

BEHIND THE LEADERS:  
HOW MEDIA PRODUCERS BUILD STRONG TEAMS,  
DELIVER OUTSTANDING CONTENT  
AND TRANSFORM THE INDUSTRY'S FUTURE

By

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Bachelor of Arts, Media Production, Toronto Metropolitan University, 2022

A Major Research Project

presented to Toronto Metropolitan University

in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in the program of

Media Production

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2024

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**ABSTRACT**

In an ever-changing media industry, the need for strong leadership remains constant. This study aims to provide leaders in media production fields with the understanding and tools to build people-centred teams, develop creative collaboration and advance technical innovation. Through in-depth interviews, Canadian leaders in non-fiction content producing, directing and business management share insights and stories about their professional leadership experience. With a focus on leadership qualities, approaches and practices, leaders envision the future of the business by identifying key traits and actionable strategies for effective leadership. The findings will contribute to an industry-wide discussion, providing leadership recommendations for media organizations. The study inspires current and future leaders to build a resilient media industry.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank and acknowledge the following people at Toronto Metropolitan University for their guidance, assistance and mentorship during my Master of Arts in Media Production and Master of Business Administration (MA-MBA) pathway program at The Creative School and Ted Rogers School of Management.

- My Supervisor: RTA School of Media Associate Professor Joe Recupero, BAA, MA, PhD Candidate
- My Second Reader: Dr. Neil Rothenberg, BA, MBA, DBA
- Media Production Graduate Program Director: Associate Professor Dr. Laura Nenych, BAA, LLB/JD, LLM, EdD
- RTA School of Media Associate Professor James Nadler, AB, LLB, MBA
- Ted Rogers MBA Professor Dr. Philip Walsh, BSc, MBA, PhD
- My MA-MBA cohort: Jacob Krywetzky, BA, Farheen Raaj, BA, Kyle Damji, BA and Lindsay McLean, BA
- The faculty, staff and students at The Creative School and Ted Rogers School of Management

## DEDICATION

*My deepest gratitude to my parents – Susan and Garth Beer, for their  
unwavering support throughout my education.*

*In memory of my grandparents – Colleen and Charlie Ross, who instilled  
the value of lifelong learning.*

*For my community, mentors, friends, and family — who shaped the leader I am today.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Leadership in the media industry is a dynamic domain that is an art, science, and sport. This study and the *Media Production Leaders video series* find that leaders must exhibit a unique approach to managing the inherent processes of media production. The participants identified that the current landscape, especially in Canada, faces rapid creative and technological changes that shift content distribution, audience viewership, consumer engagement, and media quality. The value of content will continually evolve, and new business models will necessitate how producers adopt creative and entrepreneurial approaches, seize emerging opportunities, and hold consumer attention (Levitan, 2023). This study prioritizes effective leadership first to understand what leaders must do to tackle the ongoing industry evolution and then see why or how that can shape successful outcomes for media organizations. Effective leadership is to act more decisively, navigate complexity more efficiently, and better anticipate and react to business challenges (How to Become a More Effective Leader, n.d.). Comprehending leaders' decision-making process is fundamental to this narrative research as media leaders transcend traditional management practices. Leaders must balance artistic vision with commercial viability, ensuring their teams are motivated and equipped to produce compelling content (Murphy, 2016). This study proves that influential media leaders build strong teams, advance creative collaboration, drive technical innovation and transform the business.

Sixteen leaders in Canada's non-fiction media production industry participated through semi-structured interviews. They challenged current management practices and discovered a new leadership potential. The participants comprise diverse individuals in various leadership roles, from middle managers and senior-level executives to freelancers and entrepreneurs. The makeup

of the participants includes individuals from different age groups, genders, race/ethnic backgrounds, LGBTQ+ communities, and educational levels. The participants mainly specialize in the domains of creative (15) and business (14). Technical leaders (4) are, however, represented less. Participants mainly work in the fields of factual content (15), followed by entertainment (11), news (8), sports (6), unscripted content (4) and DEI (1). Participants were selected based on verifiable professional experience, industry connections and availability. Therefore, this study only partially represents the Canadian media industry, and more diversity is essential to future research. The participants have modelled the way for future studies in media.

## **Background**

Leadership and management styles matter in the media. Producers must exhibit inspirational leadership and skillful management to overcome the pressured expectations of their roles (Matthews, 2015). Becoming a leader in media involves understanding the contextual dimensions of leadership practices, including interpersonal relationships, networks, and shared meanings. Leadership is an intangible relational resource embedded in a group's social dynamics (Dovey et al., 2017). A producer's leadership style must evolve at different points of the production process as organizational goals shift (Matthews, 2015). Shared power in the media industry shapes workplace culture, expertise dynamics, and interactions that influence reputational behaviours and decision-making processes (Murphy, 2016). Strong leadership impacts the survival and success of a media business. Senior managers provide direction and foster identity, while middle managers focus on process execution and personal direction (Benavides Almarza, 2012). Leaders must earn and keep the trust of the people they work with. Executives should aspire to influence their teams and make changes by understanding how things work (and what does not) through one-on-one conversations (Stewart, 2015). Leaders in

media often struggle to prioritize short-term gains over long-term success (Benavides Almarza, 2012). It is essential to study media leadership to examine the general discipline of management and the specificities of media organizations. Media researchers propose that a media manager has seven essential functions: planning, organizing, motivating, controlling, facilitating, communicating, and negotiating (Lowe & Brown, 2016). Successful leaders prioritize creating innovative and agile work environments (Shaw, 2017). Global media firms like Netflix have reinvented workplace culture and redefined self-leadership practices by removing controls and creating an environment of freedom and responsibility (Hastings & Meyer, 2020). Organizations focused on long-term success establish creative atmospheres before concentrating on developing media products. Traditional corporate media companies need help recruiting and retaining talent with unique qualities (Shaw, 2017).

### **About the Researcher**

I am a producer, journalist, and community leader with over 12 years of media production experience. As the Founder and Executive Producer of Cobourg Media, I specialize in multi-camera and single-camera production, live special events and creative strategy. I have also worked for CBC News and CBC Sports on the Beijing 2022 and Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games. I am the President and Chair of Northumberland Rocks Back, a benefit concert for Northumberland United Way and the Lions Club of Cobourg. The events have raised over \$91,000 for organizations, services, and programs. I hold a Bachelor of Arts in Media Production from the RTA School of Media at Toronto Metropolitan University and a Certificate in Entrepreneurship from the Harvard Business School. In 2024, I am completing my Master of Arts in Media Production and Master of Business Administration at Toronto Metropolitan University.

## **Rationale**

The rapidly evolving media production landscape requires a nuanced approach to leadership. This study provides practical insights from industry leaders with five or more years of professional leadership experience. It also includes applicable leadership theory, leader biographies, and academic peer-reviewed studies specific to media. This research is vital to developing creative solutions and innovative business models. It also encourages industry resilience—enabling companies to become more leadership-oriented within a competitive, people-centred marketplace. Despite the critical importance of effective leadership, there is a significant gap in knowledge about media leadership in Canada. The Canadian media sector has unique business structures, rules, and regulations that shape its industry practices, subsidized programs, and cultural effects (Levitan, 2023). The knowledge gap results from a lack of shared industry information or access to leaders with valuable institutional knowledge. This gap in knowledge highlights the need for a dual research approach comparing existing leadership theories with current leadership priorities. The research is imperative to understand what has changed or stayed the same in people’s leadership behaviours. The study will help leaders understand the shortfalls in present leadership initiatives and new ideas for innovating, implementing, and managing media firms. The outcomes will be pivotal in defining media leadership and understanding the evolution of industry leaders in Canada.

## **Research Aim and Objectives**

The study aims to identify key traits and actionable strategies for effective leadership in the media industry. The Major Research Project’s objectives are to contribute to an industry-wide discussion by publicizing the findings and recommending leadership opportunities. The

literature review and findings also evaluate the impact of leadership styles, approaches and theories based on the media industry. The study will equip current and future leaders with the tools and inspiration to lead a robust workplace.

### **Research Questions**

RQ1: What effective leadership strategies must a media production leader prioritize in today's marketplace?

RQ2: How do leadership approaches build strong teams, advance creative collaboration, drive technical innovation and transform the business?

RQ3: What leadership initiatives are media organizations implementing, and why are these programs essential to developing new leaders?

### **Limitations, Omissions and Assumptions**

This study's limitation is that the leadership research only focuses on Canada's nonfiction media industries. This may generalize the effects of leadership on the entire media sector. Additionally, this study is based on qualitative interviews with sixteen participants. The participants' subjective experiences and perceptions of bias may influence the findings and recommendations. Time constraints also limited access to broader representation and diverse leadership perspectives, fields of expertise, genders, ages, races, and underrepresented groups.

Certain aspects of media leadership may have been omitted or not fully explored, such as the direct impact of technological advancements or specific business frameworks in media production, due to the backgrounds of participants and limited interview timeframe. Some specific current practices or emerging trends have been omitted to remain relevant in the future.

The study assumes that the participants represent the nonfiction media industry, including unscripted, factual, news, and sports. It also assumes that the participants' professional insights are credible, accurate, authentic, and relevant. The findings and recommendations will not apply to all subsets of media and may only apply to specific organizational contexts in leadership.

### **Study Structure**

The study has four main themes: building strong teams, advancing creative collaboration, driving technical innovation, and transforming the business. It also examines leadership qualities and perspectives, the outlook on the current industry, and messages on what to prioritize as a current and future leader.



## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

Leadership is a well-known discipline in business, politics, and culture, often examined through a top-down approach (Murphy, 2016). However, leaders in media must be studied from a contextual perspective, considering the nuances and uniqueness of media organizations in the evolving marketplace (Benavides Almarza, 2012). This literature review examines media leadership from a theory, practice, and reflective lens, emphasizing the research themes and the perspectives of leadership practitioners.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The literature review identifies leadership theories based on media contexts. Narrative, grounded theory, and case study research are the primary forms of inquiry, illustrating the exploration of social, cultural, and institutional knowledge of leadership. The qualitative approaches demonstrate the sophistication of research collection and analysis required to examine leadership in the media industry. Shared leadership is a crucial theory for creative teams as a collaborative approach is necessary to distribute influence and decision-making among team members (Murphy & Ensher, 2008). Authentic Leadership has been defined in several ways in positive psychology and positive organizational behaviour fields, characterizing how leaders act on followers, use information, and make ethical decisions. Authentic leaders exhibit positive psychological traits, self-awareness, self-regulation, self-development, and moral character when leading others (Nikolić et al., 2020). Transformational leadership theory is identified to influence subordinates through motivation and inspiration to achieve and exceed organizational expectations (Londoño, 2021). Charismatic leadership theory describes leaders who demonstrate

strategic vision, awareness of their environment, a willingness to take risks, and an understanding of the needs of organizational members as leaders challenge the status quo through unconventional behaviour (Murphy & Ensher, 2008). Narrative identity theory explains why leaders construct their identities and find meaning through storytelling. This theory emphasizes why leader narratives enhance leadership effectiveness, self-awareness, and authenticity (Don-Solomon et al., 2024). The range of leadership theories illustrates the various applications of leadership within the media industry. Furthermore, this literature review and study show that media leaders blend leadership theories with individual practices as goals, organizational meanings, and situations change rapidly.

### **Effective Media Leadership**

Strategic leadership in the media industry may vary depending on the organization, yet it remains crucial in the marketplace. Murphy (2016) identifies strategic leadership as setting a shared purpose that unites organizational members to make decisions based on a company's strategic direction, structure, and culture. Shared power in the media industry drives specialized expertise and macro cultures because collective sanctions and reputational forces reduce the need for strict management practices (Murphy, 2016). Organizational change is vital to strategic leadership, as continuous innovation in production requires leaders to anticipate problems, maintain flexibility and facilitate organizational learning (Murphy, 2016). One challenge for novice showrunners is their initial focus on the creative aspect over the crew's well-being and effectiveness (Murphy, 2016). Leaders must be self-aware to prioritize the crew's needs while balancing creative storytelling with the facilitation of work (Murphy, 2016).

Three commonly accepted leadership styles can be observed in producers when managing a project. Laissez-faire during the concept and proposal phase, democratic during the coordination phase, and autocratic during the execution phase (Matthews, 2015). The laissez-faire style is a hands-off approach in which the leader relies on the team's self-motivation to accomplish tasks (Matthews, 2015). A leader embraces the team's perspectives to arrive at one clear vision and, as a result, develops a timely, creative, and convincing proposal. By influencing a team, a producer mainly uses a laissez-faire style to avoid stifling creative input (Matthews, 2015). The democratic style involves a consultative approach during the coordination phase, allowing the team to make decisions, execute tasks, and coordinate inputs (Matthews, 2015). In production, the autocratic style involves making most decisions unilaterally due to the urgent nature of tasks. Setting up, executing, and striking production is human resource management: "The producer must know the team, what they are capable of, and what they must accomplish" (Matthews, 2015). Leaders must learn conflict resolution strategies because disagreements are inevitable when skilled workers from diverse backgrounds collaborate in scheduled, stressful and profit-driven environments (Matthews, 2015). Negotiation is a significant part of producing, especially when managing live productions (Matthews, 2015). Resolving and negotiating issues between team members and the client largely depends on the producer's priorities (Matthews, 2015). Maintaining reputation, preserving the event's integrity, and safeguarding relationships are crucial to a producer's long-term success (Matthews, 2015). During a negotiation, an interest-based approach over a positional one is more advantageous for all parties involved, despite the influences of strong-willed personalities that may disrupt the process and clash with the collective objectives (Matthews, 2015).

Leaders combine skills that many individuals possess, but only a few activate. Leadership is a learnable trait and, therefore, should not be withheld from individuals in the workplace (Benavides Almarza, 2012). Effective leaders should prioritize quality work over seeking praise and consider present relationships (Benavides Almarza, 2012). Benavides Almarza (2012) identifies five characteristics of an effective leader: having a clear vision, expressing a passion that inspires hope in others, preserving their integrity, setting confidence in their organization, and sharing a tone of curiosity with audacity. Leaders must examine the organization's history and current position to understand its strengths, weaknesses, and aspirations. Constant learning embedded into workplace culture can help achieve future key performance indicators (Benavides Almarza, 2012).

Media managers require a range of specialized leadership competencies, including managing institutional relations, providing intellectual perspectives, and possessing communication skills. They must also excel in creative talent management and be proficient in managing technological innovations. Leaders should also monitor social trends, demonstrate entrepreneurial abilities, and uphold social responsibility while managing ethical situations (Lowe & Brown, 2016). Leaders play different roles when responding to their department, representing the organization to the public and liaising with their parent company (Lowe & Brown, 2016). Lowe and Brown (2016) claim that "Media managers spend at least 80% of their daily work communicating with others" and, therefore, the dynamic challenge is responding to high-need environments.

## **Building Strong Teams**

A compelling purpose defines any good team, but the right people with the necessary attributes take their purpose to higher intensity and dedication (Shaw, 2017). Clear and only essential priorities paired with metrics guide individuals to behave according to the values of their team (Shaw, 2017). Traditional companies face challenges building teams because they cannot attract and retain talented individuals (Shaw, 2017). Leaders must balance focus on results and relationships (Shaw, 2017). Companies risk complacency by accepting mediocre results. Teams can focus on more substantial results and meaningful relationships by setting group strategies, structures, processes, and culture (Shaw, 2017).

Hastings and Meyer (2020) believe that strong teams have dense talent. High performers thrive in environments with talent density; as a result, employees learn more from each other, and individual motivation increases (Hastings & Meyer, 2020). Talented teams often create fast-paced, exciting, fun workplaces (Hastings & Meyer, 2020). Hastings and Meyer (2020) proved that even one adequate performer can set an unproductive tone and lower team performance. Team leaders must have the discipline to build a team of stunning colleagues who are highly talented with diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and skills (Hastings & Meyer, 2020).

Don-Solomon et al. (2024) argue that team leadership development must focus on communication, problem-solving and emotional intelligence. Narrative identity theory highlights that individuals' self-awareness, authenticity, and leadership are shaped by the stories they construct about themselves (Don-Solomon et al., 2024). Leadership development programs must incorporate reflectiveness, such as self-reflection questionnaires and storytelling workshops, to articulate the narrative skills of teams. This can be achieved by creating a safe and supportive

environment for leaders to share their stories individually or in groups (Don-Solomon et al., 2024).

### **Advancing Creative Collaboration**

Creativity must not be an individualized pursuit or exist solely in pockets of businesses. Organizational creativity is essential to competitiveness and grants the leader's team autonomy (Murphy, 2016). "Ultimately, control belongs to the network. I have a voice. I have influence. But control in a collaborative medium like television or film, nobody really has that kind of control" (Murphy, 2016). Competing interests can spring from individual roles like director and producer or project stakeholders like broadcasters and distributors (Murphy, 2016). Conflicting goals to achieve specific creative outcomes inevitably lead to tensions within production teams (Murphy, 2016). Leaders impact creativity's systems, structures, and social aspects by offering resources, managing pressures, and eliminating obstacles (Murphy, 2016). Leaders encourage creative problem-solving by challenging stereotypes, understanding paradoxes, and adopting resiliency skills (Murphy, 2016). Supportive relationships through high-quality leader-member exchanges motivate and inspire creativity (Murphy, 2016).

Creative leadership can be observed as a collective achievement emerging from everyday practices (Dovey et al., 2017). Referencing a leadership-as-practice perspective, Dovey et al. (2017) emphasize that pluralizing leadership is required in environments where work is creative, complex, and interdependent. High-trust and soft power relationships characterize specific creative environments. Temporarily hired freelancers, such as technical crews or casting directors, are managed through normative and relational agreements by self-regulation and respecting professional autonomy, creative freedom, and future work opportunities (Dovey et al.,

2017). Dovey et al. (2017) encouraged wise partnering through commissioning when the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) chose a smaller production company to partner with for the television program entitled *The Code*. Established relationships, demonstrated skills, a distinct artistic approach, and a shared understanding are crucial in finding a production partner (Dovey et al., 2017). Collective visioning is the foundation of any shared creative project and establishes the core vision, purpose, and values among emotionally invested people (Dovey et al., 2017).

*The Leadership Quarterly* studied television directors using charismatic leadership theory (Murphy & Ensher, 2008). Twenty-one television directors were interviewed, analyzing charismatic traits, leader distance, shared leadership, and leadership self-schema (Murphy & Ensher, 2008). The research found that charismatic leadership is influential in the roles of television directors when explaining and conveying their vision, being sensitive to the team's makeup, gaining respect, and promoting crew confidence (Murphy & Ensher, 2008). A leader's influence can result in positive outcomes like group performance, improved follower motivation, organizational performance, satisfaction, or effort (Murphy & Ensher, 2008). Charismatic leadership traits are at the core of supportive leaders, providing high-quality leader-member exchanges. Directors manage fast competing demands with much scrutiny and money at stake. Charismatic leadership is central to fostering a creative mindset and a shared leadership perspective (Murphy & Ensher, 2008).

Creative collaboration is best achieved by diverse stakeholders working with distinct objectives to create value for their customers. Leaders significantly influence others by providing passionate leadership, shepherding, and cheerleading (Amabile & Khaire, 2008). Amabile and Khaire (2008) stress that management should not directly manage creativity but instead manage

for creativity, diverging from traditional management practices. Employee-driven initiatives are successful when the right people are engaged at the right time and to the right degree (Amabile & Khair, 2008). Leaders should align individuals with projects where they can thrive, reinforcing autonomy to set individualized agendas (Amabile & Khair, 2008). Producers often work in ambiguous contexts without clear standards. To address this, producers must create a shared purpose while encouraging individuals to openly contribute their expertise (Amabile & Khair, 2008).

Strong affiliations with supervisors and employees result in enthusiasm for work (Marshoudi et al., 2023). For engagement to thrive, media leaders must activate comfort in the workplace, provide access to essential amenities, and recognize accomplishments (Marshoudi et al., 2023). Marshoudi et al. (2023) claim that studies show a correlation between employee engagement and performance, which drives profitability, client satisfaction, and retention.

In *Creativity Inc.*, Catmull (2014) describes how a fear-based, failure-averse culture stifles innovation and creativity by causing individuals to avoid risks. A positive view of failure can lead individuals to change their perspective of setbacks to learning opportunities (Catmull, 2014). Leaders must openly acknowledge their mistakes and commit to an environment where employees feel safe to make mistakes (Catmull, 2014). Managers typically prioritize tight control or the appearance of being in control (Catmull, 2014). Leaders must invest in middle management so they are prepared for unexpected situations without feeling threatened (Catmull, 2014). A positive and adaptive organizational culture is built from trustworthiness through leadership actions over time (Catmull, 2014).



## **Driving Technical Innovation**

The media industry is fundamentally driven by people, and therefore, leaders must act as change motivators to set the direction of technical innovation (Benavides Almarza, 2012). Skilled leaders are essential for guiding organizations through periods of uncertainty and adapting to new challenges (Benavides Almarza, 2012). Strategic and consistent innovation in products and processes are critical for differentiation and competition among media companies (Benavides Almarza, 2012). Benavides Almarza (2012) stress that organizational motivation must be aligned with innovation, as managers direct technical advancement from the top down, while involvement and understanding should come from all levels. A culture of innovation is necessary, and an established action framework enables the workforce to deploy the requirements across the organization (Benavides Almarza, 2012).

Pixar's success was attributed to integrating technology, art, and business (Catmull, 2014). Catmull (2014) focused on areas where Pixar needed more expertise. The animation company invested in technical innovation internally rather than relying on external parties (Catmull, 2014). Specialized skills influenced their technical output and strong storytelling capabilities (Catmull, 2014). Pixar conducted post-mortems to consolidate and analyze lessons to continue innovating, highlighting the value of reflecting on critical insights and enhancing future endeavours. Teaching others absent in the process supported a long-term commitment to innovation. Catmull (2014) noted that information is rarely passed on to the next team working on a similar project, stalling innovation (Catmull, 2014).

Londoño (2021) underscores the perspective of leadership and innovation. Technology advancements dramatically depend on a leadership style favouring change (Londoño, 2021).

Transformational leadership is coined as the most effective style in motivating followers to achieve organizational goals, especially with media innovation (Londoño, 2021). Leaders must be aware of the impacts of digital transformation, which has significantly shifted consumption patterns (Londoño, 2021).

The impact of changing distribution models and production integration has led to a shift towards smaller scale, independently run productions (Christian, 2019). Legacy broadcasters have traditionally prioritized complex, seamless technical execution by large, specialized crews (Christian, 2019). However, internet streaming has disrupted the need and emphasis on high production value (Christian, 2019). Managing time and space effectively is critical for the production's capacity to produce quality content (Christian, 2019). Technical leadership comprises standardized processes through traditions and rules enacted by unionized crew members and technical organizations (Christian, 2019). More productions lack technical sophistication due to non-unionized environments and limited resources, so producers cannot afford to produce complex projects (Christian, 2019). Christian (2019) highlights the tensions between artistic freedom and adequate remuneration in technical leadership. Technical leaders should set quantifiable benchmarks for their production value and develop strategies for design execution, understanding and implementing technical trends—communicating the needs or expectations of technical crews (Christian, 2019).

### **Transforming the Business**

Acknowledging relational dynamics between profit generation and ethical standards requires innate responsiveness and accountability from various stakeholders (Painter-Morland & Deslandes, 2017). Media businesses have non-standard organizational structures, so leaders are

influenced by varying levels of competing or collaborative forces (Murphy, 2016). Ten film and television producers, directors, and executives were interviewed through grounded theory analysis and found that creativity and innovation are essential to effectively manage the production process and an organization's systems, structures, and social aspects (Murphy, 2016).

In response to media production's complex, uncertain, and interdependent nature, Dovey et al. (2017) identify the polyarchic governance regime characteristic: power is invested in multiple people during production. Broadcasters exert hard power during the commissioning phase, and contracted employees wield soft power through their creative influence (Dovey et al., 2017). Once strictly hierarchical and vertically integrated, television production has transitioned to temporary, flexible organizational forms (Dovey et al., 2017). Broadcasters now use softer power management styles relying on cultural norms, professional expectations, and relational capital to manage complex project arrangements (Dovey et al., 2017). Perspectives of command and control have transitioned to collaborate and coordinate to manage stakeholders (Dovey et al., 2017). Transformational media organizations operate with a neo-bureaucratic approach that prioritizes more flexible and inclusive leadership practices (Dovey et al., 2017). Integrative leadership is modelled by emerging media companies investing in contemporary organizational environments where leaders collaborate on diverse creative work (Dovey et al., 2017).

The media industry in parts of the world, including Germany and Canada, is based on a dual system comprising influential public and private broadcasters competing on consumer demand (Windeler & Sydow, 2001). With the rise of globalization, digitalization, and privatization, content remains king and becomes a crucial resource for economic and cultural success (Windeler & Sydow, 2001). Television content has traditionally been created through projects managed by executives and carried out by relatively independent producers, writers,

directors, and technical crew (Windeler & Sydow, 2001). These flexible, project-oriented arrangements are called project networks—coordinating activities among relatively independent firms (Windeler & Sydow, 2001). Windeler and Sydow (2001) demonstrate how project networks have evolved in the German TV industry by interviewing leaders in four prominent German media organizations. Sociological Neo-Institutionalism Theory and Industrial Organization Theory were applied to the study by proving the importance of organizations and media institutions (Windeler & Sydow, 2001). Windeler and Sydow (2021) use a Structurationist model, distinguishing between industry practices and inter-organizational forms. Industry practices are guided by industry-specific rules and resources set by a wide range of knowledgeable agents (Windeler & Sydow, 2001). Inter-organizational practices are shaped by form-specific rules internal to a workplace environment (Windeler & Sydow, 2001). Smaller media firms create distinct project networks for media groups or influential independents while also pursuing differentiation (Windeler & Sydow, 2001). In-house production was favoured and supported by industry practices in the 1980s (Windeler & Sydow, 2001). Broadcasters remain prominent, especially in news production. Therefore, innovative inter-organizational structures have evolved alongside project networks (Windeler & Sydow, 2001). Project networks support more vital coordination, reduce transaction costs, and enhance adaptive creative capacities. However, the industry's project networks remain institutionally embedded (Windeler & Sydow, 2001). The driving forces behind project networks are strategically placed agents such as producers and directors collaborating on major projects (with significant creative freedom and financial flexibility) (Windeler & Sydow, 2001). Digital media will shape the evolution of project networks and the strategy of producing content (Windeler & Sydow, 2001).

Powers (2006) conducted an exploratory study on leadership's impact on news convergence and job satisfaction as part of Küng's *Journal of Leadership Contexts*. Leadership in news television production can be applied to the path-goal theory, demonstrating the importance of leaders possessing diagnostic skills (Powers, 2006). Powers (2006) emphasizes how environmental characteristics such as task structure, staff size, salary structure, and market size influence leadership and their followers' behaviour and job satisfaction. Where tasks are straightforward, relationship-oriented leadership behaviour tends to be more effective. Meanwhile, task-oriented behaviour is better suited for understanding employees' roles in complex or urgent scenarios (Powers, 2006). Powers (2006) indicates that allowing employees to participate in decision-making significantly impacts their satisfaction. While journalists had varied perspectives on workplace convergence, Powers (2006) emphasizes the importance of management in motivating staff and promoting a collective understanding to achieve convergence-related goals.

Londoño (2021) identifies four dimensions of transformational leadership: idealized influence, characterized by leading with charisma and strong ethics; motivation and inspiration, which cultivate teamwork and trust among followers; individual consideration, promoting dialogue and recognizing individual abilities; and intellectual stimulation, encouraging adaptable problem-solving among followers. Transformational leadership has been linked to improved job satisfaction, workplace well-being and engagement (Londoño, 2021). Organizational culture changes when leaders maintain open communication, provide ongoing feedback, and serve as ethical role models by taking accountability (Londoño, 2021).

Catmull (2014) shares vital lessons that drove the creativity and innovation at Pixar. Its success is believed to be due to its creativity and technical prowess, but much more went into

developing Pixar's culture (Catmull, 2014). When producing an animated film, feedback is engrained in the process, which is inherent in Pixar's *Braintrust* meetings (Catmull, 2014). People reviewing the film must view one another as peers, even if there is authority outside the room (Catmull, 2014). Pixar believes that safety leads to a better exchange of ideas. Leaders are expected to actively listen, lead by example, and hold each other accountable for absorbing and applying constructive feedback (Catmull, 2014).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study employs a narrative inquiry framework to understand personal and professional leadership experiences in the media industry. Narrative inquiry provides insight into the participants' identity, culture, and social context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The industry is often dynamic, and leadership perspectives can vary widely through time, social experiences, and space/geographical locations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This framework was chosen to understand how and why leaders are shaped by the evolution of their careers in Canada's non-fiction media industry. Participants were introduced to the four themes of research, which include building strong teams, advancing creative collaboration, driving technical innovation, and transforming the business. Study participants responded to questions about two themes, which narrowed the scope and responses per their experiences, pre-determined through pre-interview answers. Participants were encouraged to think about the four main themes while responding, provide lessons or advice, and share stories about past experiences that led to developing their leadership skills and abilities. Participants were also asked about effective leadership traits, leadership training and development in media organizations, what must be prioritized from a leadership perspective and their messages to future media leaders.

### **Data Collection**

Sixteen participants were involved through semi-structured interviews in person at Toronto Metropolitan University or via virtual conferencing on Zoom. The interviews ranged from 20-45 minutes, depending on the length of the leaders' responses. Participants were required to have five-plus years of leadership experience in producing, directing, and or business management with specific expertise in non-fiction content, including unscripted, factual, news, and sports content. The interview recordings were transcribed using the Otter.ai platform.

## **Data Analysis**

The study used narrative analysis to classify stories, locate insights, and identify contextual information in participants' oral histories (Creswell, 2006). Thematic analysis highlighted this study's topics, ideas, and patterns (Caulfield, 2019). Deductive coding was used to identify the predetermined research themes, and inductive coding was used to identify new patterns and subthemes that emerged in the transcripts (Bingham, 2023). Memoing served as a log for shared insights and critical perspectives during the data collection phase. The memo journal was reflected during the coding process, and missing codes were identified in the second coding cycle (Bingham, 2023). The transcripts were compared to recognize repetition. Leaders' claims were analyzed based on their professional fields and specialization in creative, business, or technical domains.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Participants were given the study's aim, objectives, procedures, potential risks, and potential benefits. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. All participants granted permission to use their full name, title, place of employment and professional background. Data collected will be used solely for this research study, and participants were given information on how it will be stored and destroyed. All ethical considerations were taken to ensure that all perceived or direct conflicts of interest were acknowledged and addressed to uphold the integrity of the research. Participants were encouraged to keep their responses positive, but critical or constructive responses were accepted to achieve the study's objectives.



## **FINDINGS**

### **Effective Media Leadership**

Participants emphasize transparency, authenticity, and adaptability as key leadership qualities they associate with being an effective media leader. It was identified that change and uncertainty make up the industry's dynamics. Therefore, participants prioritize such qualities by actively listening, collaborating, and understanding what is essential for their company's success. These qualities improve trust in production and build accountability within teams.

Transparency is about being open and honest as a leader while building a sense of calm within a team setting. James Lewis leads CTV News Toronto and CP24 with the responsibility of transforming the future of local newsrooms. As Executive Producer, James exhibits effective leadership by making collaboration a two-way street: "You cannot be afraid to answer questions from team members and to receive feedback from them." Collaboration involves transparency by sharing positive and negative viewer feedback, analytics, and ratings, as team members want to know that their work is having an impact. James is transparent by communicating challenges and uncertainties—ensuring his teams stay focused on what they can control (J. Lewis, personal communication, July 15, 2024). Brent Huckfield leads with transparency as a freelance Technical Producer in various televised environments, from sports to live entertainment. Brent prioritizes active listening and remains nonpartisan in serving the business and its employees. Brent wears both a "crew hat" and a "client hat" to consider the needs of his direct team, the production, and the client (B. Huckfield, personal communication, July 18, 2024). As Head of Morning Programming at Global News, Jordan Schwartz describes his leadership style as "planting seeds" and getting buy-in from his team. He explains how this approach can be

unconventional to those in media: "My style, sometimes can be frustrating to some people, because I like to plant seeds... As opposed to saying what we are going to do" (J. Schwartz, personal communication, July 17, 2024)

Authentic leaders are self-aware and consistent in their actions to build strong integrity within the industry. Karen Sebesta, Former Executive Producer at CBC Sports and current Assistant Professor at Toronto Metropolitan University, identified a leadership philosophy that she learned later in her career: "True leadership, as you climb ladders, or move towards true leadership, is looking at all the people that you work with...What skills do they bring to the table? And how best can you help them succeed?" Karen shared that younger producers must develop their skills and voice while establishing their creative footprint. Those who advance into higher-level leadership roles leverage the crew's strengths to improve the entire project. Karen notes that not everybody makes a good producer: "That is why they stay being great camera operators or graphic designers." She adds that everyone on the production team has unique crafts that contribute to a successful show. Karen says the producer's role is to support and help the crew do their job well (K. Sebesta, personal communication, July 4, 2024). As a Development Executive and College Instructor, Phyllis Newman believes in relationship-building as a strength for effective leadership. Phyllis advises, "It is really critical to have a very extensive database." She says it is an unwritten code within our industry to be generous with our contacts: "We have to help each other" (P. Newman, personal communication, July 8, 2024). Craig Colby has led a range of factual productions in various production settings, from large media organizations to running his own business, colbyvision. Earlier in his career, Craig was producing a sports program when his colleagues shared that he looked panicked. "I thought my job was to be like a hawk and catch any mistake before it went to air," added Craig. He was open to criticism of

himself and became a more confident and self-aware leader (C. Colby, personal communication, July 3, 2024). Mark Johnston believes in leading with a higher purpose. As Owner and Executive Producer for Eelay Media, he focuses on building genuine, authentic connections with key stakeholders like buyers, executives, and talent. Leaders can develop relationships over time to achieve a strong sense of collaboration. "Meaningful connections and authenticity are the two of the strongest tools you can use when it comes to media production," Mark shares (M. Johnston, personal communication, July 19, 2024).

Leaders identified adaptability as embracing openness to change and self-resilience to recover from challenges or setbacks. Keith Capstick manages original content and brand integrations at theScore, transforming the sports media landscape with innovative and compelling sports content. He notes that media is a raw environment that is constantly changing. A traditional corporate environment cannot adapt to the media's fast-paced, dynamic landscape. Keith believes effective leaders should demonstrate ingenuity and adaptability: "Willing to do whatever... Whichever job it takes for your team to be successful" (K. Capstick, personal communication, July 11, 2024). Sarah Jenkins provides an outlook on the future of media leadership as a digital content creator and Producer at CBC Sports. She proves the importance of leaders being willing to "get their hands dirty" and not just delegate tasks. Sarah notes that she is the only editorial producer going to the Paris 2024 Olympics because of her hands-on producing skills: "I can produce a high-quality television style show... But then, at night, they [CBC Sports] can send me to the swimming pool and to Athletics with just my phone. I can go and create in the moment immersive content as well." As teams get smaller, individuals with diverse and multi-faceted skill sets become invaluable (S. Jenkins, personal communication, July 15, 2024). Stephanie Gosine is a Program Manager who advises media organizations to create

meaningful content and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategies. She supports organizations in leading through change by prioritizing people, culture, and learning. Stephanie offers questions that leaders should consider when navigating change effectively: “Are we learning? Are we upskilling? Are we developing our people? Are we listening to our people as to what they need? What would help them do their best work?” Stephanie adds that professionals now operate as one-person teams or achieve more with fewer resources due to budget constraints or smaller team sizes. Effective leaders should acknowledge the changing needs of the industry and its people (S. Gosine, personal communication, July 3, 2024).

### **Building Strong Teams**

The participants believed that leaders should have the right people in the right roles and establish cohesion among team members. Leaders must amplify diversity in their daily practices and actively surround themselves with people who have varied expertise. Leaders can create inclusive opportunities for all team members to display leadership qualities.

Leaders must carefully select the right person for the role expectations, as one bad hire can negatively impact the entire team dynamic. Former Executive Producer Simon Ostler believed that Global News championed team building by considering each team member: “Create an environment where you are hiring the right people to do the roles and bringing in new people who complement the existing team.” He was able to attract top talent away from competitor news organizations. “Through the reputation that we built up within the journalism community of being a good place to work that respected the workers, there were probably four or five examples specifically where I was able to bring in people... Reporters and on-air talent from our competitors to come and work for less money and work at an organization where they just

felt more respected,” Simon proudly shared (S. Ostler, personal communication, July 9, 2024). Freelance Director and Toronto Metropolitan University Instructor Jeff Mather chose to work in television because of teamwork in production: “I have never thought of a show as my show. It is always our show. There are countless people in a production, and you are one of them.” Jeff explains that a team must have cohesion, “I think one of the most important things that I like to do in advance of a live situation is to have as many conversations as possible about situations that can come up in a live environment so that you minimize the surprises... You cannot have people doing their own thing” (J. Mather, personal communication, July 4, 2024). Brent believes it is essential to understand what drives his team members so they can perform at their best potential. He also advances the careers of his team members and motivates them to develop their own career objectives. He expressed that downtimes in production are moments to provide mentorship and help others grow within the industry (B. Huckfield, personal communication, July 18, 2024).

Participants stressed that leaders should ensure that their diversity initiatives are evident in every aspect of their business. Brandon Gonez, CEO and President of Gonez Media Inc. built his team by hiring diverse storytellers in front and behind the camera. Newsrooms across North America have a homogeneous culture that needs to represent more diversity. He noted that most people look the same or have the same income brackets, presenting a particular lens through which stories are told and viewed. Brandon ensured that this team reflected diverse backgrounds and came from various parts of Toronto: “It is those experiences that help us better relate to our audience” (B. Gonez, personal communication, August 14, 2024). Jordan emphasizes that as a leader, he surrounds himself with people who have diverse expertise. He says, “My philosophy is to surround myself with people that know more than I know in different areas.” Jordan especially

listens to his younger colleagues. A recent intern presented social media ideas to the team, and they decided to implement them on *The Morning Show's* Instagram (J. Schwartz, personal communication, July 17, 2024).

Media leaders are encouraged to take a supportive and accountable approach to create inclusive opportunities when addressing their teams. Maria Armstrong, CEO and Executive Producer at Big Coat Media, has over 40 years of experience in the television and film industry. She has executive produced seventeen seasons of the critically acclaimed series *Love It or List It*, which airs in over 150 countries. In her company, she ensures her team members' voices are heard and personal and professional time is respected: "It is essential to let people know that they are cared about and are just not another body in the office." Maria understands what resources team members need and improves what is missing. She asks her team, "What are you not getting from me to be able to do what I need out of this show?" Maria emphasized the importance of team resilience and facing difficult situations that are inherently part of production. She described a situation where a young crew member made a significant mistake that would cost her company thousands of dollars. Instead of firing the individual, Maria took a sensitive approach, helping the crew member understand the consequences and devise a plan to prevent similar mistakes. Maria allowed them to take responsibility for their actions and understand the importance of avoiding such errors (M. Armstrong, personal communication, July 30, 2024). Stephanie believes leaders must create inclusive opportunities. Sharing experiences, successes, and challenges helps leaders become more personable and approachable within their team. She shares this advice, "Build as you rise... Bring more leaders alongside you, mentor and sponsor them, bring them on your initiatives and answer their calls" (S. Gosine, personal communication, July 3, 2024). Sarah offered a shared insight that many leaders highlighted when reflecting on

teamwork: “I think leadership does not come through the title that you have in a corporation. It comes through the daily acts that you do every single day.” Sarah believes all team members can exhibit leadership qualities, from production assistants to executive producers (S. Jenkins, personal communication, July 15, 2024).

### **Advancing Creative Collaboration**

Participants encouraged creative collaboration through alignment, exploration, and trust. Alignment ensures that all team members are unified around the common vision, highlighting that shared creative objectives are achieved through meaningful exploration and trust among team members.

Communicating a creative vision requires leaders to align each project's priorities by emphasizing clarity. When Jodie was Co-Executive Producer for *Entertainment Tonight Canada*, the focus was on direct conversations about how the show would look and how they could cover a story from a different point of view. Jodie set the tone with a strong reputation and relied on repetition to set the show’s priorities. ET Canada was a digital-first show, so recurring check-ins with the team were essential to see how the content performed: “Making sure people had the right understanding of why we were doing it” (J. Davis, personal communication, July 9, 2024). Clear communication, feedback and recognition are essential to establishing a collaborative environment. Craig empowered creative decision-making by ensuring clarity: “Let them make the decision but try to dictate the parameters in which the decisions are being made.” Team members must execute the task using their own skills and creativity without the micromanagement of their leaders. He suggests that when someone accomplishes something commendable, it is essential to acknowledge them. Craig adopted a routine of sending

recognition emails to colleagues and copying their management: “You are shining the spotlight on them in a way that benefits them for the job” (C. Colby, personal communication, July 3, 2024). Jeff said to balance creative control, “You have to check your ego at the door.” He directs Apple TV Major League Soccer and must follow a detailed playbook to align with Apple TV's vision: “In the case of the Apple MLS soccer productions, they are not looking for a new way to do soccer production; they have a way in mind that they want to consistently see across the board from all of the production crews in North America.” Jeff says awareness is vital to understanding the parameters of each production. “Everyone has ideas as to how a creative venture can go.” Therefore, a detailed playbook sets the crew's expectations and the production’s objectives (J. Mather, personal communication, July 4, 2024). Stephanie believes collaboration begins with a strategy, especially when aligning DEI priorities with a company’s mission and vision. “It all comes down to having a strategy in the first place,” she says. When developing an inclusive and creative strategy, there must be a commitment from the top to reflect the team dynamics, workplace culture, daily processes, and product development. Questions must be asked about how this will reflect in real-life business and what the strategy means to everyone involved: “Understand the nuances between different teams and ensure that the strategy reflects these differences” (S. Gosine, personal communication, July 3, 2024).

Exploration fosters an environment where ideas are freely exchanged, and novel solutions are developed. Michael Nunan is a thirty-year media veteran specializing in production and post-production sound. Michael suggests that leaders and their employees should allocate twenty percent of their work time for exploration, experimentation, and developing new ideas. Instead of focusing solely on immediate tasks, employees should engage with unfamiliar content or interactive media. Employees can also take relevant courses to understand the effects of content



creation and its significance in the marketplace. Michael presents what this twenty percent looks like: “Something that is not about supporting today's objective, but it is starting to lay a foundation for cognition. So that we can start having interesting conversations about what is next” (M. Nunan, personal communication, July 3, 2024). Jordan explains that he encourages his colleagues to take ownership of their ideas by proposing concepts and gathering feedback. He helps his team understand their evolution process and invests in people’s ideas: “Believe in what we are doing and champion the people” (J. Schwartz, personal communication, July 17, 2024). Simon supported the contributions of interns coming into Global News. He saw them as a valuable source of fresh perspectives who often understood emerging trends: “I can think of many examples of interns just coming in and raising their hand and feeling so inspired.” He suggests it is an opportunity for mutual learning: “Because it is just as much as there is an opportunity for them to learn from us, there is the opportunity for us as leaders to learn from them.” Simon’s openness to input and willingness to listen demonstrates his leadership approach of valuing diverse perspectives and trusting new hires. He acknowledges that all leaders have unconscious bias. However, it should be in their best interest to evolve their editorial strategy to listen to staff and, ultimately, the audience (S. Ostler, personal communication, July 9, 2024).

Trust is the foundation for collaboration, and leaders must be confident in achieving creative goals. Phyllis suggests strategies for creative collaboration between a producer, broadcaster, or distributor: “You have to be confident in what you are pitching: the talent, the concept, the format—where you feel this would land.” Phyllis adds that picking battles and not always getting your way is vital to a thriving creative negotiation. Firmly advocate for the core elements and trust your instincts. Phyllis also reflects that leaders must be open-minded and understand that no one always has the best ideas. Producers must be willing to consider

suggestions that may lead to improvements: “I think we need each other... It must be a great integration of skill, talent, experience, and wisdom.” Phyllis hopes the industry believes in intergenerational collaboration, citing critical thinking and openness to learning (P. Newman, personal communication, July 8, 2024). Karen identified trust and clear communication in collaboration: “If everyone knows the vision, the plan and the goal, then I can use precision of language and speak quickly and with few words. Everyone knows what they must do, and I am leading the marching band.” While complex plans are in order, Karen acknowledges that flexibility and failures are inevitable in live television. How a leader responds is the key to a successful production: “Ultimately, live television has to be full of confident people who are pretty sure they are not going to make a mistake. Then if they do, they say sorry, and they move on.” Karen has seen varied situations of live TV mishaps, such as losing power in an arena or having an injured horse on camera. In these situations, Karen emphasizes the ability to calmly address her team and make quick decisions based on being honest with the audience (K. Sebesta, personal communication, July 4, 2024).

### **Driving Technical Innovation**

The media industry is fast-paced and constantly innovative. Participants demonstrated the need to inquire about disruptive innovations that spark significant breakthroughs. They also discussed how incremental improvements are necessary to drive successful automation in production. Team well-being must be carefully considered when implementing innovation in organizations.

Leaders must have a transformational perspective to push radical innovation and expand technical boundaries. Michael believes that media organizations must find their “iPhone

moment" to drive innovation: "A moment where they get to unleash onto the world something that nobody has ever seen before." Format, platform, and storytelling techniques fundamentally change how an audience engages with media. Rather than just focusing on incremental improvements, Michael looks beyond to consider the long-term consequential effects of emerging technologies. He also looks to understand how future innovations will be integrated into production teams (M. Nunan, personal communication, July 3, 2024).

Intelligent automation or machine learning-driven tools may fix broadcast automation's current limitations. Michael is concerned that automation systems continually improve efficiency but have a brittle quality effect. He cautions against the goals of automation: "You saved some headcount because you automated the show, but now the show cannot pivot, the show cannot twist and move and flex, and it does not feel human." Broadcast innovation must evolve alongside the human creative process—not constrain it (M. Nunan, personal communication, July 3, 2024). Ross Video's Overdrive and Vizrt's Viz Mosart have driven automation in news production. Brent says this operational innovation has allowed for one-person execution of multiple production roles: "Instead of a specialized job in one specific field, this person is now a generalized area and understands more." The operator requires a range of production expertise and technical knowledge and, as a result, is paid more. Brent recognizes the potential of artificial intelligence in which facial recognition automates camera movements (B. Huckfield, personal communication, July 18, 2024).

Remote capabilities have changed broadcasting workflows significantly. Brent shared that Canadian broadcasters have always had initial resistance to new technologies, but this has changed dramatically since the pandemic. He explains that traditional mobile production infrastructure is less common, particularly with the technologies of SRT and Dante that allow

productions to transmit video and audio signals worldwide, enabling remote control rooms and reducing the need for extensive on-site staff. Local teams can handle the backbone of the operation, enhance efficiency, and reduce cost. Brent discusses the possibility of cloud-based production technologies as the next step to remote production, reducing on-site technical footprints (B. Huckfield, personal communication, July 18, 2024).

The work environment must meet and exceed production safety standards for successful production operations. Brent shares his perspective in leading and supporting his crews: “I am always actively trying to ensure the environment is not just up to code, but we are taking that one step further.” Safety comes with responding to the well-being of a crew. Small gestures like providing food during extended shoot schedules can go a long way in boosting team morale. “There are certain things you can do to make it better,” adds Brent (B. Huckfield, personal communication, July 18, 2024).

### **Transforming the Business**

Business structures are complex and depend on the genre, distribution, type of audience, and production scale. Participants identified several strategies for the rapidly evolving media landscape, including investing in digital media production and refocusing revenue generation on new partnerships and services—embracing the future of audience engagement. Leading the next generation of media professionals requires a commitment to emerging diverse talent and equipping them with the skills necessary to thrive in the business.

Broadcasters, media brands and production companies must invest in digital to stay competitive in a content-driven market. Jodie emphasized the need to give precedence to digital content, treating it at the same level as broadcast production. Jodie said leaders must have the

proper crew representation to achieve this: "In Canada, there is a lack of representation in production and technical areas at decision-making tables. So many of the shows are being produced by other production companies." Jodie believes that if media companies understood that it is crucial to invest in digital content now, there would be more business opportunities (J. Davis, personal communication, July 9, 2024). James emphasizes the need to focus on what separates news outlets. "What is somebody going to get from you that they cannot get anywhere else?" Therefore, a robust digital strategy is essential for multi-platform distribution: "The audience no longer seeks us out anymore. We need to find them on whatever platform they are on, and how can we provide our content in the simplest of fashions to them" (J. Lewis, personal communication, July 15, 2024). Keith discussed the unique workflows of theScore that focus on tracking audience and business success across their owned and external platforms. Keith tracks viewership, watch time, subscriber growth, and cost per view. Leaders should consistently evaluate audience engagement and targets by focusing on each specific platform. Keith said to collaborate with various departments and align priorities about key audience demographics, including the psychographics of individuals who engage on the platform. Once the audience is well-defined, a leader can empower cross-functional teams to ideate and experiment (K. Capstick, personal communication, July 11, 2024).

Producers must embrace new content formats as traditional television commissioning opportunities are becoming limited. Craig pivoted to grow his business and focused on content creation, branding, and marketing. He also hired a business coach to help him identify new opportunities through his existing producing skills and relationships. Craig adds that creatives are self-financing or unpaid development resources for larger production companies. Producers must diversify their projects, while legacy media organizations should define their market

identity to serve their audiences better (C. Colby, personal communication, July 3, 2024). Jordan notes that *The Morning Show* on Global TV has a smaller budget than some larger networks. Despite the financial situation, he views an opportunity: "I see them as advantages because it just makes us in this particular landscape a very efficient company." He leads by calling *The Morning Show's* audience "viewers" rather than "customers," which some media companies choose to do. He sees this language as an essential distinction that aligns with the show's goals of informing and engaging its active audience. Jordan also took a different approach to morning television compared to his competitors. He shifted *The Morning Show's* focus to the rest of Canada beyond Toronto's top stories. This strategy increased ratings and value to Corus' advertisers. Evolving the show's format and content over time can be achieved by incorporating new entertainment segments: "We listen to our audience, and we test these things. If we test them slowly and carefully, and if they work, we keep moving." Jordan explains that when he first arrived at *The Morning Show*, the show engaged in sponsorships and partnerships with no money attached. He believed paid integrations would increase profit and strengthen the content. Since this decision, his team have created more compelling segments and increased business opportunities across their platforms (J. Schwartz, personal communication, July 17, 2024). As the rapid deployment of content grows on social media, Keith explains how it is worthwhile to evaluate the cost benefits of content and whether it corresponds with organization goals: "How much money does it cost per hour of work for those pieces of content? What is your cost per view on each piece of content" (K. Capstick, personal communication, July 11, 2024)?

Canadian broadcasters are working to maintain technical progress within the confines of tightening resources and budgets. Brent advises that the Canadian media sector could benefit from more players to increase local broadcast and streaming advancements (B. Huckfield,

personal communication, July 18, 2024). Michael notes that leaders must embrace failure in a traditional, safe broadcast environment. He adds that projects only get greenlit if they reach certain levels of success: “It has to be okay to fail again... No business can guarantee its long-term viability on the basis of efficiency.” Recent business fragmentation has shifted the role of legacy media and is emerging with innovative players. Michael adds that media leaders must actively recruit and empower younger employees to be part of the long-term planning process and decision-making. Michael notes, “Cognitive diversity, particularly in the realms of innovation, has not been well discussed. We put the same group of people in a room and constantly ask them to innovate the future without necessarily hearing from all the voices that might make that innovation easier or more productive” (M. Nunan, personal communication, July 3, 2024).

Producers have more choice and opportunity to distribute their content globally. Brandon Gonez left legacy media to tell diverse and authentic stories: “We can bring more people into the fold. We can rebuild trust with communities and audiences who have lost trust in storytellers.” Brandon shared that digital media changes how people consume most content on a smaller phone screen. He shares, “As a media producer and someone who wants to deliver content via that medium, you have to ask yourself, if it is that intimate, then are you meeting the viewer where they are?” Authenticity has been key to his success as audiences drive content: “Social listening is the most important thing because audiences are telling us what they want” (B. Gonez, personal communication, August 14, 2024). Streamers, broadcasters, and television manufacturers now offer FAST channels (free ad-supported television). This distribution trend has opened more content creation opportunities. Phyllis sees this as a positive, reacting to audience control, choice, and demand: “Content is King... It is the way in which we are creating and receiving our

content, which is now the shift.” Consumers can pick what they want to watch and how much they want to spend (P. Newman, personal communication, July 8, 2024). Maria believes that content must have global business appeal. She emphasizes that storytelling is universal but must be told well. The key is to produce content with an angle that will resonate internationally—whether it is the topic, visuals, or story. Then, Maria asks: “What kind of product can we make that is going to be internationally viable” (M. Armstrong, personal communication, July 30, 2024)?

Transforming the business requires leaders to support the next generation of media professionals and balance business outcomes with the well-being of its people. Karen championed a career of uplifting women in sports media but faced several challenges, rising into her own leadership positions. In the early part of her career, there were few women in leadership to help her. Karen reflects, "There had never been a woman who was given the full executive producer title at CBC Sports.” Karen was given the title but highlighted the significant gender inequality in sports media: "There were no women helping me at all. And so, it was incredibly competitive.” Karen noted that her male peers competed against her and were only interested in supporting the men (K. Sebesta, personal communication, July 4, 2024). Keith explains the balanced leadership approach at theScore: "The people at the top might have the best understanding of how to make content, whom to put in a position to succeed, and how to do it. They acknowledge when it comes to ideas, the audience is represented in the staff, and they listen more than any leadership I have ever worked with.” Keith adds that hierarchy should be disregarded because the focus has shifted from efficiency to excellence (K. Capstick, personal communication, July 11, 2024).



A strong emphasis on well-being in leadership translates to the future of work and healthier workplace policies. Mark shares advice for producers working intensely at their craft: "Taking care of your own needs first is something that took me a long time to learn." He was more focused on the project and the work, but it wore down his body and spirit over time. He shared that leaders should be more prepared, balanced and inspired to support their teams: "Then, genuine energy comes through in the content you have created" (M. Johnston, personal communication, July 19, 2024).

### **Leadership Training and Development**

Participants identified the current state of leadership training and development within media organizations. Most participants said leaders must be better supported and promoted through meaningful leadership channels. Leadership programs were also noted as too corporate, outdated, or insufficient to meet leaders' needs. More mentorship opportunities and tailored inclusive leadership initiatives are necessary for substantial change in management.

Media organizations promote top performers without providing the necessary support and learning. Leadership training should be prioritized to help people who become elevated into leadership roles but are not necessarily natural leaders. Simon identified a common situation when people are promoted into management positions: "Oftentimes, they [new management] are not even able to do the work anymore firsthand. So, they resent that. And then they start doing the work in addition to leading the team" (S. Ostler, personal communication, July 9, 2024). Craig identified that some organizations reserve leadership training for specific management positions: "I have been in a place where my level of management got leadership training, but the executives did not." Craig is concerned that the media industry does not value leadership: "There

is an absolute crisis of leadership in media that is unaddressed.” He advises that investments must be made in leadership initiatives to retain workers, improve productivity, and promote workplace well-being (C. Colby, personal communication, July 3, 2024). Jeff recalls attending only a handful of leadership sessions or training courses since he started in the 1980s. He reflects, “I think there is still an awful lot of people being put in positions and being left in a position to figure things out as they go... Outside of individual mentorship” (J. Mather, personal communication, July 4, 2024).

Mentorship has provided emerging media professionals guidance, support, and advancement through trusted relationships with experienced leaders. Sarah believes the most effective leadership training is individualized, which is best achieved through one-on-one mentorship. She saw this firsthand throughout her Olympic roles at CBC Sports: “I do not think the mass corporation version of leadership development works in media at all, especially with the skill sets you need” (S. Jenkins, personal communication, July 15, 2024). Mark notes his connection with mentor Barbara Williams, CBC’s Executive Vice-President of English Services: “Almost 30 years later, writing an email to Barb at CBC and getting a response within an hour reminded me... That is an authentic connection” (M. Johnston, personal communication, July 19, 2024). Jeff spoke passionately about teaching and supporting younger crew members in the production environment: “I get a real kick out of seeing people I have had as students join me on a call sheet.” Jeff shared that mentorship has benefited his nearly 40-year career, “You can be a calming influence on somebody, and you can put things in perspective to someone because you have the reps over the many years of involvement” (J. Mather, personal communication, July 4, 2024).

The ownership of media organizations impacts access to inclusive leadership development, often prioritizing upward mobility without providing the necessary resources. Jodie identified that more support is needed to improve leadership effectiveness: “There is a lot of emphasis on moving people up... but not giving them the tools to succeed.” Jodie reflected that Shaw provided a management course where managers from across the country gathered to learn from each other and share how they handled different situations. It is beneficial when managers return from these experiences and communicate company announcements or goals to employees. Leaders must help their team understand how their roles affect the company’s bottom line (J. Davis, personal communication, July 9, 2024). Stephanie shows that leading through change promotes leadership growth. Based on the pandemic and circumstances around racialized and LGBTQ+ communities, there has been more access to leaders and a strategic focus on driving inclusion within organizations. Stephanie notes that the investments are gradual, and momentum is needed: “I have seen a lot of investment into learning... into participating or attending events as either a participant or contributor to a community.” Professional development opportunities like the Directors Program for Women have expanded in Canada. Initiatives in large media organizations have also emerged for underrepresented groups, such as women, LGBTQ+, Black and Indigenous communities. Senior leadership has mentored or sponsored the development of individuals with leadership potential through structured or unstructured programs. There is now greater emphasis on supporting underrepresented creators and opening pathways to ensure they are visible within the industry (S. Gosine, personal communication, July 3, 2024).

## **DISCUSSION**

The study set out to identify key traits and actionable strategies for effective leadership in the media industry. Participants provided their individual and organizational leadership approaches to building strong teams, advancing creative collaboration, driving technical innovation, and transforming the business. The results indicate that transparency, authenticity, and adaptability are qualities of effective leadership. Leaders build trust within their teams and understand the priorities of their company. Alignment, inquiry, and exploration are vital aspects of creative collaboration and technical innovation. The participants stressed the need for further investment in digital media and the development of new business models that increase revenue streams. More effort in developing leadership growth opportunities will help employee retention and drive long-term success for media organizations.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

Effective leaders exhibit transparency, authenticity, and adaptability to achieve their goals. These findings align with the leadership theories of authentic leadership, transformational leadership, and charismatic leadership. Matthews (2015) suggests that a producer's leadership style must evolve throughout the production. The findings underscore the importance of understanding the varied dynamics of the production process and how organizational goals can impact a team.

Participants identified that leaders should ensure they have the right people in appropriate positions to complement a strong team dynamic. This aligns with the literature by Hastings and Meyer (2020), who explain that teams must have dense talent and should avoid recruiting adequate performers. Given the complexities of project networks, further research would be

helpful to understand how much leaders can control the level of talent density in specific production environments. Participants encourage diverse team-building practices to create inclusive growth opportunities. They suggest that media organizations must reflect the audiences they are trying to connect with. Shaw (2017) notes that leaders must balance results and relationships. The findings and literature review require further research on diversity practices and how it impacts team building in media organizations.

The findings suggest that alignment in creative collaboration is necessary to communicate a concept or vision. The literature finds conflicting goals can create tensions within production teams (Murphy, 2016). Therefore, this literature supports the findings stating that high-quality leader-member exchanges are attributed to bridging together creative ideas (Murphy, 2016). The results indicate that trust is necessary for collaborating on creative projects. Dovey et al. (2017) support this finding by suggesting that high-trust and soft power relationships characterize interdependent creative environments.

Participants called for leaders to cultivate an environment that embraces technical innovation and continually inquire about disruptive and incremental advances. The participants acknowledged a need for more transformational leadership in media companies. Motivating followers to embrace the evolution of production and digital distribution is necessary (Londoño-Proañó, 2021). The literature identifies the development of internal innovation and specialized skills rather than always relying on external partners (Catmull, 2014). The participants critiqued current automation systems, its impacts on quality and the people producing the content. The literature describes current production practices with internet streaming. Independent or low-budget content has emerged from a traditional system that increasingly demands higher quality.

However, the literature falls short of explicitly identifying how automation technology affects the quality or value of content production (Christian, 2019).

Participants stressed the need to invest in multi-platform content as audiences continuously have choice and power over what they consume. The literature identified that broadcasters operate in a dual system with public and private organizations with project-oriented network arrangements (Windeler & Sydow, 2001). The participants who addressed this need work in Canada's public and private media organizations. Therefore, regardless of the business structure, all organizations prioritize digital media. However, these organizations must thoroughly examine if they are achieving long-term goals. The outcomes must translate to sustainable growth and a transformative business model for both producers and audiences.

### **Creative Reflection**

This major research project allowed me to improve my leadership skills, expand my network, and reconnect with industry leaders. The ambition was to interview more leaders and have more diversity of genders, ages, underrepresented groups, and backgrounds. However, the most challenging part of this project was gaining access to leaders. Forty individuals were recruited, and sixteen participated. Many did not respond to my requests, while others had to decline for work or personal reasons. Most successful recruitment occurred through professional connections or recommendations. I corresponded with PR representatives during the recruitment period, indicating that media organizations may ask leaders to refrain from contributing to research or be aware of the potential risks.

The *Media Production Leaders* video series exceeded expectations, and I am proud of its high production value, offering viewers an engaging, entertaining, and inspiring educational

experience. I worked with each leader to craft the chapters, including stories, lessons, and messages. I utilized three cameras to capture the featured leaders from distinct perspectives: a medium-wide shot, a close-up, and a motion slider to highlight the set design and convey the metaphor of revealing the behind-the-scenes aspect of leadership. The graphics and lighting embody the brand and its message of effective leadership. The set design represents the environments in which a media leader works. The music was carefully selected to reflect the tone of various leadership theories exhibited by the featured leaders, including authentic, charismatic, and transformational leadership. Ultimately, I hope the series can be a resource for students at my alma mater, the RTA School of Media. I would be proud if it inspires others to explore and develop a passion for media leadership. Producing a high-quality video on a zero-dollar budget was challenging yet rewarding.

## **Future Research**

Leadership will always be important to media organizations; therefore, it is essential to continue researching, learning, and discussing. Although leadership practices and strategies evolve with the media industry, leadership principles and theories remain more consistent. Therefore, this research should remain relevant regardless of content, technology, or audience developments. Leaders must prioritize understanding and learning from as many leadership perspectives as possible. Future research is necessary to understand leadership's effects in other media production areas, like digital media, commercial production, film, or scripted television. Research could also be conducted to understand the influence of top, middle, and lower management on media production. Future research is needed to gain deeper leadership perspectives and wider knowledge-sharing to strengthen the media industry.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study has identified that leadership, especially in media, is an ongoing and evolving domain that must be a priority for organizations that wish first to survive and then revitalize the industry. Kouzes and Posner (2021) describe leadership as a personal journey and a mobilization of others. Individuals can become leaders through a learnable set of behaviours and actions (Kouzes & Posner, 2021). Based on the literature review and findings, three recommendations are proposed for media organizations: enact a leadership development strategy, establish a workplace environment for creativity and innovation, and diversify collaboration across organizations, networks, and industries.

### **Enact a Leadership Development Strategy**

The findings identified that media organizations must do more to prioritize the development of leaders. Due to the complex nature of the industry's project networks, power structures, and shifting business priorities, leaders sink or swim depending on the organization, production, or management level. It is recommended that media organizations enact a leadership development strategy that unites all employees and stakeholders within the business. A leadership development strategy may include components of team or departmental initiatives, active personal learning, self-reflection questionnaires, mentorship connections, specific group coaching programs and or organization-wide community events. A leadership strategy must be designed and catered for each media business or department of a larger organization. Understanding the possible engagement touchpoints is necessary for building a unique and purposeful strategy that is known, detailed, planned and executed by an engaged team. Ultimately, the strategy must match the organization's goals and be actively updated. Media



leadership development must be approached in a balanced, fluid way, viewed individually and as an organization (How to Become a More Effective Leader, n.d.). Mapping a development strategy begins by assessing the organization's culture, values, and purpose. Leaders should understand the people within the organization and their own strengths and weaknesses (How to Become a More Effective Leader, n.d.). Attainable leadership goals must be established, utilizing an agile approach that balances short-term and long-term objectives, such as promoting a specific number of leaders by the year's end (How to Become a More Effective Leader, n.d.).

Leadership practitioners Kouzes and Posner (2021) assert that leaders can develop exemplary leadership behaviour by modelling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart. All five leadership behaviours are beneficial when considering a leadership strategy (Kouzes & Posner, 2021). When Pixar started *Leadership Kickstart*, a five-session training course for current and interested leaders, it was incorporated into daily work and covered topics relevant to the company's objectives (Catmull, 2014). Organizations must allocate more time, provide increased resources, and offer open access to development opportunities to ensure media leaders in Canada become more effective and confident in their abilities.

### **Establish a Workplace Environment for Creativity and Innovation**

This study identified that media leaders often react to current priorities and daily operations. Media managers are constantly tasked with responding to and communicating concerns, feedback, and ideas about specific projects or timelines. Based on the findings and literature review, leaders collaborate, innovate, and create new business opportunities when a workplace environment accepts exploration, risk-taking and organizational change. Establishing

a workplace environment for creativity and innovation looks different depending on an organization's budget and scale. However, there must be a commitment from the top and a prioritization of attitudes and mindsets (Reid, 2022). Media leaders must block intentional work time for creative exploration, technical experimentation, and business model ideation. Participant Michael Nunan identified that twenty percent of the time should be allocated to curiosity (M. Nunan, personal communication, July 3, 2024). To achieve results, leaders must consider the elements of successful transformation (Reid, 2022). The drive to transform a workplace must be cultivated through a sense of urgency to act, provide top-down guidance and support, communicate constantly and transparently, engage through ownership to change the process, celebrate small wins (but do not declare victory), and adapt with relentless pursuit for creative and innovative progress (Reid, 2022).

### **Diversify Collaboration Across Organizations, Networks, and Industries**

Diversity of knowledge, people, and business will be essential to future success in the media industry. The participants of this study represent and lead various media organizations and production contexts. As the findings show, the democratization of media continues to grow because media professionals are attached less to larger media organizations and work as their own media brand: as a content creator, freelance producer or specialized crew member working on short-term contracts. Both leaders of larger organizations and entrepreneurs of start-ups must diversify business models and collaborate further among project networks. The study represented the competitive nature of the media business and the few situations in which organizations can remain independent. Leaders should re-evaluate how they collaborate from a team, department, or organization level. They should also consider industries outside the media that could generate income for their business. Brands have become the broadcasters as content creation disrupts

professional media distribution on social media platforms like YouTube (Francis, 2022). Service production has substantially increased collaboration in the Canadian media landscape. For example, Dome Productions is jointly owned by Bell Media and Rogers Media Inc., servicing a range of media properties produced by their competing brands, TSN and Sportsnet (About Us – Dome Productions, n.d.). Media organizations should look at investing in new collaborations and partnership opportunities beyond typical media businesses. Organizations must diversify sponsorship and advertising opportunities and tap into innovative distribution methods. The findings proved that to remain relevant, leaders must grow their audience, balance innovation with creativity, and stay competitive in developing new business models—consistently producing top-notch content.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this major research project finds that effective leadership is essential in the Canadian non-fiction media production industry. Leaders prioritize transparency, authenticity, and adaptability by aligning creative collaboration practices with innovation exploration. Leaders will transform the business by investing in digital media and diversifying revenue streams while prioritizing the success and well-being of their team. The study was limited to sixteen participants, so more diversity across the many fields of media production is required to gain a deeper understanding of leadership effectiveness.

The study and the *Media Production Leaders* video series are disseminated online on [www.mediaproductionleaders.com](http://www.mediaproductionleaders.com), YouTube, Instagram, and LinkedIn. It may be submitted to future research publications or shared through professional leadership channels. Presenting this project at academic conferences or during the NAB Show in Las Vegas would be a fulfilling accomplishment. There is an opportunity to continue the video series or evolve the project into a podcast, event, or blog so more leaders can share perspectives and debate current issues.

This study contributes meaningful leadership perspectives to the Canadian media industry. Leadership in media organizations should respond rather than react, embrace conversation over criticism, and choose learning above certainty. Leaders have the potential to propose a leadership development strategy, establish an environment for creativity and innovation, and diversify collaboration across organizations, networks, and industries. By pursuing these recommendations and learning from the participants, current and future leaders can build strong teams, deliver outstanding content, and transform the industry's future. It is time for a new leadership scene. *Media Production Leaders* must call action.

## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix A: Interview Guide**

#### **Pre-Interview:**

1. What was your basic job progression, and what is your current role?
2. What are your primary responsibilities in your current job?
3. Is your role creative, technical, or business-focused? Or a combination?
4. What leadership skills do you excel at?

#### **General Leadership:**

1. What leadership qualities do you associate with an effective media leader?
2. Do you think media organizations have invested in leadership training and development? Why do you think this?
3. How have your leadership skills and perspectives benefited your work in media?
4. Can you detail an experience, moment or person in your career that shaped your leadership trajectory?
5. How has your approach to leadership evolved, and what key experiences have driven this change?

#### **Building Strong Teams:**

1. What defines a strong team, and what factors do you consider when building one?
2. What practices do you implement to promote organizational culture during a production?
3. From a leadership perspective, what is the biggest challenge in leading teams through an unpredictable industry?

#### **Advancing Creative Collaboration:**

1. What strategies do you use to communicate your vision and inspire others to make creative decisions?
2. How do you balance creative control while negotiating the needs and wants of different stakeholders?
3. How have you led by understanding the needs and wants of a production team?
4. Several barriers to creativity and innovation still exist. How can leaders overcome risk-averse approaches and foster a more dynamic creative environment?

#### **Driving Technical Innovation:**

1. How can leaders encourage a workforce to embrace technical innovation?
2. What trends are you seeing in production changing workflows and how crews operate?
3. How do you ensure crews have the necessary skills and training to leverage new production technology?

4. What approaches do you take to communicate your production needs to producers and senior leadership amid financial, logistic, and creative constraints?

**Transforming the Business:**

1. What are the most evident challenges in your business right now?
2. What is the potential of emerging platforms to create innovative content?
3. What actions should leaders take to understand their audience?

**Industry Reflections:**

1. With the industry rapidly evolving, what must a leader prioritize to adapt and remain relevant?
2. What is your advice or message to future leaders in the industry?

## **Appendix B: Media Production Leaders Project Links**

**Website:** [www.mediaproductionleaders.com](http://www.mediaproductionleaders.com)

**YouTube Channel:** [www.youtube.com/@MediaProductionLeaders](http://www.youtube.com/@MediaProductionLeaders)

**LinkedIn:** [www.linkedin.com/company/media-production-leaders](http://www.linkedin.com/company/media-production-leaders)

**Instagram:** [www.instagram.com/mediaproductionleaders](http://www.instagram.com/mediaproductionleaders)

### **Transforming the News Business with James Lewis | Media Production Leaders**

[https://youtu.be/o6wrOEDSWFo?si=XyyggDIHTF\\_4VI6l](https://youtu.be/o6wrOEDSWFo?si=XyyggDIHTF_4VI6l)

### **Producing for a Higher Purpose with Mark Johnston | Media Production Leaders**

<https://youtu.be/otXfua4A4Ew?si=s3tnotkEgY-WUEf4>

### **Disrupting the Future of Media with Brandon Gonez | Media Production Leaders**

<https://youtu.be/3uBKYdYXXCY?si=lf6MAG7CeCLzIYxx>

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