

Valerie Belair-Gagnon, *Social Media at the BBC: The Re-Making of Crisis Reporting*. New York & London: Routledge (2015). 147 pp., ISBN: 9781138823488

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Arriving at a crucial moment in the BBC's history, when proposals for a radical overhaul in the license fee are afoot, Valerie Belair-Gagnon's *Social Media at the BBC* documents the massive cultural and structural shifts that have taken place at the broadcaster in recent years. Drawing on interviews with over 50 journalists and BBC senior executives, direct observation of its news staff, not to mention documentary analysis of the Corporation's main websites and voluminous institutional literature, the book provides insight into the various ways in which the 'Beeb' has sought to retain its looming presence on the British media landscape whilst at the same time appropriating new media information sources as part of its journalistic toolbox. Using David Altheide and Robert Snow's influential concept 'media logic', a framework of analysis that aims to consider the assumptions and processes whereby messages are constructed and communicated within a particular medium, Belair-Gagnon suggests that the use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and Bebo has resulted in the emergence of new structures and actors in the BBC newsroom, enabling a series of new spaces of reporting in which the boundaries between journalists and citizens are becoming more and more blurred.

The book is structured as follows. Chapter 1, "'Auntie' Takes on Social Media', briefly highlights the transformation of the BBC since the emergence of social media, and shows how its journalists have sought to use a series of socio-political events as a means to reassert journalistic norms and practices. Focusing on the BBC's coverage of the December 26th 2004 tsunami and the July 7th 2005 transport bombings, Belair-Gagnon suggests that these two events should be viewed as significant moments in the Corporation's history whereby the 'line between audience and journalism became less distinct' (p. 12). Chapter 2, 'Tweet or be Sacked!', continues in much the same vein but draws on a broader range of case studies, which include the 2006 'Saffron' revolution

in Myanmar, the 2008 Mumbai attacks, the 2009 Iranian elections, and the 2010 Haiti earthquake. Here, Belair-Gagnon powerfully illustrates how social media platforms have become a central feature of the BBC's 'journalistic tool box' (p. 39), alongside more traditional forms of newsgathering and content verification. Chapter 3, 'A New Order', and Chapter 4, 'New Structures, New Actors in the Newsroom', form the real core of the analysis, with Belair-Gagnon drawing on her fieldwork to detail the extent to which social media has become a central element of the BBC's newsgathering resources; something, she suggests, simultaneously improves its reporting, bringing the broadcaster closer to its audiences, whilst also rearticulating familiar journalistic challenges surrounding the difficulties of establishing facts or maintaining impartiality. In particular, it is here where *Social Media at the BBC* makes a significant contribution to the literature on this influential broadcaster, as we are offered insight into the way the BBC's news staff are developing a set of verification techniques that enable them to establish the 'truth' behind an event and the authority of the sources being used. While these techniques do not seem very different from traditional journalistic norms and news values, Belair-Gagnon suggests that the use of social media is increasingly renegotiating the borders between the BBC's journalists and audiences. In addition to this, she also shows how social media has not only impacted upon the general structure of the BBC, with the User Generated Content (UGC) Hub becoming a central feature of the overall production network, but also within the daily culture of the institution, with the BBC's journalists increasingly encouraged to enrol on 'how to' training courses that cover various aspects of social media usage. As she reveals, '[a]s of 2012, more than 3,000 BBC News staff had received training on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, or Flickr, in groups or one-on-one sessions' (p. 102). The final chapter, 'The Connected Newsroom', and conclusion, 'Global, Crises Local Responses', serve to reflect upon the extent to which social media has transformed the BBC's journalistic practices, and in turn its relationship with its various audiences, during crisis reporting.

Crucially, while Belair-Gagnon highlights the extent to which social media has become an important newsgathering tool for the BBC's journalists, providing them with insight into conflicts and contexts in which they may have little physical access, questions still remain surrounding the extent to which these new media platforms are changing the more deeper, structural power relations that underpin news and current affairs at the BBC. Though it is wrong to simply label the institution as a mouthpiece for State discourse, the BBC does have a longstanding tradition of privileging of 'elite' voices and prioritising 'official' perspectives over less established sources (e.g. Schlesinger 1978; Philo, 1995; Philo & Berry, 2004 & 2011). Indeed, research by Williams et al (2011), suggests that, far from revolutionising the way BBC journalists work, user-generated content from social media is increasingly embedded within existing news gathering practices. Importantly, Belair-Gagnon acknowledges these rigid hierarchies, albeit tacitly, but it would be wise not to overstate the power of the new breed of 'tech-savvy' journalists. In addition to this, it would also be interesting to see if these structural shifts have influenced other forms of news coverage, beyond those that emerge within its crisis reporting. So, for example, are these structural shifts evident in the Corporations coverage of wider social and economic issues? And, is social media providing a more democratic, participatory space in which marginalised and disenfranchised groups within Britain, or elsewhere, can have their voice heard?

This is not to suggest that *Social Media at BBC News* is limited in its scope, however, but rather that its findings open up important questions related to media power in the twenty-first century. Indeed, this is where the strength of Belair-Gagnon's work lies, as it serves to invite further questions, and hopefully more research, into the way new communications technologies and media platforms are challenging the traditional power relations that govern news media production, creating the conditions of possibility for a more empowered and democratic public service news media. As such, *Social Media at BBC News* is a timely and much-needed analysis of the changing journalistic practices not just at our much-beloved 'Auntie', but also across the contemporary news landscape, and thus will serve as a rich source of information for students and academics alike.

References

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