

Book Review

NEW MEDIA, OLD NEWS*

The book *New Media, Old News: Journalism and Democracy in the Digital Age*¹ is a result of a research project carried out by a team of nine members², published in the form of a book collection. The authors attempt to investigate the nature of journalism as one of the most urgent challenges that the world faces in defining public interest in the modern age; this is a book about journalism, news and new media in the digital age. It explores how technological, economic and social changes reconfigured journalism and what the implications of these transformations are for democracy.

The study is empirical. By using interviews, ethnography and qualitative content analysis the authors investigate the processes of news making in a representative sample of the news media. The research combines macro-social critique with micro-organizational analysis in order to achieve complex, critical understanding of the nature of news and journalism in the digital age. The main concern in this endeavor, which was subjected to empirical debate, is the way new media, news and journalism contribute to the democratic political practice and defend the public interest.

Although each of the 11 chapters examines different dimensions, all the studies are closely linked. Therefore, this is not a collection of loosely related texts, but a comprehensive review of the state of media organizations, from the late 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century, which the authors provide through a variety of perspectives: historical, economic, regulatory, socio-political, organizational and socio-cultural.

The key issues raised in this book are: *Has the new technology revitalized public realm? Can we even talk about an international public realm under the existing relations of social inequality? Have the technological, social and economic changes reconfigured the job of journalists and creation of news? How can these changes affect the nature of online news and participatory journalism, as well as the increasing role of non-governmental organizations as a news source? Is the "online" news heterogeneous? Are the new sources truly new or are they the same old sources but in a "new package"?*

Since the mid-nineties, a growing number of studies have explored the implications of the Internet for journalism. At some point, all of the studies determined and confirmed three important, paired, central features of the Internet: speed and space, diversity and polycentricism, interactivity and participation - which are said to have created a new

Received December 5, 2016

* Fenton, Natalie, ed. *New Media, Old News: Journalism and Democracy in the Digital Age*. University of London, UK: Goldsmiths, 2010, p. 232.

¹ Natalie Fenton is a Professor in Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London. She is Co-Director of the Goldsmiths Leverhulme Media Research Centre and Co-Director of Goldsmiths Centre for the Study of Global Media and Democracy. She is interested in the following broadly defined areas: the media and democracy; the political economy of media and cultural industries; media power; media and political resistance; new media and radical politics; voluntary sector, civil society and the media.

² Authors: *James Curran, Nick Couldry, Aeron Davis, Des Freedman, Angela Phillips, Joanna Redden, Tamara Witschge and Peter Lee-Wright.*

brand of journalism. The authors of this book start from technical innovations rather than from technological determinism, and by using empirical analysis they try to show that the Internet actually enabled non-hierarchical participation and heterogeneity.

By considering the context of the new media and news, *James Curran* in the first chapter of "Technology Foretold" refers to the history of communication technologies and, through the critique of previous conceptions about the power of technology (and by analyzing the unmet expectations firstly of the cable, and then digital and Interactive Television in the UK), he claims that the predictions of radical changes were frequently annulled or appropriated by the most powerful institutions operating within the dominant technological and socio-political paradigms. Many forecasts of new media visionaries have proven to be mistaken, although they were often taken seriously and promoted the agenda of media deregulation; the author calls them "the dynamics of miscalculations."

A frequently asked question: *How to make online news profitable?* remains a mystery that awaits a solution. Through the investigation of the dynamics of markets, pressures and technological responses in the newspaper industry, *Des Freedman* in the second chapter of "*The Political Economy of the 'New' News Environment*" indicates that the decline in advertising revenue and readership cannot be foreseen exclusively based on economic or technological factors since the news has always been a different type of "goods". Based on the financial data and interviews with a number of financial managers and media strategists, Freedman first identified the scope of the economic problems that traditional news services are faced with, and then discussed some of the strategies that media organizations use to survive in the precarious environment. In particular, the viability and implications of the online business model are estimated, which is still in the experimental stage. However, despite the pessimistic forecasts, the author concludes that the apocalypse has been postponed. The future of the news, as other chapters in this book will show, depends on the imagination and independence, but it primarily depends on the investments in technology, resources and especially in the journalists themselves.

Material terms of contemporary journalism do not provide the optimum space and resources for Independent Journalism, which would be in the public interest. On the contrary, job insecurity and commercial priorities increase the limitations of journalists to work ethically. Through a consideration of opportunities and threats to ethical journalism, especially relying on the neo-Aristotelian ethical tradition, and through a consideration of the evidence of journalists working in newspapers in the UK, the authors *Nick Couldry*, *Des Freedman* and *Angela Phillips*, in the third chapter of "*An Ethical Deficit? Accountability, Norms, and the Material Conditions of Contemporary Journalism*", point out the limited autonomy of "online" journalists, and therefore the danger that the freedom of ethical behavior can be limited. The authors conclude the chapter with a discussion on the consequences of liability and the limitations of the current process of media regulation.

However, it is not only the ethics which is being limited in the digital age, new technologies as well work within the same system limitations by media institutions, which the new media and news still have not been liberated from in practice. *Peter Lee-Wright* writes about this in the fourth chapter of the *Culture Shock: New Media and Organizational Change in the BBC*. There is little evidence of new media who try to enable journalists do "more journalism" or to more effectively engage the public (albeit with exceptions), while new technology and organization lead to a reduction in funding. In this chapter, the author seeks to understand journalism and politics within the culture of new capitalism. On the other hand, through the analysis of journalistic practices in

different contexts, *Angela Phillips* demonstrates how some journalists, because of the need to fill more space, had good access to sources of stories, which as a consequence had them thrown from the informative program into creative cannibalization and not into original journalism.

In order to isolate the important information from the “blizzard”, journalists are forced to create a system of “filtering based on known hierarchies and news value.” Therefore, in the fifth chapter of, *Old Sources: New Bottles*, the author concludes that the internet does not lead to a heterogeneity of sources, but rather to the old (trusted) sources in “the new packages”. *Aeron Davis* in the seventh chapter of *Politics, Journalism and New Media: Virtual Iron Cages in the New Culture of Capitalism* adds that, as news production becomes more expensive, so does the engagement with the public and news sources decrease, and it becomes more symbolic and “virtualized”.

While analysts such as *Nancy Fraser* speak of the existence of an international public realm, which would mainly include the gathering of individual citizens and informal networks through an interconnected global public communication and dialogue, on the other hand, *James Curran and Tamara Witschge* in the sixth chapter of *Liberal Dreams and the Internet* point out that international public realm does not exist, or, at best, it is still in its infancy. Through the analysis of the electronic magazine *Open Democracy*, the authors emphasize the problem of economic inequality, which, when associated with other forms of inequality (in terms of access to education, acquiring knowledge, learning foreign languages and communication skills, and access to the links on global social networks) disables global connectivity in the so-called international public realm. On the other hand, the authors suggest that the prediction of the expansion of new sources, and thus the diversity of information offered “online”, has still not been achieved. The world of the “new” media still has not destabilized the superiority of the dominant news brands, it still has not transformed the values of traditional news, and it has not connected the legion of bloggers and mass audience, which was written about by *Nick Couldry* in the eighth chapter of *New Online News Sources and Writer-Gatherers*. In the ninth chapter of *NGOs, New Media and the Mainstream News: News from Everywhere*, *Natalie Fenton* uses *Couldry’s* opinion and applies it to NGOs, and emphasizes that new media has not made NGOs with limited resources influential, besides enabling them to be more efficient in their communication process and in the exchange of information with each other.

The authors do not dispute that the Internet, as a repository of information and knowledge is unrivaled, but this book also points out that the utopian vision of a “brave new world”, where everyone is connected with everyone, on a nonhierarchical network of equal votes, with open and global access is actually far from being true.

The study this book is based on emphasizes several concerns regarding the nature of the news program. In order to investigate allegations that *Fenton* presents in the introduction: that the Internet could lead to the creation of more news (because of its speed and space), diversified news (because of plurality and polycentrism) and allow for greater public participation in the production of news (due to interaction), in the tenth chapter of *A New News Order? Online News Content Examined*, the authors include content analysis of five different kinds of stories.³ In relation to the coverage of the five pieces of news, the authors

³ Analyzed stories are: 1. *Prince Harry in Afghanistan (February 28– March 5, 2008)*; 2. *The Tibet protest story (March 10– March 20, 2008)*; 3. *Knife crime (March 29– June 4, 2008)*; 4. *The Sichuan earthquake (May 12– 18, 2008)*; 5. *The Northern Rock crisis (September 13–19, 2007)*.

seek to answer the following questions: *Is the content diverse or homogenous (within and across the platform)? To what degree the online news spread the sphere of the news? Does the online news offer a wide range of content? What are the possibilities that networks offer for public participation?* The replies suggest a lot of unused potential. The authors conclude that new media technologies have changed the way of presenting the “traditional” news, but not dramatically; there is plenty of online news, but the content of mainstream media companies is generally the same –they use the same quotes, images and very similar texts. In the analysis, *Joanna Redden and Tamara Witschge* reveal that online news, contrary to expectations, are actually very homogeneous.

In the final, eleventh chapter of *Futures of the News: International Considerations and Further Reflections*, *Rodney Benson* discusses the future of news in relation to the conclusions of the previous chapters, adding that in order to achieve pluralistic democratic goals, an open mind is as important as money. Benson points out that journalists will have to give up their monopoly in public life in order to give more space to other professionals and citizens, adding that there are encouraging signs that at least some of the most respected media organizations are heading in that direction. In the Internet age, the challenge will be to bring together both private and public, and both economic and cultural capital, so that journalism can fully assume its democratic accountability, Benson concludes.

Foregrounding technological innovation, and not technological determinism, the authors empirically seek evidence of transformation of media organizations and the creation of news, referring to practical examples of change, but also to the inadequate utilization of potentials. Through different perspectives and approaches, the authors provide a comprehensive insight into the (r)evolutionary development of the media industry, considering one of the main contemporary topics, featured in the very title of the book: *Have the new media brought new news and what are the implications on journalism and democracy?*

Marta Mitrović