Book Review

Pablo J. Boczkowski & C. W. Anderson (Eds.)
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As editors Pablo Boczkowski and C. W. Anderson explain in the introduction to Remaking the News, this is a collection of essays “about the relationship between technology and journalism.” The “technology” is, of course, digital and the “journalism” is pretty much everything that digital technologies touch—both in production and circulation—across a vast landscape of computer-enabled reportage, from the trivial to the profound. What an ambitious undertaking!

Yet the ambition is not misplaced. There is serious scholarship here, organized across four sections that embrace and interrogate broad categories: theory and methodology; key concepts; occupational culture and practice; and underexamined themes. Furthermore, unlike many collected works, Remaking the News does not suffer from inconsistency, wherein one or two disappointing contributions tend to spoil the effect of the whole. On the contrary, this is an extraordinarily even presentation where the reader can be assured of taking away something of value from each essay on offer. And should the trajectory of a section become somehow muddled there are helpful commentaries by senior scholars to help us resituate thematic purpose.

This is not to infer that Remaking the News is without its limitations. It is a book by journalism scholars compiled largely for journalism scholars, graduate students, and senior undergraduates; its appeal to average readers is almost certain to be limited unless those readers are familiar with large swaths of journalism studies theory. Those looking for insight and direction on how to work the practical levers of digital journalism are likely to be disappointed; this is not a how-to manual (although to be fair, the book never claims that purpose). The text itself could do with a scrub. There are multiple typos sprinkled throughout the work that would have caught the attention of a competent copy-editor. And there is a rather large and surprising oversight in this book about the relationship between technology and journalism that remains obliquely acknowledged but largely untouched, much like the proverbial can of worms.

But more on that later.

Why produce a book such as Remaking the News? Why now? The unsatisfying answer is that it is time. That might sound trite, and on a superficial level it is, but as the editors rightly point out, the last couple of decades have been a “whirlwind” of change for journalists and, in parallel, have produced a fever of activity for journalism scholars. It is time to regroup, to reflect, to consider and reconsider what all of this disruption might mean for journalism, for journalism scholars, for consuming and
producing publics, and for the future of democracy itself. Rodney Benson cuts to the heart of the matter when he calls for “a good explanation in a new descriptivist era” (Chapter Two). It is time, says Benson, to start extracting “better answers” from the accumulation of observations that have dominated published scholarly accounts of recent decades. More succinctly, Benson challenges us to answer (albeit more politely) the old desk editor’s question: “Why does this matter?”

For the most part the contributing authors rise to the challenge. We are, for example, treated to the possibility of “white space” or silence as a positive feature of journalism production “giving audiences the time and space to interpret preexisting speech instead of trying to tell everything to as many people as possible, right now” (Ananny, Chapter Seven). In the realm of ethics, we are prodded to consider that journalists have a “positive obligation” to use detailed audience measurements, enabled by digital technologies, to ensure “how different reporting and stylistic choices affect their ability to inform the public” (Hindman, Chapter Nine). We are challenged to consider the value of failure, to learn from the products of success that have their origins in the inevitability of failure by taking a “deliberate interest in failures, strugglers, and those who resist innovation and change in organizations” (Whal-Jorgensen, Chapter 13). We are reminded that there is a historical dimension to technological innovation as it pertains to journalism; that the advent of legendary television current affairs programs such as See it Now and Panorama did not magically follow from the introduction of the technology, but were the products of journalistic visionaries who understood the new technology as a practice (Prenger and Deuze, Chapter 12). These are random examples, but they are indicative of a central objective of the book: to use scholarship based in fieldwork and theory in support of convincing explanations and useful objectives with respect to current realities in the field.

If there is an overall tone to Remaking the News it is one of general optimism. The possibilities of a better informed, more thoroughly engaged range of publics, enabled by a host of digital platforms to both confirm the journalism on offer and project their own observations, concerns and opinions, permeates the collective sensibility of the essays. There is nothing wrong with this. There is ample fare elsewhere for readers who need to confirm yet again that legacy news media, ink-on-paper publications in particular, are on the rocks. The optimism gets a bit worn, however, with an apparent unwillingness to challenge full on the notion that perhaps there is a serpent in the garden. Rasmus Kleis Nielsen’s essay, “Digital News as Forms of Knowledge” (Chapter Five) is, for example, an elegant and convincing update of Robert E. Park’s notion that news is a form of knowledge sitting somewhere between “acquaintance with” and “knowledge of” phenomena. Nielsen’s acknowledgment that digital forms certainly contribute to the enormous churn of shallow bits of “newsy” distraction is countered by the valid assertion that digital tools—data journalism, the use of search engines to access information archives, interactivity—are now sophisticated enough to offer easily accessed explanatory legitimation when news consumers seek deeper knowledge about events.
However, a deeper epistemological question remains unanswered: How are news consumers to know that what they are consuming is legitimate? If the same digital tools that provide the possibility of explanatory legitimation can be used to subvert election outcomes, or if the unscrupulous use of Twitter can be used to plant false allegations to undermine the integrity of journalism itself (Fake news!), or if large and well-funded propaganda machines posing as credible journalistic alternatives regularly muscle their way in to the social media flow, what are average people of goodwill to make of it all? News consumers cannot be expected to fact-check every bit of “newsy” information that comes their way, and even if such a thing were possible what biases would the search-history algorithms lead them to confirm?

To be fair, Remaking the News was conceived and published prior to confirmed revelations about Russian election meddling and the violation of public trust at the hands of Cambridge Analytica, AggregateIQ and, by association, Facebook. But these are not small matters. It was not impossible to anticipate that some sort of politically motivated, high-stakes breach of the public trust was in the making, nor is it impossible to anticipate that another one is around the corner. At any rate, journalism scholars across the field—ethicists, epistemologists, historians, and technologists—now have a new furrow to plough.

To return to the matter at hand: is Remaking the News worth the read? Unequivocally yes: no book can be all things to everyone and all books have inevitable shortcomings. But this one does a good job of covering the important concerns and considerations that inform and confront journalism today. It is one of those works that creates an enviable space for quiet contemplation about a mediated world that constantly surprises us, knocks us off our concentration with its innovations and their ramifications, both anticipated and unexpected. It is, I believe, a valuable and important contribution, a pivot to the future of scholarship about journalism in the digital age. It is worthy of deep attention.

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