

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

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purposes 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 audiences. These qualitative findings neatly tied into more quantitative 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 pluralism 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 assumed 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 digital 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 dismiss 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 particular 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 embedded 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 forward across history.

Correcting this mistake thus involves rethinking more than the relationship between ethnography, content analysis, and experimental research—it also involves a deeper interrogation of the relationship between technology, historical scholarship, and more presentist social science. This discussion 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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