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Book Review: Digitizing the News: Innovation in Online Newspapers

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BOOK REVIEWS

Pablo Boczkowski, *Digitizing the News: Innovation in Online Newspapers*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004, xi+243 pp. ISBN 0-2625-2439-2, \$17 (pbk)

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In the fine tradition of Raymond Williams' *Television, Technology and Cultural Form*, Pablo Boczkowski's *Digitizing the News* aims to debunk technological determinism – even while taking technology seriously. Boczkowski is dubious of the revolutionary effects discourse of Howard Rheingold, Manuel Castells and others – not only because these scholars overstate the degree of change (at least in the short-term) but because they gloss over the complex and contradictory 'appropriation of novel technical capabilities by actors situated within established social and material infrastructures' (pp. 8–9). In broader terms, Boczkowski emphasizes three elements crucial to understanding the emergence of online news media, or indeed any new technology: historical context, local contingencies and the ongoing process of user adoption and adaptation.

Drawing on a systematic analysis of newspaper trade publications during the 1980s and 1990s, the first half of the book comprehensively documents the US newspaper industry's halting exploration of non-paper-based means of delivery. Boczkowski reminds us of the relatively long period of experimentation and adaptation that took place – remember videotex, fax papers, or even Prodigy? – before the development of the more user-friendly Mosaic browser in 1993 and the subsequent movement into the web-based world. Yet this is not an account of newspaper companies simply searching and eventually finding the 'best' new delivery technology; instead, they were mostly reactive (imitating initiatives launched in Europe or by other US industries), defensive (exploring new technologies largely to head off challenges from the telephone companies) and pragmatic (far more concerned with short-term threats than long-term opportunities). Newspaper companies only 'settled' on the web when it became clear that this is where the audiences and the advertisers were going.

However, by the late 1990s, growth in online communications had become 'explosive' (p. 52). Boczkowski catalogues three types of adaptations to the online environment: repurposing, recombining and recreating. An online

newspaper repurposed when it merely republished online stories originally produced for print. Recombining could include any in-depth extension of a story, through related links, provision of access to previously published articles (archives), or individual customization based on interests and past usage patterns. Recreating ('re-', because even here, as Boczkowski rightly emphasizes, the 'new' drew on pre-existing 'symbolic, behavioral and material repertoires'; p. 60) entailed any creation of content exclusively for the web, e.g. more frequent news updates, multimedia extensions of stories, or user-authored content in forums or elsewhere. The existence of such a variety of internet strategies, often by the same firm, provides Boczkowski's first rejoinder to those who say that the inherent characteristics of a medium somehow determine its use.

In the second half of his book, Boczkowski continues to demolish the grand claims of technological determinism by paying close attention to local contexts of online production. Specifically, he highlights the relationship between the print and online newsrooms, how users are 'inscribed' in the website interface design (as either active or passive, savvy or beginner) and the character of newsroom practices.

These factors do seem to distinguish clearly the three cases in his innovative multi-site ethnography – online websites produced by the *New York Times* (*CyberTimes*, subsequently the 'Technology' section of the *Times* on the web), the *Houston Chronicle* and New Jersey's Advance Publications. At *CyberTimes*, for example, the print newsroom maintained heavy supervision of the online division, website design was kept simple and largely text-based in line with the editors' belief that most readers were technologically unsavvy and newsroom practices largely imitated those followed on the print side (copy editing, filing stories at the end of the day, etc.). Boczkowski labels this outcome at the *Times* 'mimetic originality', a paradoxical process whereby 'the creation of newness turned into the creative production of sameness' (p. 74).

On the other hand, innovation and experimentation going well beyond conventional notions of journalism were the order of the day at the *Houston Chronicle*'s 'Virtual Voyager'. On one virtual voyage, journalists on a month-long trip down Route 66 placed a camera in their back seat to allow viewers to see, almost in real time, what they were seeing as they barrelled down the road; on another, a businessman and an anthropologist on a three-year boat voyage around the world used a computer and satellite connection to post photos, videos and written diaries, as well as to communicate with viewers via email. Multimedia journalists worked independently from their print colleagues and even began to question their old identities. In the words of one formerly disillusioned print journalist working on *Virtual Voyager*: 'Now when I wake up in the morning, I say to myself, "It's time to conquer!"' (p. 111).

Boczkowski's third case study is of 'Community Connection', a section of *New Jersey Online*, in turn owned by a local newspaper/television company. Community Connection provided a user-friendly space for local non-profit

organizations to communicate with their members and the public at large. In return, *New Jersey Online* hoped to increase public traffic to its regular news pages. Here, perhaps even more than at Virtual Voyager, journalistic identity and practice were transformed, from gatekeeping to 'gateopening' (p. 158). Community Connection also challenged assumptions about the sacrosanct status of the editorial/marketing division within newsrooms: in this case, the opening up of the public space to a range of civil society voices was facilitated precisely through an active coordination of marketing and editorial functions (see pp. 158–9).

Despite his original and insightful use of organizational theories, if Boczkowski's account falters anywhere, it is in the realm of explanation. The local contextual factors that he identifies as explanatory – such as newsroom practices or website architecture – seem more accurately described as mechanisms or categories of action. In keeping with Bruno Latour's injunction, Boczkowski seeks to 'follow the actors' (p. 183) in order to tell the tale of the emergence of online journalism as a distinct set of practices and news genres. However if, as Boczkowski often emphasizes, action is limited by its historical starting point (and all the interests and assumptions embedded in that moment), it also tends to be patterned by the kind of economic and symbolic resources that each agent possesses. In other words, we need to situate the local context in a wider web of relations and structural constraints.

I was struck by Boczkowski's quotation from a *New York Times* employee who said, 'We can't be the avant-garde because we are the garde' (p. 79) (and the book is full of fantastic, telling quotes such as this). What then of the other papers that are part of the 'garde' – the *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*? How are their online sites similar or different to those of the *New York Times*? And how do all of these differ, systematically, from online ventures linked to other kinds of ownership, internal organization, funding, audiences or even national political systems?

At one point, Boczkowski cautiously ventures that it is not 'far-fetched' to imagine that the *Houston Chronicle's* abandonment of the Virtual Voyager project suggests an inverse relationship between 'innovative storytelling' and 'commercial prospects' (p. 137). But this kind of generalizable claim and (implicit normative) critical analysis is relatively rare in *Digitizing the News*. Such questions of the relationships between economic power, cultural innovation and especially ideological diversity, deserve more attention in future research.

On the other hand, the in-depth ethnographic understanding of these cases allows Boczkowski to closely interrogate common explanatory models. For example, one could argue that the 'translation of HTML into print' at *CyberTimes* resulted from deeply-entrenched 'institutional work patterns and symbols of the *Times*, known for its organizationally conservative dynamics' (pp. 102–3). However, as Boczkowski continues:

[T]his could not account for the fact that things started very differently. Why not repurposing from the very beginning . . .? More important, this type of

explanation would miss the fact that, in general, actors did not mindlessly reproduce a set of taken-for-granted procedures because 'that was the way things were.' On the contrary, many times they reflected on the what, how and why of their practices, mindfully enacting certain options and discarding competing alternatives.

Finally, what about Boczkowski's ambition to take technology seriously while rejecting technological determinism? Responding to Michael Schudson's challenge to offer evidence of how new technology 'affects the news' (p. 80), at one level, his answer is: 'Not much'. Citizen forums, offering the potential for greater journalist and audience interaction, have failed largely in that ambition due to lack of interest among both parties, according to the evidence from interviews and content analysis of forums that Boczkowski provides (pp. 93–5). Similarly, despite the potentially 'limitless newshole' of the internet, *CyberTimes* articles were slightly shorter on average than those in the print *Times* (pp. 83–4). Yet new technological capabilities, as well as old print-based habits, actually may have been behind this surprising result. Boczkowski suggests that the use of hyperlinks to previous stories or websites of sources reduced the 'space devoted to background information' within many articles (p. 82). One other technology that seems to have made a difference is email. Since online journalists tend to list their email addresses more often than their offline peers, perhaps this has facilitated increased two-way communication (p. 93). Technologies were appropriated in more transformative ways in Houston and New Jersey, but we need more and different kinds of research to assess these experiments' effects on the journalistic field as a whole.

This review only scratches the surface of Boczkowski's empirically rich, theoretically sophisticated and highly readable study. Nearly four decades have passed since Herbert Gans, Gaye Tuchman, Edward Epstein and others wrote their classic newsroom ethnographies. It is high time, to say the least, for both an empirical updating and a theoretical rejuvenating of this tradition. Recipient of the International Communication Association's 2004 Outstanding Book Award, *Digitizing the News* is surely a worthy successor to these earlier studies, as well as an exemplar for the next generation of newsroom research.

Manuel Castells, *The Network Society: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2004. xx+464 pp. ISBN 1-8454-2435-2, \$40.00 (pbk)

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