

2 From Heterogeneity to Differentiation: Searching for a Good Explanation in a New Descriptivist Era

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As our digital media systems are becoming ever more complex, our capacity to criticize, map, and explain them risks becoming progressively poorer. No theory is perfect, of course. A theory can be overly simplistic, decontextualized, reductionist, or mechanistic. A lot of energy is expended criticizing this kind of "mainstream," often highly quantitative research, and these are legitimate concerns. But an even greater problem, I would argue, is when complexity is taken as an end in itself, preventing any gesture toward systematic critique, patterned observation, and generalizable explanation. This is precisely what is happening today, with the rise of what I call the "new descriptivism."¹

This "new descriptivist" media research is an eclectic collection of approaches from Bruno Latour's actor-network theory to Manuel Castell's network society to Jeffrey Alexander's cultural pragmatics, among others.² What these diverse approaches have in common is a close eye for empirical detail, all to the good, but an indifference or hostility to questions of normativity, variation, and causality. While the new descriptivists offer unique perspectives and insights, the questions they ignore are at least as if not more important and deserve more rather than less attention by scholars of digital journalism. In particular, I argue that in order to understand our increasingly socially fragmented media systems we need theories of systematic differentiation rather than chaotic heterogeneity.

In the discussion that follows, I discuss legacy as well as "new" media. If in fact, we live today with a "hybrid" media system (Chadwick 2013), it is often the case that few media outlets can be deemed either "old" or "new" but instead are mixes of the two.

Descriptivism, Old and New

How prevalent is description in news media research? In their comprehensive survey of online news research after 2000, Mitchelstein and Boczkowski

(2009) convey the breadth and diversity of a research field in formation. What is striking is the overwhelming descriptive focus of the research: "historical context and market environment, the process of innovation, alterations in journalistic practices, challenges to established professional dynamics, and the role of user-generated content" (562). The review article only mentions the word "explain" twice. In the first reference (569), the authors suggest that Klinenberg's (2005) ethnographic findings of extreme time pressures in online newsrooms may help explain Cassidy's (2007) survey results showing skepticism by online journalists about the "credibility" of online news. In the second reference, Mitchelstein and Boczkowski call for cross-national comparative research that would both compare "practice and professional dynamics" across locales and "explain the sources and patterns of variance" (577).

Updating this analysis and providing a very modest check on its contemporary generalizability, I categorized all the articles about journalism in the first summer 2015 issues of the journals *Journalism*, *Journalism Studies*, *International Journal of Press/Politics*, and *Journal of Communication*. Of a total of 23 articles, 14 were descriptive whereas 9 were explanatory. In order to be coded as explanatory, the article needed to only make at least one explanatory claim (whether in the hypotheses, findings, discussion, or suggestions for future research): a majority of these articles offered minimal explanation.

Now why is the prevalence of descriptive—or weakly explanatory—research a problem? Descriptivism has a long and often prestigious lineage in the humanities and social sciences, exemplified by legendary scholars such as Clifford Geertz (1973), Herbert Gans (1979) and Howard Becker (2008).³

Geertz (1973) provides the catchall justification for any attempt to "understand" rather than "explain," calling for interpretive "thick description" of the process of meaning construction in any given social milieu. Becker (2008) offers concepts for guiding research (cooperation, collective action, conventions, etc.), but his overall approach avoids closure. A "world" of cultural production is an "extendable, open space" and "an ensemble of people (including various support personnel) who do something together" in ways that "are never entirely predictable" (374, 379) (see also Dickinson 2008 for discussion in relation to journalism). Gans, of course, is well known for his distaste for grand theory and deductivism: the important thing is to get into the field and start observing.

Nikki Usher's (2014) excellent in-depth profile of the *New York Times* in the midst of its online transition fits squarely into this inductive mold (she

dedicates the book to Gans). She takes as her starting point the classic newsroom studies of the 1970s and 1980s and asks what has changed. Clearly, a lot has changed, including the shift toward a more laissez-faire economic order as well as the rise of the Internet: she places the emphasis on the latter. Usher identifies the rise of three news values that the digital environment has either intensified (immediacy) or introduced (interactivity, participation) into the newsroom. Usefully clarifying terms that are often used interchangeably, Usher conceptualizes interactivity as the user-computer interaction via various forms of online multimedia and defines participation as reporters' use of social media to engage or collaborate with their audiences (or as is most common, to publicize their stories to their audiences).

One of her key discoveries is that despite a myriad of pressures pushing the *Times* toward digital, the print side still dominates. Just to take one example, the amount of time and energy that goes into deciding what should go on the print "Page One" still far exceeds that of the much more heavily trafficked web home page. This finding of "legacy" inertia echoes findings from other recent US newsroom ethnographies, notably Anderson (2013) and Ryfe (2012), with the notable difference that Usher is looking at a successful newsroom that has made a concerted digital effort. So what she finds is not a wholesale rejection of digital imperatives but rather a complex, still unfolding rise of new hybrid news values shaped by the "clash and combination of external, internal, professional, and normative pressures on journalists" (152) with the direction of the "causal arrow" difficult to discern (21). As is generally the case with a single case ethnography, the "how" effectively becomes the "why."⁴

Now, one could argue that high quality descriptive research of this type is entirely appropriate for our age, and for analyzing digital journalism. In a moment of rapid change and complexity, it makes sense that our first move should be to get the lay of the land. Detailed description *should* come first, before explanation or critique.

Theoretical but antinormative and anti-explanatory new descriptivists build on this long tradition both by widening and deepening description. They widen description by calling attention to dimensions of digital journalism previously underplayed (such as technology, networks, and culture) as well as by refraining from making a priori normative judgments that could bias the analysis. They deepen description by comprehensively documenting the agents and action that go into constructing and maintaining a particular case. I focus here on actor-network theory, network society theory, and cultural pragmatics, but many of my comments also pertain to

journalism research influenced by various poststructuralist currents or classic descriptivists such as Becker and Geertz.⁵

Actor-network theory was the focus of the first three articles of a recent special theory issue of *Digital Journalism* (Domingo, Masip, and Costera Meijer 2015; Lewis and Westlund 2015; Primo and Zago 2015) and has been highlighted in a number of prominent studies of digital news media and political communication (see, e.g., Anderson 2013; Anderson and Kreiss 2013; Braun 2013, 2015; Hemmingway 2008; Nielsen 2012a, 2012b; Plesner 2009; Turner 2005). ANT's specific theoretical vocabulary of actant, network, mediator, intermediary, black box, translation, and the like (Callon 1986; Latour 1991, 2005; Law 2009) all are oriented toward a single purpose: encouraging us to see the world as highly contingent, unstable assemblages of human and non-human elements. These terms, deployed in detailed descriptive (usually) single case study accounts, assure some minimal "commensurability between accounts" (Sayes 2014, 142), though as I discuss below the accumulation of generalizable knowledge does not seem to be on the ANT agenda.

Most notably, ANT adds to sociocultural approaches by calling attention to non-humans, generally technical objects, as exerting agency in shaping outcomes. As Primo and Zago (2015, 39) insist, these material artifacts are not secondary but just as important "as any other actant in the ongoing process of news production, circulation, and consumption." Non-human objects have agency not by exhibiting consciousness but in the minimal sense that they can make "a difference in another entity or in a network" (Sayes 2014, 141). Similar to Becker's insistence on including everyone who helps produce the work of art, actor-network theory takes comprehensiveness as a point of principle: "Let all the actants be recognized, human and non-humans, their agencies, the associations they engage in, the traces they leave" (Primo and Zago, 43). "Widen[ing] the observation field, letting us see what was not before identified" is justified as a way to open up "new and innovative conclusions" (*ibid.*, 49). So, what are these new and innovative conclusions in relation to digital journalism?

Domingo, Masip, and Meijer (2015) summarize some of the notable findings of previous studies: for example, Schmitz, Weiss, and Domingo (2010) studied content management systems and found that practices "prescribed" by the software clashed with journalists' preexisting practices; Hemmingway (2008) showed how personal digital production equipment at a regional BBC office increased flexibility in dealing with deadlines and thus "enabled" journalists to produce more human interest stories. In another oft-cited study, Plesner (2009) finds that emailing, googling, and

phoning have become "seamless" parts of journalistic work practices. Nielsen (2012a) credits ANT for providing the kind of open-ended inquiry needed to notice the important role played by technologists as well as journalists and business managers in shaping the development of online news operations. Anderson and Kreiss (2013) show how sociotechnical objects like political maps and content management systems are "actants" that "hold networks in place" in particular ways, shaping a particular course of action.

There is something missing in almost all of these ANT accounts, in short, a clear answer to the reasonable question: why should we care? On the principle that it is important to know more rather than less about the world in which we live, we can thank ANT for making us more aware of the objects in our midst and the roles they play in greasing and maintaining our social relations. But the promise of many ANT studies to show how some seemingly "mundane" object makes a "highly consequential" difference (Anderson and Kreiss 2013, 366–367) is rarely made good: at the end of the analysis, the object, it turns out, is just as mundane as it seemed at the beginning. The interesting questions lie elsewhere, where ANT (in its pure version) does not go. For instance, in Anderson and Kreiss's study, the significance of the Obama campaigns' use of political maps to facilitate an "instrumental" model of delivering votes only really becomes clear in the road not taken. Why didn't the campaign pursue an alternative "organizing model" oriented toward creating "shared narratives, articulating moral claims, and generating emotional commitments among voters" (374), as advocated by some activists? Answering this question requires a non-ANT explanatory theory that can point to why some actors have more power and influence than others.

Manuel Castells' network society theory (1996, 2009) is similar to ANT in that it calls attention to the "networked" character of digital news media (see also Van Der Haak, Parks, and Castells 2012), although as a theory it has a much less developed account of its epistemology, ontology, and orientation toward normativity. Whereas actor-networks are seen as the building blocks of society and predate digital network technologies, Castells is clearly focused on the changes wrought by the Internet. Network Society theory offers an historical account of how a new kind of social configuration has emerged since the early 1980s, brought about by transformations in the world economy, the growth of new identity-based social movements, and the rise of the Internet, a uniquely decentered system of global communications. NS theory is also highly empirical and descriptive but has a more restrained sense than ANT of what is worth observing. Theorists of

"network journalism" (see also Bardoel and Deuze 2001; Heinrich 2011; Russell 2011) are also much more willing to acknowledge the existence of power relations and often speak of the important role journalism plays in promoting democracy worldwide. They also generally paint an upbeat portrait of news start-ups and their contributions to democracy, even going so far as to deny that there is really a crisis in the quality of contemporary journalism (Van Der Haak, Parks and Castells 2012).

In NS theory, description goes beyond microdetail to encompass categories of digital phenomena, largely built up on an inductive, ad hoc basis. For instance, in a recent article on the future of journalism, Van Der Haak, Parks, and Castells (2012) identify and provide examples of "new tools and practices" of digital journalism that are contributing to the "adequate performance of a democratic society": networked journalism; crowdsourcing and user-generated content; data mining, data analysis, data visualization, and mapping; visual journalism; point-of-view journalism; automated journalism; and global journalism.

This is a useful cataloguing, but as an analysis of the contemporary digital moment it leaves much to be desired. For starters, it could state more clearly what's at stake: What is meant by democracy? Which kind of democracy? Second, going beyond a mere listing, one could search deeper for patterns of variation. Are these new tools and practices randomly distributed across a range of types of media organizations and other actors, or can we observe patterns in the forms of ownership, management, and funding? A casual glance at Van Der Haak et al.'s (2012) listing seems to overrepresent public service broadcasters (BBC, NOS, Arte), state broadcasters (Al Jazeera), government agencies (National Film Board of Canada), elite broadsheet newspapers shielded by formal or informal "trust" ownership forms (*Guardian*, *New York Times*), foundation-supported nonprofits, and small donor-supported media, whereas large privately held or publicly traded commercial companies are underrepresented. Lacking methodological rigor and explanatory curiosity, Van Der Haak et al. attribute their findings to the "open, networked structure of the Internet" (2934), when in fact most of the journalism that most people consume on the Internet has little to do with these exemplary democratic practices and tools (see, e.g., Hindman 2008). By not identifying the common threads uniting the positive examples of media performance they list (as well as the characteristics of those they do not list), NS theory authors obfuscate the actual possibilities and limits of what Williams and Delli Carpini (2011) call "democratically relevant, politically useful" media content on the web. NS theory often discusses what "can" happen with digital media, but

has no way of sorting out when a particular outcome is more or less likely to occur.

Jeffrey Alexander's (2011, 2015) cultural pragmatics represents a third kind of new descriptivist current that makes room for explanation, but only as a broad "value-added" collection of factors: actor, collective representations, means of symbolic production, *mis-en-scène*, and social power.⁶ In *Performance and Power* (2011), Alexander insists that his approach offers both a hermeneutic model of understanding and "a model of causality: each of the [elements in the model] is a necessary but not sufficient cause of every performative act." The incorporation of social power is a departure from his previous "strong program" in cultural sociology, which focused only on cultural elements. Social power allows Alexander to ask such questions as (2011, 32): "Who will be allowed to act in a performance, and with what means? Who will be allowed attendance? What kinds of responses will be permitted? Are there powers that have the authority to interpret performances independently of those that have the authority to produce them?"

And yet, to give one example of the associated research, one comes away from Alexander's beautiful descriptive accounts of Obama's electoral campaigns and policy-making not any closer to knowing why Obama has succeeded or failed: is it really mostly about the success or failure of his performance? Or were there other factors that mattered more—for example, the strength and determination of his opponents, the divisions within the Democratic party, the power of lobbyists and money in politics, the failure of the media to go beyond personalities and strategies to adequately convey to the public the issues and interests at stake? The "value-added" model makes it difficult to sort out these important questions. With cultural pragmatics, we have arrived at the most compelling and useful of the three forms of new descriptivism, as is evident in Jacobs and Townsley's (2011) complex, critically self-aware mapping of US "space of opinion" journalism. And yet cultural pragmatics still falls short of the kind of specific, generalizable explanations needed not only to make sense of but also to intelligently respond to the actual challenges posed by the new media landscape. It seems no accident that none of the new descriptivist theories emphasizes commercial pressures or systematic class inequalities: their ideological elective affinity and effective complicity with neoliberalism (or in the case of network society, anarchist social movements) inevitably produces an uncomfortable silence about progressive policy responses.

In sum, new descriptivist research has its virtues, but each of its strains fall short of providing the complete theoretical toolkit needed to adequately

analyze contemporary digital journalism. Committed to comprehensiveness, its descriptions often lose sight of the (contextual) forest for the trees; highly observant of heterogeneity, it fails to see patterned variation; careful not to impose normative judgments, it refuses to draw obvious connections to real-world concerns and possible solutions. These shortcomings are most centrally those of ANT, but the indifference to systematic explanation also applies to network society theory and cultural pragmatics. My intention in offering these critiques is constructive. By calling attention to the questions ignored or inadequately answered by the new descriptivism, I hope to stimulate a renewed effort to provide adequate responses.

Responding to New Descriptivism's Unanswered Questions

What's at Stake?

Why does this matter? This is the fundamental question that too many new descriptivist accounts fail to answer. How might we come up with better answers?

Domingo, Masip, and Meijer (2015, 62–63) make a case for ANT's "problematization" of normativity. They argue that if researchers do not take firm a priori positions about what journalism "should" be, they will be more open to discovering how journalists (and other stakeholders) define journalistic excellence. This openness in turn can improve the dialogue between scholars and journalists, so that the latter do not feel they are simply being preached at rather than listened to and understood (Blumler and Cushion 2014).

Yet hampered by the injunction to downplay normative questions, ANT-inspired digital media researchers are at risk of reporting trivial findings or of simply relaying the narrow worldviews of the actors they are studying (see also Couldry 2008, cited in Anderson and De Maeyer 2015, 7). In an otherwise well-constructed research article, Braun (2015) falls into this trap. Braun (31) tells the "backstory" of Newsvine, an innovative news site where "citizen journalism published by users would be aggregated and discussed alongside professional news content." Newsvine developed a set of "heterogeneous" tools (social, technical, commercial, and policy—a "code of honor") to create what Braun describes as a "productive and commercially viable" (33) social news site. With the sale of Newsvine to NBC News and the reuse of Newsvine as a general commenting site, the civility that the founders sought to create broke down—threatening to alienate the core users attracted to the site in the first place.

Braun focuses on the organizational implications, noting how the case demonstrates the anarchy that can ensue when a "sociotechnical" system is effectively "stripped of the social" that originally allowed it to "function correctly" (in this case, via the massive entry of new users who were not aware of the original purpose of the website) (36). His ANT methodology helped him show in detail what actually happens when a large corporation swallows up a start-up: "rather than having a homogenizing effect on organizational cultures, vertical integration and corporate partnerships tend to make things more complex, populating news organizations with diverse organizational subcultures, each with their own heterogeneous strategies and assemblages of tools" (41). But what is at stake here? Why should anyone beyond the businesses involved and perhaps business school students using this as a case study care? Braun never directly speaks to the issue, even though it is there in his findings: questions of news quality and democratic civility. Without taking a particular stance, Braun might have *normatively signposted* this issue as one of the reasons why this case study bears repeating and connecting to other studies: How have other websites attempted to create "sociotechnical" assemblages to promote news quality and civility? How were these terms enacted into practices? What general properties of the assemblage stand out as crucial to the outcomes?

The principled relativism of actor-network theory need not be abandoned in favor of an ideologically rigid stance in judging findings. One need only move from an unconcerned relativism to an observant relativism, that is, a comprehensive linking of findings to the array of political and aesthetic positions potentially at stake. This approach moves beyond network society's vague commitment to democracy: it is most notably used by Myra Marx Ferree et al. (2002) when they assess German-US differences in news framing of the abortion issue in relation to four partially competing democratic normative models. I adopt a similar approach in my comparative study of French and US immigration news coverage (Benson 2013). I also do this in my contribution (Benson 2010) to a multimethod, comprehensive study of online news in the United Kingdom spearheaded by Natalie Fenton of Goldsmiths, University of London. I argue that claims of declining journalistic "quality" actually pertain to three distinct democratic models: a watchdog accountability ideal linked to elitist democracy, a diversity ideal linked to participatory democracy, and a civil discourse ideal linked to deliberative democracy. Given that any given news article or outlet is likely to "score" higher on some ideals than others, it makes no sense to make a singular claim about quality. Thus, both criticism and praise

should be placed in the context of clearly specified multiple criteria of quality and the public good (see also Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011).

New descriptivists willing to carry their theories lightly should have no problem engaging with normative questions in their work. Indeed, Anderson's exemplary ANT-influenced network ethnography (2013; see also Howard 2002) of the Philadelphia digital news media ecosystem simply ignores Latour's antinormative injunction. To his credit, Anderson makes clear in the opening pages the "central normative problem" it will tackle (3): "Local journalism's vision of itself—as an institutionally grounded profession that empirically informs (and even perhaps, 'assembles') the public—is a noble vision of tremendous democratic importance. But the unreflexive commitment to a particular and historically contingent version of this self-image now undermines these democratic aspirations." Actor-network theory usefully helps Anderson break away from a narrow institutional analysis that would have only focused on traditional journalistic organizations. But when it comes to making sense of and explaining his findings, he (like many other ANT-inspired researchers) is forced to abandon ANT and look to institutional theories, to be discussed further shortly.

Is There Systematic Variation? Is This Case Like Others?

Every sociotechnical assemblage, we are often reminded, is an uncertain concatenation of noncomparable elements. The Internet, from a network society vantage point, facilitates an incredible diversity of journalistic and activist practices and strategies. Performances, cultural pragmatics insist, may be composed of similar elements but always in different ways, and their likelihood of success is always contingent. These conclusions are presented as a kind of hard-won wisdom, but they are actually untested premises. There is no attempt to search for evidence that might prove otherwise.

In short, new descriptivist accounts tell us a lot about heterogeneity, multiplicity, and diversity, but very little about systematic variation. And the search for variation—linked to systematic comparison—is fundamental to any form of critical knowledge. In the words of philosopher Peter Osborne, "Strictly speaking, the incomparable is the unthinkable" (cited in Steinmetz 2004, 390).

If everything is a supercomplex, unique heterogeneous assemblage, then the only possible conclusion is that no case is like another. And indeed, no case is exactly like another. But some cases are enough alike that we might compare them, note significant similarities and differences, and draw some

useful conclusions. To paraphrase C. Wright Mills, this is the "comparative imagination."

The search for variation (and explanation, as discussed in the next section) requires a move that is often anathema to the new descriptivists, especially those of a poststructuralist bent: categorization. ANT's injunction against *a priori* categories needs to be scrutinized more closely. If *a priori* is understood to mean *ex nihilo*, this is certainly a valid warning. But in actual research practice, categories are built from a combination of theory, previous research, and preliminary inductive research; they are often modified in the course of research. Purely inductive research is a myth. In other words, if we want to conduct good research, we cannot avoid the use of categories. The question is not whether to use them but how.

As Mitchelstein and Boczkowski (2009) acknowledge, international research leads us almost inevitably to comparative questions and the search for variation. Happily, there has been an efflorescence of international news media comparative research in recent years. But there is no reason to limit the investigation of variation to the cross-national level.

For example, two landmark studies in the making (Christin 2014; Pêtre 2015) test the extent to which the use of audience metrics, ostensibly agents of commensuration (transforming different qualities into a common quantitative scale), are actually leading to convergence across newsrooms. Christin (2014) compares a US and French website (the latter overtly modeled on the US site) that both use the Chartbeat audience measurement tool, thus allowing her to test competing hypotheses of convergence (due to overt imitation and use of a common commensuration tool) and difference (due to their location in different national journalistic fields). Effectively deploying a basic categorical distinction between editors and reporters, she finds that different dynamics are at work in the two groups. US editors use metrics to guide story development and placement; French editors often "steadfastly refuse to cut articles and sections that are not successful (according to metrics)" and are supportive of reporters whose stories are deemed substantively important but attract few page clicks (23–24). On the other hand, US reporters are mostly indifferent to metrics, whereas French reporters are obsessed with Chartbeat. Christin attributes these differences to distinct types of organizational power (sovereign in the US, disciplinary in France), manifested in different divisions of labor between editors and reporters, ultimately rooted in the unique historical trajectories of and the relationship to political and market power in the US and French journalistic fields. As one can see, these findings are historically specific and finely attuned to the particularities of the cases (note: the larger study

of which this is a part examines two news organizations in each country) yet speaks to broader theoretical questions and makes generalizable claims that could be tested through further research.

Petre (2015) pursues similar questions through an innovative study that not only compares the variable uses of audience metrics by two news organizations with distinctly different business models (*New York Times* and Gawker) but also analyzes the process of constructing these metrics inside Chartbeat. Among many other important findings, Petre shows how traditional journalistic values, far from being necessarily opposed to audience metrics, are actually consciously incorporated into the technology by metrics corporations concerned with maintaining good relations with their news organization clients.

Christin and Petre build on an encouraging miniwave of comparative news ethnographies, most notably by Ryfe (2012), Anderson (2013), and Kreiss, Meadows, and Remensperger (2015). Kreiss et al. (2015) improve on cultural pragmatics by showing how the production of performance at US political conventions is crucially shaped by the intersecting and competing logics of the journalistic and political fields: as they emphasize, cultural pragmatics "lacks a meso-level appreciation for the different standards of evaluation that field actors and audiences bring to performances within the civil sphere" (580). Other important small-N comparative studies in recent years include Graves (2016), Graves and Konieczna (2015), and Konieczna (2014). Numerous studies call attention to the crucial shaping distinctions of types of ownership, funding, and audiences: publicly traded vs. privately held companies (Cranberg et al. 2001; Dunaway 2008; Edmonds 2004), public service vs. commercial audiovisual (Aalberg and Curran 2011; Benson and Powers 2011), and the influence on content of various types of audiences (Benson 2013; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010). Few studies have yet attempted to systematically trace the differences among various types of nonprofit media or the differences between nonprofit and other forms of media ownership (but see Konieczna 2014).

To be fair, much of the recent international comparative research, summarized and critiqued in Hallin and Mancini (2004) and Esser and Hanitzsch (2012), is based on sizeable samples of nation-states and media organizations. This type of research, as with any large-N study, could be legitimately criticized for inadequately incorporating historical and social context. Even so, because it makes clear its categories of analysis, justification of cases, and hypotheses, it opens itself up to productive critique and refutation in a way that most new descriptivist studies avoid. Variation-attentive ethnographic and in-depth interview based studies can and should operate in

partnership to help improve the quality and use of the categories deployed in such large-scale digital media research.

Scholars influenced by new descriptivist theorists can join the conversation about patterned variation in media, whether at the national, field level, or organizational level, but in order to do so they must break with self-defeating new descriptivist theoretical purity. Fortunately, many are willing to do so.

Jose Van Dijk (2013) actually makes more effective use of Castells' and Latour's concepts than does either of these theorists themselves in order to identify meaningful variation across types of digital media. She compares several social media sites, drawing on Castells to identify institutional variables and Latour to specify technological variables. It is a rather heterodox use of Castells and Latour, but it works. And it provides us with some real insights into how and why Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Wikipedia are different as well as similar.

Anderson (2013) is clearly influenced by ANT when he casts a broad net to incorporate the full range of amateur as well as professional journalistic online organizations at work in the Philadelphia area during the 1990s and 2000s; yet he goes beyond ANT when he pays attention to systematic variations across the professional-amateur divide, across types of funding (notably commercial vs. nonprofit foundation), and audiences. Anderson also finds that efforts to collaborate across the professional-amateur divide largely came to naught. Braun (2015), while not fully drawing out the implications, makes it clear that NBC Online News is not just a *sui generis* heterogeneous assemblage but is also representative of a broader type of contemporary media organization, what David Stark (2011) has termed a "heterarchy." In both of these instances, there is a welcome movement toward generalizability, an effort to specify what their case is a "case of."

Why?

Once one begins asking normatively significant questions and identifying systematic variation, inevitably one stumbles upon the "why" question. What is the explanation? According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2014), an explanation provides an answer to a question about "why" things happen—"where the 'things' in question can be either particular events or something more general, for example regularities or repeatable patterns. ..."

Some might take my call for explanation as a return to Robert Merton's (1949) "middle-range" sociological theories, situated between

grand theorizing and pure description. While the descriptive work I am critiquing is closely allied to some versions of grand theory, there are other versions of grand theory (Bourdieu, Giddens, Raymond Williams) quite amenable to the kind of research I am advocating. What I am calling for is an integration of theory (grand or otherwise) with “good” explanations that respond to the legitimate and socially useful desire to go beyond the particular case, to draw conclusions relevant to other cases, in short, to understand in a way that can guide action in the world. I acknowledge that there are multiple forms of explanation that might achieve such a goal. While I admire certain elements of the strict research design and methods of “explication” specified by Chaffee (1991), my own position is considerably more open minded while emphasizing the basic elements of concision and generalizability.

By concision, I do not mean that the most parsimonious explanation is always the best explanation. Because the social world is an open system with over-determined outcomes, a good explanation has to be contextualized and complex. However, the basic demands of communication suggest that we should strive for concise over long-winded explanations. Moreover, concision goes hand in hand with effective incorporation of variation into the research design and ultimately explanation. In order to identify the factors that matter most, cases need to be selected that are similar in enough ways that the potentially crucial differences can be isolated. This of course is always a “construction,” ignoring the full complexity of each case, but if done carefully can be heuristically useful, indeed indispensable, in order to identify and explain patterned variation.

Generalizability (what Martin 2011, 340, calls “transposability”) is even more fundamental to any explanation that seeks to speak to a class of phenomena. If we are able to show that a given event or process is a “case of something” that reoccurs either spatially or temporally, then we can and should proceed to generalization. Generalizable claims usually refer to causal mechanisms, understood as acting relatively independently or as part of a larger conjuncture.

Some ANT proponents have argued that actor–network theory is not in fact wholly descriptive, that it does offer explanations. It’s just that these explanations are rooted in specific historical conditions unique to each contingent case. The explanation of something lies in recounting all that preceded it; the explanation lies in temporality (Kreiss 2013). As Latour (1991) writes, explicitly addressing this question: “Explanation does not follow from description; it is description taken that much further (120). ... If we display a sociotechnical network ... we have no need to look for any

additional causes. The explanation emerges once the description is saturated” (128).⁸

It is a truism that every particular event is the result of a temporally unique, overdetermined mix of other events. But usually our goal is not to explain in full a particular event (even if on some occasions we might have reason to try), but rather to draw out the common “causal mechanisms” (e.g., field logics, habitus, social struggles for distinction, discourses) that seem to be operative across a class of social phenomena (Steinmetz 2004). Thus, while comparative research most directly advances this project, the accumulating evidence of single case studies can also be harvested for explanatory claims (*ibid.*, 391).

To be clear, I could not agree more with C. W. Anderson’s call (see chapter 4 in this volume) for historicizing news research. However, I do not see an inherent opposition, as he seems to, between structural and historical approaches (Benson 2013a). Structures are historically produced and to be properly understood must be placed in their full historical context. History is a causal factor to the extent that institutions tend to exhibit “path dependent” behavior and resist change (Thelen 1999); such an understanding of history does not preclude the possibility of unforeseen events opening up new paths, but it does suggest that such “critical junctures” will be rare and that they must be strategically exploited to realize their full transformative potential. These conceptions do not seem incompatible with a “genealogical model” *per se*, though they do conflict with a voluntaristic conception of the social world at odds with what most social scientific research has actually shown. The point of paying attention to systematic variation is not to insist on the difficulty (I would never say impossibility) of change, but rather to precisely identify the ways that action can be effectively harnessed to produce particular outcomes.

In cross-national studies, a number of comparative approaches are on offer (Krause 2015). Hallin and Mancini (2004) create their typology of three media system “models” in reference to distinct conjunctures of the four causal mechanisms they identify (market structure, political parallelism, professionalism, and state intervention). These “dimensions” are somewhat less than causal mechanisms in that they do not systematically specify news content outcomes. Yet they meet my definition of a “good” explanation in that both the models and the dimensions are concisely stated and “potentially” generalizable (a lively debate has ensued over precisely this issue; see Hallin and Mancini 2011).

If we look at prominent studies that attempt to explain systematic temporal or spatial variation (or lack of variation)—even those that draw on

actor-network theory or cultural pragmatics (see, e.g., Anderson 2013; Jacobs and Townsley 2011; Kreiss et al. 2015)—almost inevitably their explanations are provided by macro- or meso-level institutional or field theories (Benson 2014; Bourdieu 1993; Cook 1998; Fligstein and McAdam 2012). Why is this? It is because these are theories that capture the central social dynamic of complex large-scale societies: hierarchically organized institutional differentiation.

While sharing an emphasis with critical political economy (McChesney 2014; Pickard 2014) on economic power, these institutional theories better acknowledge the limited pluralism introduced by partially competing organizational fields (politics, science, arts, religion, etc.) and emphasize the variable forms these institutional configurations take across societies and time periods. Political economy often ignores or is baffled by capitalism's apparent "contradictions" in relation to media production: Fox's *The Simpsons*, HBO's *The Wire*, Vice's hard-hitting documentaries. Although Bourdieu paid little attention to large-scale commercial production (Hesmondhalgh 2006), in principle field theory calls attention precisely to those cross-cutting factors that can help explain these apparent paradoxes, such as class stratification of audiences (Clarke 2014) and the varieties of commercial ownership logics operative within contemporary capitalist "social formations" (Williams 1973).

As noted with Christin (2014), cross-national studies revealing variation in news practices or content can find explanations in the balance of power between different societal fields (see also Saguy 2013). In my own research comparing the production of French and US immigration news (Benson 2013b), I draw on field theory to explain differences in news content both *across* nation-states (differences in the position of the journalistic field in relation to competing state-civic and state-market poles of the field of power) and *within* nation-states (differences among news outlets related to their particular location in the field, as indicated by type of funding and size and class composition of audience). Likewise, a comparative study of the degree of "external pluralism" across the online versions of agenda-setting newspapers in Denmark, France, and the United States showed how institutional factors mediated Internet affordances (Powers and Benson 2014).

In single nation case studies, institutional theories have been used to account for variation and the lack of variation, either spatial or temporal. Kreiss et al. (2015) use field theory to offer meso-level explanations of differences across fields, specifically distinct media practices by actors rooted in the political and journalistic fields. Ryfe (2012) argues that field-shaped

"constitutive" rules structuring social interactions both inside the journalistic field and with neighboring fields are the reason for the persistence of traditional notions of journalistic professional authority, despite dramatic technological and economic transformations seemingly undermining such authority. Anderson (2013, 162–163) goes beyond this argument by showing that change (as well as continuity) is institution driven: "Successful networked news ecosystems depend on the presence of strong institutions dedicated to building networks."

So-called "local" interorganizational comparative studies can be seen as complementing rather than competing with macro- or meso-institutional theories. For example, Boczkowski's (2005) comparison of the adoption of digital technologies by three US news organizations during the 1990s emphasizes local contextual factors and local "contingencies" such as the relationship between the online and print newsrooms and conceptions of the audience as inscribed in web interface designs. Microanalyses are also crucial in identifying the precise mechanisms of institutional reproduction and change (Hallett 2010; Kellogg 2009). But whether or not these factors are only locally contingent cannot be determined without reference to a broader sample. For this reason, macro- or meso-level institutional analysis needs to supplement and build on purely local approaches.

Conclusion

Outside of academia, there are diverse efforts afoot to make sense of and evaluate systematic variation in our digital media landscape. For example, journalist Michael Massing (2015a, 2015b), in a multipart series for *The New York Review of Books*, asks the question too few academics are asking: "Digital journalism: How Good Is It?" Massing sizes up the leading US news and opinion websites, including Huffington Post, Talking Points Memo, Slate, Salon, The Drudge Report, Politico, Pro Publica, BuzzFeed, Vox, and a host of smaller "narrowcast" websites on specific issues. He makes clear some of the important ideals at stake—such as the "range of voices" beyond the usual American elite commentators or the degree of "sustained investigations" into "systemic problems" such as "the composition, shape, and reach of the global oligarchy"—and finds that even the most highly praised digital media outlets fall short.

Massing also makes note, though not systematically, of variation in the ownership and financing of the various outlets and the size and composition of their audiences. In short, he signposts normativity, observes variation, and points toward potential explanations. In similar fashion,

numerous useful empirical and policy reports are also being produced by nonacademic or publicly oriented academic research organizations such as Pew, Nieman, Tow, and the Reuters Institute.

To put it bluntly, without theory, Massing and other nonacademic observers are going further and saying more than many academic studies being produced on digital media today. Theory, if it is to have any justification at all, must provide a way to go beyond this kind of intelligent lay analysis. It must not just add to the mass of detail, but make sense of and identify patterns in the detail; it should help us look beyond the obviously complex heterogeneous assemblages and find the less obvious strands of variation.

Stripped of their programmatic stances, new descriptivist theories might be hitched to such a project, but it's clear the heavy lifting will be borne by institutional approaches. We have all the conceptual tools we need—epistemological, methodological, normative—to make sense of this moment in history. We just need to be brave and lucid enough to use them well.

Notes

1. This chapter builds on my remarks as a discussant at the Qualitative Political Communication preconference of the International Communication Association, Seattle, Washington, May 22, 2014, available at <https://qualpolcomm.wordpress.com/2014/06/05/challenging-the-new-descriptivism-rod-bensons-talk-from-qualpolcomm-preconference>. I wish to especially thank Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Daniel Kreiss, Andrew Perrin, Juliette de Maeyer, Fenwick McKelvey, Dan Hirschman, and Elizabeth Popp Berman for insightful online posts that helped me formulate and reformulate my arguments in this chapter. I am also grateful for the additional helpful comments I received from the editors and other participants at the Northwestern conference that led up to this book.

2. Other versions of descriptivism are resurgent and increasingly assertive across the academy, many of them linked to poststructuralist or postcolonial theory. See, for example, the program for "Description Across the Disciplines," a three-day conference (April 23–25, 2015) sponsored by the Heyman Center for the Humanities at Columbia University, <http://heymancenter.org/events/description-across-the-disciplines>.

3. Another type of descriptivism, also not entirely new, is highly quantitative social network or "big data" analysis. With recent advances in computation, these research approaches have gathered steam (see, e.g., Chris Anderson's [2008] essay on the "end of theory.>").

4. Nikki Usher, Twitter communication to author, May 2015.

5. Gans, despite his protestations against theory, actually produces work that speaks well to broader theoretical debates. Both *Deciding What's News* and Usher's Gans-influenced *Making News at the New York Times* provide potentially "good" explanations, as I will define them—systematic, generalizable, normatively signposted claims—even if they aren't always overtly offered in this spirit.

6. This value-added model, though differing in the particulars, is similar in kind to that used by Gamson and Modigliani (1989) in their model for explaining the construction of social problems in the media; see Benson (2004) for a critique.

7. Actor-network theory and field theory actually share a constructionist conception of knowledge. The difference is that field theory is able to break from a debilitating relativism by privileging "scientific" construction, understood not as the accumulation of facts via scientific methods but rather as an "epistemological break" with common sense knowledge facilitated by the semiautonomous reflexivity of the researcher. Obviously, this project of fully reflexive knowledge construction (not limited to the individual researcher, but caught up in the institutional conditions underlying autonomous production of knowledge) is never fully realized, but that does not invalidate the attempt.

8. Another reason why ANT is unable to offer concise explanations is that it keeps the world "flat" and does not privilege one account over another. ANT's self-professed interest in "controversy studies" is thus linked to the relativist "strict constructionist" (Latour and Woolgar 1979) wing of this subfield, oriented toward simply cataloguing the various accounts of the actors involved. "Contextual" constructionists (Best 1989), on the other hand, by necessity privilege some accounts over others in order to arrive at an explanation, for example, economic data provided by government agencies, dominant discourses mapped by the analyst him/herself, etc. Field theory can be seen as a strong version of contextual constructionism, indeed a "structural constructionism" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 239).

Remaking the News

Essays on the Future of Journalism Scholarship in the Digital Age

Pablo J. Boczkowski and C. W. Anderson, Editors

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