, so, like, when we started, we were a media. And then there was the school, and now you're sitting in a studio. So those are three subsets of the media, right? When I was doing the Converse School, I was thinking of the studio, and then et cetera. And I was, you know, and then the Converse School started as just journalism, and now it's journalism, podcasting, rap. And now we started TV. So it's just like, we are constantly innovating. And I think that's really important. That's the positive side, and the nice answer. And the bad answer, or the rawer answer is also it's really hard, and it's super challenging, and um, and it's always stressful. That's just the truth, right? I've kind of learned to make that stress part of my life, but I'm not gonna lie to you that yeah, there are days when I'm like, 'why am I doing this to myself, right?' [laughs] Uh, I think it's like La Converse is super important in the Canadian ecosystem, especially in Quebec and Montreal, right? Like I know that. And, and people know that, right? The hard part is how do I make sure that everybody knows that and funds it, right?

Jessica: Yeah.

Lela: And that's the part that, it's less fun. And it's a little bit at the antidote of what journalism is about, right?

Jessica: I was gonna say: The whole money-making aspect of it is antithetical to journalism as a public service.

Lela: It is. So it's hard, and I am a very no filter kind of person, so I don't tend to masticate or whitewash my speech. So I'll just be like…

Jessica: Thank you for that [laughs].

Lela: I'll be like, 'Hey, white supremacist tactics aren't working! Can we talk about that?' [laughs] And people are like – but I mean, it's also, that like when I mean like, strategize, it's like, I think that everybody who's funded us, um, we choose our funders and we choose our partners as much as they choose us, right? And I think to be strategic and make sure that we're aligned. Um, but yeah it's, it's kind of hard to like, you have to sell, right?

Jessica: Yeah.

Lela: You have to sell and what I mean is like: Yes, we can diversify revenue. Yes, we can think of other revenue avenues, which I think is extremely important. But none of your revenue avenues in journalism are really sustainable, especially for us given our mission. We're a non-profit, BIPOC-led media that serves community. Our goal is not to make money. Our goal is to serve people. And I think that that's what people need to understand, right? So if that's our goal, we can't go about funding in the same ways, right? And we also have to make sure that people get that. And I think like, that's the hardest part. Like, it's hard to make sure that

everybody gets that. You know very often, it's kind of treated as like, a business model. But I mean journalism should not be a business model. It should be a public service.

[music up]

Jessica: What would you do today or tomorrow if you got a massive investment of funding, and millions of dollars to build out La Converse?

Lela: What would I do? That's a good question. Well, I would hire more reporters. I would do more Converse schools. I would do, uh, hire a full-time Converse school coordinator and maybe one for each branch. I would hire a funding manager that's really good, so that I don't have to keep looking for this money. Uh, I would set up a business plan. I would, I think keep, hire more reporters from various other communities and make sure that everybody could do what they do. I would develop the studio. I think, like, the studio is really cool, but we need to, you know, do more podcasting and do more with it. And, uh, probably I would make the studio free for all people of colour.

Jessica: That's awesome, lots of ideas, I like it. So my last question for you, unless there's anything else you want to add after, but would you do this all over again? Would you build La Converse again if you had all of this hindsight?

Lela: Yes, yes. I would because of what you saw when you came here the other night.

Jessica: Yeah, that makes it all worth it.

Lela: Yeah. Yeah. Um, sometimes people are like, you know, especially when I do the Converse School nights, I was like, 'that's the only thing that's keeping me in this business' you know. [laughs]. And it really is, like it's a big, like, when we don't have them, I feel like there's an emptiness. And whenever we do the schools, it's really what's keeping us – well, keeping me, a big part of what's keeping me alive in this business is that – and I'm not talking about money. I'm talking about, like, personally what's keeping me motivated to do this is that. And then the stories we write and the impact we have. And then, you know, seeing people transition from the school to the newsroom like, and seeing that, you know, like our Converse School story, actually, one of them just got nominated to the CAJ awards. So to know that, you know, youth who had nothing to do with journalism, who hated reporters and journalism, suddenly are nominated to a journalism, to the Canadian Journalism Awards for a story they wrote and they cared about and that matters, and that had an impact on the community, um, to me is like priceless honestly. So seeing the trajectories of, of everybody here, you know, is really rewarding and I think it's important for the people we work with and the communities we serve. So yeah, I would do it all over again. Yeah. Even though I have sleepless nights and I'm always stressed [laughs].

Jessica: Good stuff. Well, thank you so much for chatting.

Lela: Thanks to you.

[music up]

Narration: Thanks again to Lela Savic for the interview – and to the whole La Converse team for welcoming me into their space. The music you heard in this episode came from Pump up the Mind on Pixabay and the podcast clip near the beginning came from *Pas Tout Montreal*. I'll link to their podcast in the show notes.

Since we recorded this interview in May, La Converse has been nominated for the Journalistic Impact Award at LION Publishers' Sustainability Awards. So congratulations are in order there! They've also done another round of L'École Converse, this time focusing on using rap music as an avenue for journalism. So keep your eyes and ears peeled for that coming soon. You can find all of their journalism on laconverse.com.

[beat]

Before finishing this episode, I want to come back to journalism's diversity problems for a minute. Lela talked about the lack of racial diversity in Quebec's French journalism circles. But this is an issue that affects Canada's journalism industry more broadly.

The Canadian Association of Journalists, since 2021, has put out a Newsroom Diversity Survey where they ask newsrooms about their own demographics. Not everyone chooses to participate – which skews the data – but 273 newsrooms opted in last year, which is still significant.

Their survey results show us that Canadian journalists are still overwhelmingly white. In 2023, seventy-six per cent of the survey respondents were white. In terms of leadership, seventy-six per cent of newsrooms that responded had no visible minorities or Indigenous people in a top leadership role.

In terms of a gender breakdown, the CAJ found about half of its respondents were women, and non-binary folks represented about 0.3 per cent. The survey doesn't get into more intersectional forms of diversity though, so we don't have data on other things like disability, age, religion, or LGBTQ+ representation.

We can't say definitively how this lack of diversity affects newsrooms' daily news choices or stories they choose to cover. But there's no arguing that it makes an impact on the coverage we're seeing. It seems like – to me at least – if you want to accurately represent your community in the news, you need to make an effort to accurately represent them in your own newsroom.

Real progress on newsroom inclusion has been slow. But Lela and La Converse are doing the work – or walking the talk, I could say – to accurately reflect BIPOC communities in Montreal. I hope others can follow suit.

[beat]

On the next episode of *Reimagining Journalism: The Montreal Edition*, I'll talk to Chris Curtis, the founder of The Rover.

Chris left his reporting job at the *Montreal Gazette* to start his own English-language news outlet in 2020. We'll talk about how he's handling the transition from reporter to business owner, and some of the mental-health impacts this work can have.

Until then, I'm Jessica Botelho-Urbanski. Thank you for listening.

[music fade out]

Episode 2: The Rover

(Run time: 31:17)

Narration: A content warning before jumping into this episode. This conversation includes some coarse language, as well as mentions of substance use and self-harm. If you or anyone you know is struggling with thoughts of suicide, you can call or text 9-8-8 in Canada, anytime.

[clip fades in]

Chris: See the thing is, like, we all sort of do it. Sorry [beeps].

Jessica: Slippery. Look alive!

Chris: Everyone who has, um [laughs]. We almost died, but everyone who's done this job…

[music fade in]

Narration: When it comes to interviewing someone like Chris Curtis – the founder of The Rover – it feels appropriate to hit the road. In April, I tagged along on one of his reporting trips. We rode out in his Subaru Forester to visit Kanesatake, an Indigenous community about an hour west of Montreal. Chris has reported over the years about how illegal dumping is destroying the lands there and frustrating the community. And today's story was a follow-up. He doesn't hit the road as often anymore, though.

Chris: I used to drive a lot. When I started the project, the whole point of the project – this is pre-having a kid – was to be on the road and to go to faraway communities and get stories. That's why we called it The Rover. Um, you know, you're all over the place. But then, the reality

of taking care of another human being, you're like, I don't want to be away. I want to be able to do this job as best I can and be present in my daughter's life because that's what I would have wanted for me and that's like, I just need that relationship with my kid and I need her to know that she's loved and that I'm in that, you know. And, and so we've had like a super close relationship to where she's like a little monkey or a little koala on me all the time. I love that, and I love being her dad. And like, totally we have sacrificed, um, big stories, a couple, you know. I'm never on the road or I'm like super rarely on the road now cause I want to be there every night and I want to, you know, I want to put her to bed. And so we've kind of refocused our efforts a little more locally and, but occasionally, yeah. I mean, when you get a call from a source, who's like, 'hey, I have a USB drive with 1,600 pages of information.' You get in the fucking car, you go. [laughs]

Narration: I'm Jessica Botelho-Urbanski and you're listening to *Reimagining Journalism: The Montreal Edition*. On today's episode, we're talking about The Rover. Chris created this startup in 2020 after almost nine years reporting for the *Montreal Gazett*e.

Clip from video announcing The Rover: "I like to tell these stories that come from places you've probably never visited…"

Narration: In a video that's racked up hundreds of shares and likes on social media, Chris explained why he was leaving the *Gazette*. With the news industry in crisis, the stories he wanted to tell were increasingly being scrapped.

Clip from same video fades back up: "It doesn't make financial sense for a paper to send reporters out on location anymore. I'd like us to change that."

Narration: It's been almost four years since The Rover came online. And Chris is still publishing stories a few times a week, but a lot has changed since those early days. The Rover is not just him anymore – he's got a network of about a half-dozen regular contributors and a managing editor who helps out part-time. He's now raising an almost three-year-old daughter as well, with his partner. In a newsletter he wrote in March, Chris said his subscriber revenue was over $100,000 in 2023 – that's a huge get for any news outlet, never mind a new one. But he says that success comes with added pressure.

Chris: This is kind of like, the biggest part of who I am sometimes, and it's hard, like, I don't really see my friends anymore. I mean, I do, but it's not very much. And I don't really, like my life, this is a gigantic part of my life, more than when I was at the Gazette. And uh, the stories matter a lot to me, and getting them out matters a lot, and doing them right matters a lot. But I can't – yeah, there's like this luxury when you're, when I was at like a big newspaper of occasionally being able to like, let an opportunity pass you by or kind of take it easy one week. Take your foot off the gas, recharge, whatever. I don't get that. Like, I haven't, I've been burnt out I think since October. I feel great now, like, the last month, I don't know what happened. I didn't take any time off. I didn't. And I don't have any significant time off, probably for another three or four months. And uh, I can't like, I can't stop doing this [laughs]. This is, it's good, but right now it feels fine.

Right now, it feels really okay because I'm excited about it, but there are times, right? Like I have a really, I struggle to make heads or tails of this whole thing.

Jessica: Yeah, I can see that. It's like any job where you have your good days and your bad days and…

Chris: Uh, no, because it's like a curse [laughs]. It's like this thing that never goes away. No, I mean, it is like a regular job, but if I were to quit this tomorrow, I'd probably have to refund a ton of people a ton of money. So I can't, because I don't have the money to give them back. Um, I mean, I'm sure it wouldn't be that bad, but like, it's what supports the family. It's what um, pays most of our bills. It's what, yeah, it's like finally become bigger than me and that's fucking terrifying.

[music fades in]

Jessica: How so?

Chris: Oh because like if I fail now, it's like a failure that a lot of people or not a lot of people but like more than just me. It'll affect a lot more than just me.

Narration: Chris grew up in St. Eustache, Quebec, just northwest of the island of Montreal. His first language is English, but he's comfortable speaking in French, too. He says the French helps out with his reporting – especially his accent.

Chris: That too is like a big factor in why I did well at the *Gazette*. It's 'cause when I speak French, I have that kind of North Shore hillbilly accent a little bit. So people open up a little more. They see me less, a little less as an anglophone, a little more as someone they might know. Great strategy, being a hillbilly.

Narration: Something else that's specific to Quebec journalism is the reality of two cultures co-existing at once. Often they're in silos. And what I mean by that is if you're not reading the news in both English and French, then it's very likely you're not getting the whole story. Francophone and anglophone media sometimes have very different focuses and perspectives on the same news of the day. Chris had his own take on some of those cultural differences.

Chris: On the francophone journalism side there's, first of all, there's a desire to define and centralize. Like there were people at our journalism federation, the FPJQ, years ago, who wanted, like, a hard set of criteria for what is a professional journalist. Right? So that, just like the College of Physicians or the engineering, the engineering associations, like, we have a professional order that can punish us if we fuck up, and protect us if someone's coming after us. And we kind of sort of have that, we have the press council. But you have to submit to the press council's rulings to be a part of it, and like, the biggest newspaper chain in Quebec is not a part of the press council, Quebecor. So in some ways, like, there's, yeah, there's these, this desire to centralize and formalize everything, whereas there's resistance to overly define what journalism

is in English I find. Because we worry about – I think we fundamentally see the role of government differently. And I think we worry that if we empower the government to make such a huge judgment call, then we're giving that power to them. And I, we don't want that. Like, we don't want to give that up. Whereas I think, you see it in the English side too, but there is like a lot of francophone colleagues will go out of their way to be like, 'No, Chris Curtis is not a journalist. Chris Curtis is an activist. Or Chris Curtis is' because he expressed his opinion publicly a few times or whatever. And it's like they see it very letter of the law, instead of spirit of the law. And my response to that is always like, 'dude, I can read five paragraphs of your story and tell you who you fucking voted for in the last election.' It's not rocket science. Our biases are super easy to unpack and to see. No one's neutral. I'm just honest about what my biases are and I try as hard as I can to be fair. Um, I think there's a tendency maybe, maybe it's because the francophone papers are very successful or like La Presse is, and there's still some prestige there. There's a tendency of some – I find anyways on the francophone side – there's a tendency to see themselves, some of these journalists see themselves as like, a separate class of citizen. Like a better citizen. Like an elite citizen that lives by a different code and that, a stricter code, and that they serve a function that is essential to democracy, which of course they do. But um, I don't see it that way. And I think maybe, I think we're just citizens, and we're just people. And I think the more that we remind ourselves that, and remind our readers that, the more they take our work not as the gospel but as a perspective, and one that can shock them, and one that can maybe spurn them into action. But definitely not, you know, the God's truth. And, uh, that's, you know, that's always been my, you know, my way of looking at it, because, like that overly official way of looking at yourself as like, a super citizen? That puts a big barrier between you and the reader. Some people need it, I don't. I find I need the opposite. I need to know everything about the reader. I want to know who they are and, you know, how their minds work so I can get inside there and radicalize them.

Narration: That was sarcasm, I think. While Chris craves closeness with his audiences, it can also dovetail into pressure to always be on. To never miss a story, or a deadline. And to always get back to sources quickly and network. As the leader of a news startup, that pressure could feel even more intense. I asked Chris if he ever felt like he was playing a character when he was out in the field.

Chris: Yeah, totally. I like, there's a wink and a nod, you know, they know like it's me, but it's like the funnier, more charming version of me. And it's exhausting. Like, that's probably one of the hardest parts of all this is like, I gotta always be on. Like someone calls? You're on. Someone, you know, a writer has a question? You gotta get on top of it right away. Um, someone has a pitch? You gotta get back to them, and it can't just be like a cold email. It's gotta be like, 'Hey, how you doing? Here's my phone number. What's up?' Like that's my pitch to a lot of people is that I'm a nicer, more attentive person. Cause I hope, I hope I am. And they, it either, you know, like people buy into it or they're immediately suspicious of it. So far people generally are like, all right, this guy, he's okay. I guess.

[music fade in]

Narration: As we began driving through Kanesatake, we saw trucks that appeared to be dumping on several new sites. You see, the dump that had been causing problems was shut down by the Quebec government in 2020 for not living up to environmental standards. But it seemed like some folks were finding a workaround. We met with Chris's source – off the record – and then hopped back in the car. Chris was carrying a pile of documents and a USB stick with about 1,600 more.

[music fade down]

Jessica: So how are you going to tackle all of the documents?

Chris: I'm so not looking forward to that. Uh, I'm going to read the executive summary, right?

Jessica: Yeah.

Chris: See if there's any particular part of the tests, documents, whatever, that jumps out at me. And most likely this is several articles, right? Like it's like, I'll go and get the biggest, easiest to understand, easiest to like, be angry about elements of these documents. And then I'm going to go in a little bit deeper. I might bring on another reporter to do some of the boring grunt work. But, because just work right now, I don't have the capacity. Like I'm working on two stories right now and a project we just got funding for. So this is a bit of a curveball that I didn't want to have to deal with. But it's here and I don't want anyone else reporting on it and I give a shit about it, so we'll make it work. Like, I was up last night until 1 in the morning working. Everybody went to bed. I thought, 'all right, well here's some free hours in the day.' And lately that's kind of how I've been surviving. It's just you, um, you rob sleep from yourself and you rob rest from yourself and you kind of go into that reserve energy that, uh, is limited. But that's what we're running on right now: fumes. And we have a lot of momentum, but I'm fucking exhausted.

[music fades up]

Narration: On the way home, we talked more about Chris's approach to storytelling and how it might differ from those working in a more mainstream newsroom. At the end of the day, there are parallels – but taking more space and time with stories are what set The Rover apart.

[music fades down]

Chris: I mean, I feel like our work is less extractive than the journalism you might see in a mainstream paper or on TV. The absence of like really hard deadlines gives me an opportunity to revisit with some sources on a territory or like make sure that the angle is right and that we're thorough. And the absence of someone telling me what my word count is does the same thing. It allows me to explain and expand more. But yeah, I mean, ultimately, it's still a white guy writing about Indigenous issues to a white audience. Um, yeah, it's still extremely colonial. I, you know, just less blatantly colonial than the others.

Jessica: Do you go through your stories with the folks you talk to?

Chris: Sometimes. Sometimes.

Jessica: Before they're published?

Chris: Um, I think there's, like, I, I, in some cases, we have such a longstanding relationship that I know what's, I know where the red line is, and I don't even go close to it. But in newer relationships, I like to let the person know that they have the option to maybe take something back, or that they have the option to maybe look over a quote before it goes to print, which are big no no's in journalism school. But on really sensitive stories like these, if you run the wrong thing, or if you put someone in a dangerous position, you know, they're not going to talk to you again. So I get that it's important to hold up this kind of imaginary holy rule of journalism, but yeah, I think it's important to unpack some of the things you've spoken about with the sources to the sources before it gets printed so that they know they're not, you know, they're not going to be, there are no surprises. They're not walking into a trap, they didn't accidentally humiliate themselves, that's so important. And you don't really see a ton of that at newspapers and on TV and in the radio. People just kind of get what they can and they go.

Jessica: Yeah.

Chris: Yeah, but the thing is, like, we all sort of do it. Sorry [beeps].

Jessica: Slippery. Look alive!

Chris: Everyone who has, um. We almost died [laughs]. But everyone who's done this job has practiced some form of checking in with a source. Like even the most hardened, tough reporter who doesn't break the rules and is super ethical. Even they've gone to a source and been like, 'Look, let me level with you. This is kind of what we're doing here.' I don't believe like, I don't believe you can survive in this job if you haven't done that a few times. So I'm just being more honest about the practice and formalizing it. I see a lot of people do that now, like a lot, a lot more people are taking that extra step of being sensitive and realizing that, you know, this is one of those situations where showing people grace is going to help you sleep at night, but it's going to help you ultimately be a better journalist.

Jessica: Do you think it's like a generational shift?

Chris: I think it's 100 per cent. You're right. It is. A generational shift.

Narration: Chris is 38 years old, by the way.

Chris: It is our predecessors not maybe being aware of the biggest bias. They, our, our, our predecessors were under the impression that like, they, they presented these unbiased facts and they were uncovering some capital T truth. When in reality, like they, the newsroom they

worked in was probably 95-per-cent white, 75-per-cent male, um, mostly affluent. Like they have these gigantic blind spots and they never knew about them. I think our generation is just, we see the blind spots and instead of waiting for someone else to do something about it, we're trying to do something about it ourselves. And we're gonna make mistakes, but I think the younger generation gives a shit and they're trying. And, you know, I see younger reporters than myself maybe pushing it further than I'd be comfortable pushing it. But I'm interested in it and I'll watch and I'll see if it works or not and what it, you know, what it does to the industry and what it does to our stories and our little society of readers.

Jessica: What's too far for you? Like, what's the line?

Chris: I'm not gonna like, show up at a protest. I'm not gonna, like, I won't protest, I won't march. I won't tell people how to vote. Um, I'll tell people what I think. But I, you know, I am an observer still, like I'm not a participant. And I am a participant in a way that the work is a participant. But I try as much as I can to still not, you know, not be in there actively putting my thumb on the scale.

[music up]

Jessica: Well you were saying earlier, you're feeling like a lot of distance from your friends and things, having worked so hard on The Rover. Do you think that's going to continue – or you're going to keep making rifts? Or not necessarily rifts, but keep making space, because the more stories you do, the more this is going to happen?

Chris: Well, it's like, the thing about my friends is, like, I love them dearly. I could like, not see my friends for five years, show up to a party and all is good, you know? We just, we have this really loving friendship, and we've known each other, most of us, since we were teenagers. But, there's a way that I can't relate to them, and I can't, our jobs and what we do for a living is extremely different. And what I love about our friendships is, they almost never talk about my work, and like, they don't really care about me in that way. And many of them don't subscribe, and many of them don't even really know. And that's fine, because I'd rather that we just know each other because we're friends, and our friendship is different than work. Whereas like a lot of the friendships I've developed now are more like someone I met through work, and I have, um, I have no, uh, like it's easier to be friends with someone in my world right now, because I don't have time [laughs] to be friends with normal people whose schedules are different than mine. It's hard. Like I feel super isolated from my friends group because I know I almost never see them and, like my life is basically going to the boxing gym and the friends I've made there, being a dad and being a journalist. And I don't really do anything else. And that, there's times when that's really depressing and really isolating, and I wish that I had someone I could just kind of like, bare my soul to that isn't my partner.

Narration: A bit later, I asked Chris if he's tried therapy.

Chris: I have done a lot of therapy. I'm on two different antidepressants. I have a condition called complex post-traumatic stress disorder, and that's extremely hard to medicate and to understand because there's not a ton of research on it.

Jessica: I think I just read a book on that actually: *What My Bones Know* [By Stephanie Foo]?

Chris: Yeah, I'm like midway through that.

Jessica: It was great.

Chris: It is great. And it's like painfully relatable in some parts and you, yeah. What it, I think it makes me a really good journalist and a good writer because I'm so vigilant on certain things. And I, I'm not really afraid of getting hurt or I'm not really, cause it's like, I don't think anyone could ever hurt me as bad as I could hurt myself. But there's all this chaos in my head all the time, and I'm so – maybe one of the reasons I really like journalism is I'm so often, like, I'm confused about what's real and what my perception is. Like, is this really fucked up? Or do I just think that it's fucked up because not everything's really firing the way it should be in my brain right now? And the good thing about long-form journalism is that you really meditate on something for well, for a long time and, and you, you then realize, like, okay, uh, it is real, right? Like I've talked to seven, eight different people on this, and I'm coming to some kind of consensus on what the truth is. The documents point me in this direction. Okay, I'm not crazy, this is real. Whereas real life, like, sometimes I'll have like an emotional reaction to something, or I'll perceive what something said, what somebody said a certain way and it, it fucks everything up. And that, um, that's hard. Journalism's easy, like, that shit's hard. Life is hard. Like life is like, I have no idea what I'm doing. I don't know if that makes sense.

Jessica: Nobody does.

Chris: Yeah, but.

Jessica: How did you figure out it was CPTSD?

Chris: Um, I ended up at the Douglas Mental Health Institute in 2019. Uh, I had tried to take my life. I was in a real, real fucked-up spot. And so I ended up, you know, you end up in the locked unit at the Douglas and like you keep – and I, it wasn't like the first time that I'd ended up at the Douglas. Like that like fucking reality just kind of started coming apart for me. Um, and I don't know what it is. And I always just thought like, you know, people are like, 'well, maybe it's depression. Maybe, maybe you're, um, bipolar. Maybe you have borderline personality. Um, maybe you're autistic or you're, you're on the spectrum.' There were all these theories kind of thrown out and then finally a doctor who evaluated me was like, 'yeah, no, this is CPTSD. This is like, you have all of the, like the mix of what you're describing and what you filled out in your evaluation. Yeah, it's um, it's CPTSD.' It's extremely hard to treat. It looks like a lot of other things. It's not so much like flashbacks and whatever it kind of is, like it stems from some sexual abuse when I was a kid. And there's like, you know some other abuse in there. And you try to,

um, it was like a part of me died, and the only way I could feel alive is by like, taking gigantic risks, and hating myself, and, you know, engaging in really dangerous behaviour, uh, specifically around drinking and drugs and fucking philandering, all that bad stuff. And you realize you're just masking all this shit with, um, this like, thrill-seeking behaviour. And like big investigations too, like dangerous investigations. Like yeah, let's do that, too. I'll be the biggest, baddest motherfucker there is. You just, you end up kind of hurting yourself and the people around you a lot. And so, you know, ending up at the Douglas and I'm being put in this position where you really have to own up to how bad you've let it get. I started working on myself a lot and in the middle of all that work, I met my partner, who did not want kids or to move in together fast and neither did I, but it just happened. And then she got pregnant, um, like nine months after we met. And now we have almost a three-year-old daughter. And it's fucking amazing, and I love it, and I've never felt more determined to like, be healthy, and to be, to do the right thing. To be the kind of person I wish my daughter was when she grew up, when she grows up, you know?

[music fade in]

Narration: Arriving back in Montreal, Chris dropped me off at the metro station. Our interview was coming to a close.

Chris: Well, thank you, Jess.

Jessica: Thanks for letting me tag along.

Chris: Oh, God. No, that's, like, I love company.

Narration: Chris's stories about illegal dumping in Kanesatake are now up on therover.ca. I'll link them in the show notes.

[beat]

In July, about three months after our conversation, Chris put out a podcast of his own. The title? A Frank Conversation About The Rover's Finances. He talked with his co-host about the cash crunch he was experiencing.

Clip (The Midnight Choir): If it were just me I could live on, you know, I could live on peanut butter and jam sandwiches and, you know, sleep on your couch, and still do this even if I'm almost 40. I could do that. That's, I've always been able to live like that. But I don't want my kid to have to live like that. And I'm getting to this point with The Rover where I think, like it's the first time in a long time that I've considered stop[ping or] quitting. Or that I've considered, like, it's taking way too much out of me to like, keep up with all this financial burden.

Narration: On social media, Chris also posted a letter to folks asking for more support – and he got a lot of positive feedback. With some more subscribers now and a grant that just came

through, he was able to pay his bills. And when I followed up with him a few weeks later, he was finally taking a well-earned vacation.

[beat]

Thank you again to Chris Curtis, the founder of The Rover, for the ridealong interview. Music in this episode is by Pump up the Mind via Pixabay and the clip you heard at the beginning came from Ricochet Media.

I really appreciated Chris's openness in sharing some of his own struggles, some of which are very personal. But others may be more systemic. In 2022, researchers with the Canadian Journalism Forum on Violence and Trauma released the Taking Care report. It surveyed 1,200 Canadian media workers about their mental health and well-being. And it found those working in media are at a much higher risk for anxiety and depression than average Canadians. Sixty-nine per cent of those surveyed self-reported anxiety, and 46 per cent reported depression. The researchers made nine recommendations and the one that stood out the most to me was number four: Improve culture and work-life balance.

I feel like this is partially what the startup journalists I've talked to are trying to do – although the work-life balance part can be hard when you're short on resources and just getting started.

Journalism culture is difficult to define. But for a long time, it's relied on journalists hiding their own thoughts and feelings to preserve a semblance of so-called objectivity. And like Chris said, that objectivity has a lot of blind spots.

Startup journalists are redefining journalism culture for themselves, which can – and should – include prioritizing well-being. Because if the journalists aren't alright, how is the industry supposed to be?

Again, if you or anyone you know is in crisis or has thoughts of suicide, you can call or text 9-8-8 in Canada, anytime. Also, if you're looking for resources or help related to sexual violence, check out: endingviolencecanada.org.

Next time, we'll talk to the co-founder of two news startups in Montreal. Gabrielle Brassard-Lecours has helped build both Ricochet Media and Pivot. We'll talk about what she's learned from both of those adventures, and focus on how funding for news in Canada is falling short.

Until then, I'm Jessica Botelho-Urbanski and this has been *Reimagining Journalism: The Montreal Edition*. Thank you for listening.

[music down]

Episode 3: Pivot

(Run time: 50:00)

Clip (Engaging in/with Communities Journalism Conference): Ben c'est un peu ce que je disais dans mon introduction la [*ouais*], c'est que tous ces termes en français sont hyper péjoratifs. Moi je le sais la, je défends ça à Pivot depuis 10 ans la. Qu'on dit que je fais du journalisme engagé, donc je ne suis pas crédible parce que mes journalistes sont des militants. Pis c'est pas ça [*non, non, non, non, non*] ...

[clip fades down]

Narration: That's Gabrielle Brassard-Lecours. She's leading a group discussion at Concordia University in June about the topic of engaged journalism. Broadly speaking, that means journalism that listens to and supports community needs. Much of the group discussion though was focused on terminology.

[clip fades back up]

Clip (from same conference): … and honestly it's really hard to translate, I've been at it for months and it's like, because it's so pejorative in English to say that you're engaged because you're associated with being an activist and so not credible – especially in the Quebec context. I feel like in the English media sphere, there are more like my outlet, Pivot, who's like quite progressive, and quite transparent in our editorial line. In the rest of Canada, there are many outlets like us and so we connect with them. But in Quebec it's still, I still feel like, you know, I'm invited to a lot of panels to defend this position, to say that my outlet is credible and it's um, it's very annoying but [laughs].

[music fade up]

Narration: I'm Jessica Botelho-Urbanski and on today's episode of *Reimagining Journalism: The Montreal Edition*, we're talking about Pivot with one of its co-founders Gabrielle Brassard-Lecours.

Gabrielle wears many hats – although, I don't know if I've ever actually seen her wear a hat, but regardless. I first met her last year at Concordia when I was her teaching assistant for a course called Fake News and Misinformation. We debunked conspiracy theories with the students and she demonstrated ways to verify if information online is real, which should probably be mandatory learning nowadays, but I digress.

Gabrielle now works as a journalism lecturer at the Université de Montréal, and she has previously served as the president of Quebec's Association of Independent Journalists. In 2024, she helped organize that conference about engaged journalism, which you heard from off the top. It brought together journalists from across the country, who are keen to work together with communities.

Why I wanted to talk to Gabrielle initially though, was because she has created two news startups of her own. Most recently, she co-founded and is now the board president at Pivot.

Clip (from Pivot introduction video): Pivot c'est quoi? Pivot c'est l 'union des forces de Ricochet, de Majeur et de Press Progress. Ensemble on va faire un média plus fort avec une équipe solide.

Narration: It's a French-language journalism co-operative based in Montreal. Before Pivot, Gabrielle helped co-found Ricochet Media in 2014. It's one of the longest-running independent news sites in Canada, and it's celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. So needless to say, she knows the ins and outs of creating and sustaining a news organization – and she's managed to make it out the other side.

As you'll hear in our conversation, Gabrielle's goal is to have her media continue on without her. She's not as involved in the day-to-day at Pivot as she used to be with Ricochet, and so she's kind of seeing that plan work out already, which is great.

Gabrielle started in the field wanting to pursue international journalism. And like so many others, she faced job cuts and became a bit disillusioned with the journalism industry. She wanted to try something different.

Gabrielle: I didn't think, honestly, I was gonna launch, uh, media. It wasn't in my career plan, I have to admit, because, first of all, I'm not a business person, or maybe I am now, but I wasn't at that time [laughs].

Narration: Here's some of our chat from April. I started by asking Gabrielle about how she got involved in journalism in the first place.

[music fades down]

Gabrielle: Uh, I studied it first. So I had a first career in community organizations, I'd say. But I wanted to be a journalist for a long time. I was hesitating because we always hear that media is not doing well, there's no jobs, it's not well paid. But, and then I still decided to jump in. So I did a diploma at Université de Montréal a decade-and-a-half ago. And then I did a master's degree in international journalism because I wanted to see how journalism was made elsewhere. And the master's degree I was making was a professional one, so we got to travel to study journalism in Europe and then to do internships in different countries that we mostly chose. So I wanted to go into an African country because I thought the coverage of any African issues here is a bit, is not necessarily well made. Um, so I ended up in Senegal. I was there for two months. Um, and then I came back to Montreal. I finished my master's and I started to work at Radio-Canada International, which at the time had a daily show, radio show on international issues. Um, and I was a researcher there, so that was cool. But then, the first year I was there, there were cuts by the government, and then Radio-Canada had to make cuts, too. So, um, and

from there I went from, uh, from contracts to contracts in mainstream media, but I had also always been a freelancer. So I had, uh, done written pieces for most daily outlets in Quebec, magazines. Um, and then, uh, yeah, that's how I got into journalism.

Jessica: That's a long and winding road!

Gabrielle: Yes [laughs].

Jessica: Well do you know, like, did you have an initial idea going into it of why you wanted to do journalism as opposed to other careers?

Gabrielle: Yes. I, um, and I have to admit I was a bit disillusioned and I think maybe that's why I created my own media in the end. Um, for me journalism was really to be an actor of change, uh, especially international journalism. For me it was, my vision was I'm going to travel around, uh, and bring back inspiring innovations to change the society, to inspire it, to make better decisions on any topic: health, transportation, politics. But I learned that it's not exactly how media works [laughs]. And I didn't really have, necessarily the liberty to do that. So yeah, that was my vision. I really wanted to, to be a journalist, to tell other stories that would inspire my society. But it's, somewhat it's that, but somewhat it's not either, so [laughs].

Jessica: Well, like, always like our goals change over time. So how have yours changed since being in this career for a few years now?

Gabrielle: Well, I didn't think, honestly, I was gonna launch, uh, media. It wasn't in my plan, uh, in my career plan, I have to admit. Because, first of all, I'm not a business person, or maybe I am now, but I wasn't at the time [laughs]. Um, but when young people came to me, and after the student strike in 2012...

Narration: Gabrielle's referencing the Maple Spring, which was a huge student protest against tuition fee hikes in Quebec that happened in 2012.

[clip fades in]

Clip (from CBC News): "...we're hoping this is going to make a change and that Charest might change his mind and not put the prices up [whistles and cheers]..."

[clip fades out]

Narration: Tens of thousands of students demonstrated over the course of almost seven months, and ultimately the hikes were stopped by a new government.

Gabrielle: There were, yeah, a group of young people that thought the coverage of the strike wasn't really, uh, well made. And they wanted to launch a kind of progressive but professional outlet because there are alternative, we call it 'alternative media' in Quebec already. But they

rely mostly on free labour. So it's not necessarily journalists who do it, it's people who want to write stuff I'd say [laughs]. Uh, but we wanted to do a professional one, and I already had a strong network of freelance journalists. And I thought this project is interesting, and maybe I'll be able to be the journalist I want to be in that media, because I'll have more liberty to do the story I want to do. Not necessarily to travel, but just do more important stories, longer-form. Because it was still a bit the beginning of internet and we were, we were told that on the internet, you know, you have to, what works is top tens, short sentences with GIFs and [laughs]. But this has changed. People are now able to read long-forms on the web and, you know, paper is disappearing. So um, so yeah, I didn't plan to do this, but in the end, now, I think my goal is to have my media survive. This is my, my goal, even though I'm, I'm not as implicated in it as I was. Uh, and that's a good thing because it means also it will survive without me, which was one of my goals. But me, personally, I'm still searching, I think [laughs]. I'm still looking for really, really what I want to do.

[music fades in]

Narration: Gabrielle's first news startup was Ricochet, which started out as a bilingual outlet. She worked on the French side of things, co-ordinating much of their content.

Gabrielle: So we had a team in Montreal and another one in Vancouver. We were a bilingual outlet, which was very innovative and critical, too. But then, uh, the founders of Ricochet on the French side with me went elsewhere to earn a living, which is totally understandable. So I was managing Ricochet mostly on my own for six, seven years. I had temporary help, but I was managing all the aspects, so money, editing, writing stuff from time to time, managing the freelancers. And I was getting a little bit tired of being alone in the media. And also I had, I got a full-time job teaching journalism at Concordia. So I was kind of at a crossroads and, uh, it was a nice coincidence that two other outlets suggest that we do an outlet all together.

Narration: Those two other outlets were Press Progress – a labour-focused news outlet, funded by the Broadbent Institute – and Majeur – a social-media-focused outlet that delivered quick, punchy stories. Majeur is no longer producing journalism, but Press Progress is still going strong. Pivot was born out of this collaboration in 2021. And their first steps involved hiring staff to produce stories, rather than relying solely on freelancers.

Gabrielle: So by putting all our resources together, it gave us the chance to hire, from the start, home journalists. So we had an editor-in-chief, and we had at the start, I think, two journalists. So that was great because we never had that at Ricochet and it, uh, I had the, the chance also to, to have a step back because I wasn't, uh, you know, the media wasn't solely relying on me. So, but Pivot, we continued our editorial line, which is really progressive and we're very transparent about that. Even though we have some critics and, you know, some mainstream media always tell us that we're doing activism journalism, which is not the case. But no media is neutral anyway, but we made the bet of being transparent about what we do and where we stand politically. Um, but we do journalism with, you know, an ethic code that journalists have to respect and everything. But, uh, so yeah, we, uh, we do long-forms mostly, investigations. Uh,

we cover a lot of, um, our main issues are, are the housing crisis, LGBTQ+ issues, environment, international a little bit, when we can. And yeah, just social issues, uh, kind of left economy I'd say [laughs].
[music fades in and out]

Jessica: I just was hoping you could kind of describe what the newsroom looks like here and we're in not a very traditional newsroom space. So where are we?

Gabrielle: [laughs]. No, we're not. Well, first of all, you know, I think we're really, really up to date with the way we're working, even before the, the pandemic, but of course since it. We have a really hybrid way of working. So, uh, we have a few offices in a co-working space, and we do rotations. So, you know, some people come on certain days and others on others. Uh, and it's, it works well, but sometimes it's hard to manage ‘cause some journalists go out into the field and they come back. And, but we manage it. Uh, our video journalist is often there because she has all her editing settings in the office. The editor-in-chief also is there. I'm here a few times a week too, just to, to do things like we're doing now or to record podcasts. And we also have an online collaboration tool that is Slack. So, um, and we have a monthly, uh, team meeting in person. So we're really hybrid, but some, most of the team, they try to be at least two days in together in person, because also it's, it's just easier for some conversations than on Slack. Sometimes I see the start of arguments on Slack and I'm like, ‘Don't do this here. Call, call each other or meet in person.’ But Slack is not the place to have like, a very deep argument because you know in written form sometimes it's not super well interpreted and [laughs]. I don’t want this for the team, but we have, we're very lucky because we get along very well and there's not a lot of, you know, big tensions or conflicts. Uh, so yeah, so the team tries to be two days in together, um, the rest of the time online. But, uh, also every day everyone is saying, we have a specific channel for, it's called ‘work organization.’ So if someone, you know, has worked late the night before, they'll come in later. Uh, if they're sick or they're not feeling well, they're like, ‘okay, I'm taking a few hours off, I'll come back.’ So it's really, there's a very big trust of the working hours. But I think most journalists are working way more than what they're paid for but [laughs]. But we try to accommodate them. So, um, because some journalists brought this issue up, saying ‘we are always working more than the hours we're paid for,’ and we don't really know how to do that. So we decided to have four weekdays. So, so now for a few months, people have, the team has worked from Monday to Thursday, and they have Friday off. And it works really well. Personally, I think that they just do more hours in four days, but you know that's their thing. But at least, they can, they have their time back on Friday, and you know, a three-day weekend is fun. Uh, because we, we pay an okay salary, but it's not comparable to, you know, it would be in the mainstream media, just because we don't have the financial capacity. But we try to give other perks.

Narration: Besides the four-day work week, flexible hours and a hybrid work environment, Pivot’s employees also get a month of vacation time to use throughout the year and access to health insurance. They have seven staff right now: an editor-in-chief, a publisher, a digital strategist and four journalists. These folks are paid $25 an hour, and most work 32 hours a week – which adds up to almost $42,000 a year.

If we zoom out a bit, Statistics Canada says the median wage for a full-time Canadian journalist last year was $30 an hour. So $5 more than Pivot. That adds up to roughly $62,000 a year, or $20,000 more.

To sustain their news outlet – and salaries – Pivot is relying on a mix of grants, philanthropic funding from foundations, and revenue from subscribers. Those subscribers get access to a special section of their website.

Gabrielle: Our main perk is to be part of our media by having access to a kind of digital newsroom where subscribers can suggest topics and there's a voting system between the subscribers. And when one topic gets a lot of votes, a journalist takes it and makes a piece out of it. And we launched it officially in October. We've made maybe half a dozen pieces from the newsroom and it works. We, we see that it has like, repercussions and people share it more and, but that is mostly our main perk. But a lot of people I think are subscribing just because they think what we do is cool and they like it. So it's more like solidarity subscribing, but uh, we, we take it of course [laughs].

Jessica: Yeah, that's great. Yeah, it's almost like putting your money where your mouth is in terms of subscribing to different journalism organizations now is like, kind of a badge of honour, like a badge of solidarity.

Gabrielle: Yes, exactly. Exactly.

Jessica: Kinda, I don't want to compare it to a political party, but it is like, um, 'I believe in what these people are doing and I'm going to give them money.'

Gabrielle: Yes. And we, we see it now that it's, people are starting to understand that there are people who need to be paid behind the news that is made. But for a long time, because at the beginning of internet, all of the outlets went on the web, you know, um, giving their content for free. It's really hard to, uh, to backpedal on that and saying, 'Hey, no, it's not free.' But you know, people are used to have access to news that are free, so it's a very hard, uh, wheel to turn, but I think people are starting to see it more and more.

Jessica: Yeah, especially when CBC's right there and you get all the news you need for free.

Gabrielle: Exactly.

Jessica: Can you describe why Pivot's chosen to do the journalism co-op route versus being a non-profit or doing another kind of model?

Gabrielle: Yes, so there are several reasons. Uh, one of the first ones was that a few years ago, uh, provincial and federal governments put together a program to help media. Um, so we, we take back, um, part of our salary basis. So the more we have, uh, salaried journalists, the more

we have tax credits come back. Um, but for that, we had to be a for-profit organization. So we couldn't have it with Ricochet because we were a non-profit. But with a co-op, you can make profit. It's just that the profit you make is reinjected within the workers of the co-op. So that's why we, we chose that. And also for a democratic way of functioning. So, yes, we have an editor-in-chief. Uh, yes, we have a board. But we take, we're very horizontal in the decision-making. So we have a monthly team meeting when, where we talk about, we're very transparent about, you know, our finances, for example. Uh, even though on a daily basis, journalists don't work on, you know, looking for money la – this is the board and the direction committee's job. But yeah, we try to be as transparent as we can on how it's working. Uh, the editor-in-chief always says that she's more like a co-ordinator of the content then really, you know, but she is making some editorial decisions sometimes. So, co-op is also, uh, we chose that because of the democratic way of working, and also because it's, uh, it's a social economy model, so that gets us access to some funding also that we couldn't have if we were private. But also private have a ton of other options, including loans. But for us, loans are not ideal. We'd prefer to have grants because we don't have debts in that way.

Jessica: Yeah, exactly. And it kind of goes along with, like, the editorial line you're talking about, too, in terms of being more progressive and…

Gabrielle: Totally.

Jessica: … um, left-leaning I guess. Do you worry about that kind of turning some people off, too? Like, you alluded to it earlier, um, in terms of alienating some of what your audience could be?

Gabrielle: Uh, more or less. I guess that's why we never say like, we're leftist la.

Jessica: Okay.

Gabrielle: Like this is, left is not written anywhere on our website, even though, you know, people can make assumptions la but [laughs].

Jessica: Yeah.

Gabrielle: We prefer progressive because it's more inclusive. We think it's less niche. Uh, because of our goal, of course, is to, we're aiming to, to reach out the most, you know, the biggest mass we could. Even people who are not progressive, you know. Um so, but of course, you know, when we started, um, we were reaching out mostly to people who agreed with us already. But the challenge is to go beyond that and to reach out [to] other people. But with Pivot, we see that we are.

Jessica: You're reaching those other folks.

Gabrielle: Yes, we are reaching out, uh, just because we're making, I think, good journalism. And, you know, the progressive and more leftist opinions is more in an opinion section. But in our journalism, uh, of course, we choose progressive, um, topics. But the way we make journalism is like anything else, you know, anywhere else. We have, um, three, four journalists within Pivot. But we also have a lot of freelancers still. And the freelancers, you know, they work in several media. So they're, they're not, you know, they're not banned from other media because they've written with Pivot. So I think, uh, I think, I think, yeah, sometimes I wonder how we're perceived by other media. Because we know they read our stories, and they often pick it up without giving us a credit – but we know it's coming from us [laughs]. So that means that we have a certain credibility. And when I was at Ricochet, I worked really hard on making us credible within the media scene. And I think, I really think we are.

Jessica: Yeah, I think there's a lot of conversations about the credibility too with media now because it's so fragmented, and there's so many folks making their own news outlets and calling themselves journalists. So you really have to make that effort to stand out and be credible, yeah.

Gabrielle: Yes and that's, yeah, it's not necessarily easy to do. But, uh, but I think we're, we're kind of making it.

Jessica: How do you feel about the fragmentation of the industry and all of these journalism outlets popping up?

Gabrielle: It's uh, it's weird because in a way I think it is serving us. You know, because we're, we're kind of having a fresh view on journalism. Uh, we're still making it in a kind of old-fashioned way, but the topics, we, we choose the way we do it. So, of course, we do a written piece, but we have a video journalist, and she's doing, you know, really great. Her videos are working a lot. Uh, we are trying to be on TikTok a lot, so reaching out, you know, a younger audience. Um, so the fragmentation is, for me, it's more about the trust issue. I feel like there's a big gap of, of trust, uh, between the public and the media, um, with reason sometimes. I think, you know, I think media are really bad also at just admitting their mistakes. And I think this is not helping in being transparent. But the media, they have, we have such a big ego, and I don't really understand how it serves us to be, you know, not critical about ourselves, not admitting when we make mistakes and just swiping it under the rug. Um, we've made mistakes at Pivot and we're really, we're not, uh, shy to, to say it, you know, and to make a statement in our piece saying, 'Oh we, you know, we checked the facts, sorry, na, na, na.' But I don't feel like a lot of media are doing it. Um, so fragmentation is also, I think, in a way good because it opens the door to other alternative media, and I've always encouraged media initiatives. I think there's space for everyone. I think some mainstream media are really, they really have a lack of imagination for innovation. Honestly, if I had a third of the budget of CBC, the things I'd do would be, would be amazing and I don't get why they don't, you know, go. It's not that hard. I made it. I made two media and it's working and it's not that hard. And I don't have like a quarter of the budget that, you know, a media like CBC has.

Narration: For the record, CBC received an estimated $1.29-billion from Ottawa in the last fiscal year. About 70 per cent of the public broadcaster's funding comes from the federal government.

Gabrielle: I don't understand why it's so hard to, to make better things, you know, or more modern ones I'd say. But of course, maybe because this is, because we're a co-op, we don't have a lot of boss that we have to pay a hundred, you know, grand a year. Maybe that's why [laughs]. But um, but I think the fragmentation is also really sad because I feel like in the last year I had to justify the way, uh, the way we work as journalists more than doing journalism because I, I feel like people don't trust us. They think we do, you know, fake news, uh, that we're bad, that we're sold to whatever, uh, you know, government or political party. Uh, and this is sad because truly I believe journalism is important and it's an important democratic tool. Um, but I think we have to work on regaining some kind of trust.

[music fade in]

Narration: When it comes to trust in media, the outlook is pretty bleak – although public institutions in general have been affected by dwindling public trust. Statscan reported earlier this year that only about 37 per cent of Canadians have a quote "high level of confidence" unquote in Canadian media. And Reuters didn't find much better. Just 39 per cent of Canadians said they trusted the news overall, in their most recent survey. Since COVID-19 and since the rise in popularity of terms like 'fake news,' journalists have faced much more criticism from the public. Many people are, understandably, weary of corporate interests and commercial journalism, which have dominated in the Western world for a long time. But that may be changing.

Gabrielle: I do feel like our generation is much more open to collaborations than, uh, than the, the mainstream media, who are still in a commercial war, and I've seen it in some pieces. So, *La Presse*, you know, they target *Le Devoir* all the time, and this is because, you know, they're at a commercial war. Radio-Canada and Quebecor, you know, they've been at each other for decades. And I feel like this is so old. It's such an old way to, to work. But I don't think they'll ever step out of this just because, you know, they're established and they're gonna stay that way. But us, I think we have the chance to, to do that and it's also because we're independent. So we don't have, you know, funders who are at war with others and we're funding uniquely one media. So we can put all our resources together and, and make projects and I think it's great.

Narration: While many startups are trying to find another way to exist, it seems like there isn't enough money in Canada to help them all survive. Pivot has a publisher who's dedicated to finding money for them, and it's work Gabrielle has done a lot in the past, too. She says there's lots of opportunities for short-term, project-based funding. But she says there's a major gap that exists when outlets are trying to cover more general operational expenses.

Gabrielle: So there's, there's almost no funding for just, you know, the mission, existing, just…

Jessica: Operations?

Gabrielle: …operations. And I feel this is a big miss out, because we have to survive, and we have to have money just for operations. Not just for, you know, a project that was going to last a year or six months and then it's over, and we have to do it again, and we have to fill out another grant. And it's also, it's a lot of time for us. So I think the, the financing model is not ideal, um. In France, there's an envelope for the media who stays on whatever government is in power. Uh, there are other problems of, you know, what amount of money goes to what media, but at least there's a help, there's a help there that stays and that's, you know, global and that goes directly into the mission of just having media exist. Uh, and I really think we should do that here, uh, just so that it could help us. Because, yeah, the government, politics should – I mean, I know they don't really like us sometimes, but we're still part of the democracy. If there's no media, it's, it's terrible. And we've seen it even with the Meta ban because people don't have as much access as they used to to the media. They have to find…

Narration: Okay, a quick pause here to explain the Meta ban. In 2023, the Canadian government tried to force Meta – the company that owns Facebook and Instagram – to pay news organizations for sharing their content on social media. This was part of the federal Online News Act. Meta basically said 'no way' and blocked the sharing of news in Canada, on all of its platforms. So if you can't find Pivot – or any news outlet – on Facebook or Instagram in Canada, that's why.

Gabrielle: … as to before they were, you know, they were seeing it on their feed. And that's another funding problem right, because I totally agree that Meta should give us money. We've been giving them our content for free for years. Um, and we adapted to, to them. Because media had an ad model for so long on paper, then the ads told us, 'Oh no, we're going toward the web. We're doing on social.' So we went there. Um, and now it's, it's, it's ripping off, uh, you know, it's, it's not there anymore. But um, at the same time, Meta cannot fund, cannot be the only source of funding for the media, but it's part of it. Um, so Google has agreed to, to do something, so we should get…

Narration: Late last year, Google agreed to pay $100-million annually to Canadian news outlets. That funding has yet to be distributed, though, as debate is ongoing over how to decide the payouts for each news organization.

Gabrielle: … but you can't put all your eggs in one basket, uh, as funding from the media, for the media. It's really hard.

Jessica: Yeah, you've got to diversify it, like you said you were doing before.

Gabrielle: And, you know, the other thing is also in Quebec, I feel there's not a, a big, uh, philanthropy, uh, philosophy. So, for example, um, Press Progress is really tied to the Broadbent Institute. So Broadbent has been funding Press Progress for years, and even if he's dead, will continue to be funded by this person who had, you know, a lot of money. Um, but, uh, here we don't really have that. We have Pierre Karl Péladeau, who's at the, you know, the head of Quebecor. But uh, and I feel like it would be good to have some individual who have, you know,

a shit ton of money and would give it to media [laughs]. But I wouldn't want to be tied up to that person in terms of, you know, content and editorial line. But just people who believe in us and want to give us, you know, a few thousand bucks every year, that'd be nice [laughs].

[music fade in]

Jessica: Well, you've alluded to it already, but we've seen the government step in lately to develop some programs, in Quebec and then federally, to help journalists. So, have any of those programs been helping Pivot and how so?

Gabrielle: For sure, yes. So like I was explaining, um, federal and provincial, uh, put together a program, so they, they each pitch in. And it's, it's called a tax credit mostly. So it's kind of um, we, we get back part of our salary mass every year. To apply for this, they had really specific, really hardcore criterias. Uh, and that is also why we created Pivot, we, when we, we made the structure, we made sure to check in all the boxes so that we, we'd check in. Um, and so last year we got accepted for this program, so that's really good. And we also have the accreditation of um, official Canadian, verified Canadian…

Jessica: Registered journalism organization?

Gabrielle: Yeah, registered. Yes. Which not a lot of media have in Quebec, I think we're maybe nine or 10. And this is really great because it means that we can issue, uh, charity, um, receipts. Yes, and so for donations, like people who have a shit ton of money, maybe it would be an incentive knowing that, you know, they can declare that to their, you know, with their tax. Yes. Um, and this also had very specific criteria, so we had to have 50 per cent or more of our content be original journalism. So, opinion doesn't count. Uh, I think video doesn't count. So, you know, we had to make sure, and we still do. We had to have at least two journalists that were working a minimum of 26 hours a week. Um, and we had to be a for-profit, um, and there was one or two other – but we have it. So, financially it's really helping and also credibility, too, right? To have this, uh, this, this tag is really great. We also last year, we got, um, we got accredited to the National Assembly, so that's good also because it means that we can go cover the budgets. So, yeah, it's helping us in several ways.

Narration: One of the programs that Ottawa introduced recently to support journalists is the Local Journalism Initiative. Since 2019, its funding has paid for the salaries of hundreds of journalists in newsrooms across the country, to quote "produce civic journalism for underserved communities" unquote. The LJI seems to be fairly successful in terms of participation rates, but some journalists say its criteria can also be stifling.

Gabrielle: We've had a journalist that been, you know, paid by this, the, the IJL for a few years. Um, and it's great, but at the beginning, the criterias were like, she had to do six pieces a week. And it was really, we were seeing the criterias, and it was really made for, for paper, daily publications, which is so – I mean there's none any more, first of all. Um, and it wasn't really aligned with what we do, so we, we bargained with the program person, you know, and we said,

‘well, can we make less but longer?’ And, you know, it passed, but we had to hustle, and we had to explain. And we, we're seeing that, you know, it's those people in the government, they don't really know how new media work. You know, they have this very old vision of, like, daily paper, publish, nah nah nah. But like, be up to date, you know? Come talk to us, we'll tell you how it works, you know. We're, we're here, we're there [laughs].

Jessica: But do you think that's maybe deliberate on their part a little bit? Because they see these older media, it's more traditional status quo, but also with all these new outlets popping up that are more progressive, or that are more political…

Gabrielle: Maybe.

Jessica: …um, it's less convenient for them to help those folks out.

Gabrielle: Yeah, maybe. Yes, I, I never thought about that. But, uh, yeah, it might be the case. Um, but I'm not, you know, I'm not, you know, saying that, that established media should disappear or that they shouldn't be there, but I, I'm not super empathetic. You know, you have the money, like you, you didn't, you, you chose to stay in your old ways at the time where you should have been innovative and take the digital transition at the core. You didn't, so I don't really have pity for you. Like, you should disappear if you're not, you know, able to, to step up and to be up to date.

[music fade up]

Narration: Gabrielle says she learned a lot from her time in legacy media about how to do journalism. But she says there’s also lessons that those larger media could take from news startups.

Gabrielle: I think legacy media should trust their journalists more, a little bit. But, you know, Radio-Canada is hard because it's such a big machine, there's so many people. Uh, and there's a big, you know, scale of hierarchy and, you know, who's what and personally, I think there's, there's probably too many boss [laughs], and that's why they have to cut down at the, you know, at the bottom. Which I think is too bad because there are journalists there, you know, who have been waiting for decades to, to step up and to do stories, but they're still, you know, at the bottom of the chain and I think it's so sad. But they accept awful conditions because it's a legacy media. And this is another thing, especially as a teacher, because when I was studying journalism, I had the impression that if I didn't make it into CBC, or *La Presse*, or the *Gazette*, or *Le Devoir*, I wouldn't be like a real journalist, you know? Or a succeeding one. As to now, there, I mean, we are hiring ever since Pivot, we've been hiring several times a year, journalists. So, you know, it's not 100-grand, but still, it's, there are other perks, and you have the liberty to do a bit of what you want. Um, and there are several other, you know, new outlets that are hiring. And I think you, it's important to tell the young journalists that this is also an alternative, and also you can be a freelancer.

[music up]

Jessica: Do you think there's one, or a few important things, that you've learned that are kind of crucial to making a startup succeed?

Gabrielle: Pay yourself, first [laughs]. I'd say that.

Jessica: That was easy.

Gabrielle: Yeah. Um, and I mean, even before I was making media, I strongly believe that no media should be a private, uh, a private business. I think, I think media is a *bien commun* and it shouldn't…

Jessica: A public good?

Gabrielle: Yeah, public good, sorry. I think media is a public good and any money that you make out of the media, shouldn't go into the pocket of one or two individuals. It should be reinjected within, you know, the journalists, the workers, the public. Um, and yes, this is, uh, that I would say that to, to someone.

Jessica: Yeah. So if you were to go back to journalism school or back to your youth, would you do this all over again? Would you choose this career?

Gabrielle: Uh, it's a good question. Uh, yeah, I think so. I think so.

Jessica: After some thought, yes.

Gabrielle: Yeah, I mean, it's hard because, you know, I'm not, I'm not rich, but also I, I'm lucky, I guess, because I have cheap housing. Uh, I don't have any children. I don't have a, you know, a mortgage to pay. I don't have a chalet. I don't have a car, you know. And so that helped me do those choices of, you know, not earning a lot of money to do those projects. Um, but sometimes I do wonder if it kept me from doing all of this. But I don't think so. I'm, I'm really proud of Pivot and I just hope that it lasts, and yeah.

Jessica: Yeah. I think a lot about that in terms of this industry, but just in general in life of like, leaving a place better than you found it or leaving an industry better than you found it in this case, like…

Gabrielle: Yes.

Jessica: … what do you hope to leave behind if you leave Pivot or when you leave?

Gabrielle: It's a good question. I sometimes wonder if I die like today or tomorrow, you know, what people would remember me for and [laughs], I'm guessing it's for doing Pivot, I guess, and

Ricochet. Uh, but I do and you know, I'm not taking Pivot for granted. I mean, you know, we founded, um, we launched Ricochet in 2014, so it's been 10 years today, you know this year. And honestly, I wouldn't have made, you know, a bet on us lasting for so long. Um, and I'm not sure we're gonna be there in 10 years either. I hope so, but I'm not taking it for granted, uh, because we could disappear, uh, you know, anytime. But I do hope that even if we do, uh, we'll have left, uh, something different and original into the media scope of Quebec and that people will, will remember Pivot for being an innovative media initiative and project, and that we'll be remembered also for the good journalism that we do. Uh, I really hope that it's gonna, uh, yeah, it's gonna help. And, you know, I've seen it with Ricochet where we didn't have house journalists, but we had a lot of freelancers. And a lot of freelancers, uh, made their kind of portfolio with Ricochet and then found a job at CBC, at Radio-Canada and other legacy media. And I also think that, you know, us being a school of journalism, um, although it was, you know, it was a bit sad that people would leave. But I, I now see that people wanna work at Pivot. We receive a ton of internship, uh, you know, requests every week. So I really feel like we are building something, like a space for new journalists, um, and I hope that it stays that way.

[music up]

Narration: Thank you very much to Gabrielle Brassard-Lecours for the interview – and for just doing so much organizing work and advocacy on behalf of journalists in general. It's extra labour that's mostly volunteer, but helps benefit us all. So thank you for that. You can find all of Pivot's journalism on their website: pivot.quebec.

It's people like Gabrielle, and Lela, and Chris, who are actively working on what the future of journalism is going to look like in Canada. And I'm very grateful that they took the time to sit down with me and chat about it.

I also want to say thank you to my supervisors at Concordia University. We had many, many, many conversations about what this project could look and sound like. And I was never quite sure of what I was going for. But they understood the need for this kind of work examining a changing industry, and they encouraged me every step of the way. So thank you to Dr. Magda Konieczna and Dr. Andrea Hunter. Thanks as well to Dr. Elyse Amend and Professor Kristy Snell, who helped out with the podcast during various stages of development.

Music in this episode – and throughout the series – was by Pump up the Mind, which I found on Pixabay. One of the clips you heard at the beginning came from a livestream of the 2024 engaged journalism conference held at 4th Space in Concordia. I'll share the link in the show notes if you want to hear more from that event.

And that's it! I think? We're done? This whole podcast has been two years in the making as part of my thesis work at Concordia. I wanted to talk to journalists who were making their own news outlets to see, pretty much: How do they make this work? And is it sustainable?

I think, ultimately, the answers to those questions are up to all of us. I think almost everyone can agree that journalism is a public good. But it won't stick around if we don't support it. And in this economy?! Can we afford to? You might ask. Well, can we afford to not?

About 15 per cent of people paid for online news in Canada last year, according to Reuters. And that's pretty much the average for news subscriptions around the world.

It's getting increasingly harder to make a living in this dying industry. But if there is a silver lining, I'd argue it's these journalism startups. These are outlets that are popping up to fill news deserts or to serve underserved communities. These are journalists who see the writing on the wall and refuse to give up. They're continuing to do journalism regardless of the massive obstacles in their way. And I hope they keep on fighting.

Okay, now that's it. I think. Thank you and goodbye!

I'm Jessica Botelho-Urbanski and this has been *Reimagining Journalism: The Montreal Edition*. Thank you very much for listening.

[music fade out]