Up and Out: Journalism, Social Media, and Historical Sensibility

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Abstract
Much of the modern theorizing about journalism and communication attained its robustness due to a powerful convergence of distinct middle-range scholarly findings that emerged primarily in the 1970s and 1980s. In the present day, when we turn our analytical gaze to the relationship between journalism and social media, we thus need to strike a delicate balance between conducting new qualitative research, re-conceptualizing and re-interrogating the classic conclusions of political communication scholarship, and linking these two aspects of research together. However, we might also wish to extend our analytical gaze “out,” interrogating the movement of journalistic technology across history, as well as “up,” looking at how journalism fits within larger structural explanations regarding the shape of political life.

Keywords
social media, history, journalism

Does the emergence of social media force us to radically rethink the theoretical and empirical assumptions that have governed most media and communications research for the past two decades? Do developments in technological infrastructures open up new avenues for scholarship, avenues that may have been ignored in older, perhaps more stable times? Or rather, is the feeling of momentous technological and cultural change a surface level effect only—do the same hard earned findings and lessons of the past five decades of media research still more or less apply to the developments of the current day? I hope that whatever other paths it might wander down, these will be the guiding questions that govern the operation of this new journal. And while my remarks focus on the relationship between social media, journalism, and communication theory, I also think they apply more widely to media production industries outside journalism, as well as to the audiences that consume the content of these industries.

In the paragraphs below, I want to argue that much of the modern theorizing about journalism and communication attained its robustness due to a powerful convergence of distinct middle-range scholarly findings that emerged primarily in the 1970s and 1980s. In the present day, when we turn our analytical gaze to the relationship between journalism and social media, we thus need to strike a delicate balance between conducting new qualitative research, re-conceptualizing and re-interrogating the classic conclusions of political communication scholarship, and linking these two aspects of research together. However, we might also wish to extend our analytical gaze “out,” interrogating the movement of journalistic technology across history, as well as “up,” looking at how journalism fits within larger structural explanations regarding the shape of political life.

In retrospect, we can see that journalism scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s was the beneficiary of an apparently stable media production and consumption system, the stability of which both fostered and drew upon a powerful explanatory constellation of communication theories. These theories fused the granularity of ethnographic research (Epstein, 1973; Fishman, 1980; Gans, 1979; Schleisinger, 1978; Tuchman, 1978); middle-range theorizing about professional newsroom culture; replicable content analysis that demonstrated relatively consistent patterns of news coverage across issues, platforms, and times (Hallin, 1986; Iyengar, 1993); and a “realistically-critical” normative position on what all this meant for democracy and public life. From the ethnographic newsroom studies, scholars concluded that journalists were first and foremost bureaucratic employees, striving to rationalize the disorganized flow of news for the
pursues of workplace stability and predictability. In cultural
terms, these news workers had become professionals, with
the consequence that their primary guiding allegiances were
to their fellow journalists rather than to the market or to audi-
ences. These qualitative findings neatly tied into more quan-
titative and experimental research that established key
communication concepts such as framing, agenda-setting,
and priming. All of this work, finally, could be summarized
by the axiom that the media told people not what to think but
rather what to think about and thus could be tied into macro-
level theoretical perspectives as diverse as democratic plu-
ralism and Gramscian hegemony theory, depending on the
commitments and personality of the author (Gitlin, 1980).

The Internet (and social media in particular) either did or
did not change everything previously described by this
remarkably robust paradigm; with an extreme amount of
unfairness, we might argue that this has been the terrain upon
which the popular debate about journalism and technology
has operated over the past 20 years. But what should scholars
themselves be doing?

Going forward, I want to argue that social media scholars
can pursue two complimentary strategies as research on digi-
tal media enters its third decade. The first strategy is to
continue to direct our analytical lens “up”—connecting non-
explanatory research (of which ethnography and big-data
research are both examples) with more meso- and macro-
theories about how the media system “works.” This research
involves bracketing, at least temporarily, our standard
assumptions that the hoary old standbys of “professional
journalistic culture,” “bureaucratic social control of the
newsroom,” “framing,” “agenda-setting,” and so on, are the
ultimate points of reference that our research should engage
with in the last instance. This does not mean we should dis-
mess these theories. But it does mean that we need to foster,
publicize, and engage with structural-level communication
research that approaches them from a radically different
angle, or indeed, challenges them all altogether. What, just
to name one example, does “agenda setting” mean when an
increasingly large number of citizens flit from media stream
to media stream, consuming news in radically different ways
than might have been assumed three decades ago? What kind
of framing occurs on Facebook or on Twitter, and does the
entire meaning of or nature of framing itself change? How
can our empirical understanding of journalism and social
media continue to productively interface with these new
scholarly frameworks?

There is, however, a second but complimentary path. In
addition to encouraging a more robust dialog between social
media scholarship and both well-established and insurgent
middle-range communication theory (moving up), we also
need to foster research that sees socio-technical devices and
their content as moving through time (i.e. moving out). We
should try, in short, to bring a more historical sensibility
to our work on social media. To my mind, the greatest
weakness of the path-breaking newsroom ethnographies of
the 1970s and 1980s was their lack of understanding about
how important aspects of newswork were embedded in par-
ticular times as well as in particular locations. With a resolute
focus on trying their ethnographic into larger structural
explanations about political communication, much of the
most important work about journalism in the 1980s and
1990s assumed a timelessness that may, to put it bluntly,
have been in error. And this element of timelessness embed-
ded in otherwise highly contextualized ethnographic research
has ceded the terrain to popular theories of technology that
see it as the single driving factor in pushing newsrooms for-
ward across history.

Correcting this mistake thus involves rethinking more
than the relationship between ethnography, content analysis,
and experimental research—it also involves a deeper inter-
rogation of the relationship between technology, historical
scholarship, and more presentist social science. This discus-
sion lies outside the conceptual and spatial limitations of this
article. However, if such a dialog can even occasionally be
fostered in the pages of this new journal, then it will have
become an admirable and important step forward for our field.

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