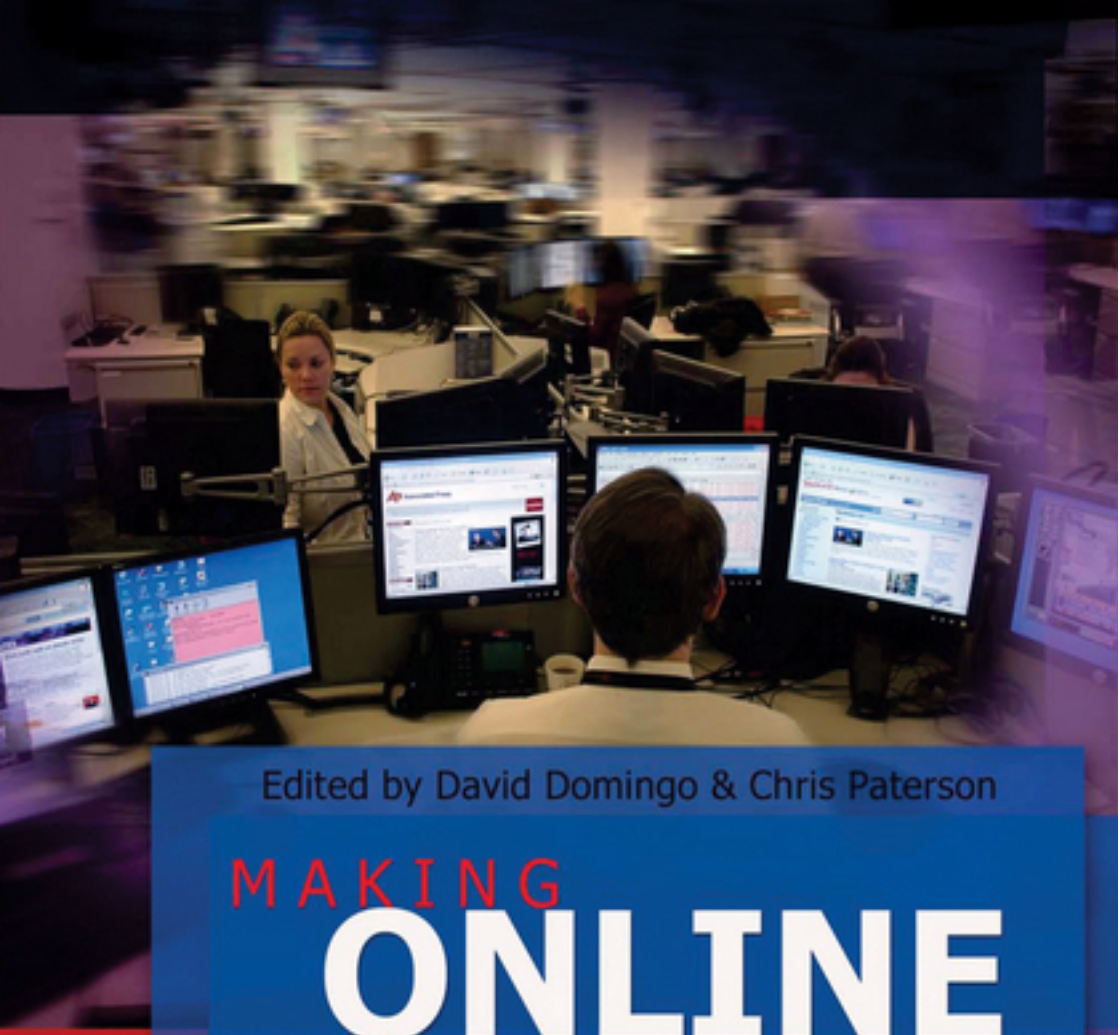

Edited by David Domingo & Chris Paterson

MAKING ONLINE NEWS

VOLUME 2

Newsroom Ethnographies in the Second Decade of Internet Journalism

INTRODUCTION

The Centrality of Online Journalism Today (and Tomorrow)

David Domingo

"We will stop printing the *New York Times* sometime in the future, date TBD." Arthur Sulzberger Jr, the publisher of one of the most influential newspapers in the world, joked about the end of an era in a conference in London in September 2010. He was presenting the new paywall strategy of their website operation, but the audience was more eager to know if the print edition would become history any time soon. Why does this matter when we discuss the present and future of online journalism? The development of online journalism does not happen in isolation. If the first edition of *Making Online News* showed that the first decade of online news history was determined by the tensions between the possibilities of the Internet and the conservative attitudes of the newsrooms, which naturally tamed the *radical potential* of the new technology (Winston, 1998), the second decade is reassuring in that online journalism has become a central element in the struggle of the media industry to reinvent itself in order to adapt to structural social changes and overcome the slow demise of its traditional business model.

The Internet has taken a central position in current debates about the future of journalism.[1] The hesitant exploration of newsroom convergence—disparate approaches to and strategies regarding the production of print, broadcast and online news are multiplying (García Avilés et al., 2009)—is the most tangible evidence that the evolution of online journalism cannot be untangled from the development of the rest of the profession. And the enthusiastic but careful embracing of audience

participation in news websites, with newsrooms making sure that their gatekeeping role is not challenged (Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Singer et al., 2011), shows how the professional culture of journalism actively negotiates its role and legitimacy in an evolving communicative space. Online journalism is here to stay: that is already taken for granted. Its shape, though, is still very much under construction, a long, open-ended process that is not going to be placid. Many tensions still pull the future of online journalism in different directions, and the quality of news and its role in democracy may be at stake.

Net-native journalistic projects[2] are a good observatory of the intrinsic tensions in the evolution of online media. In many of them there is a vindication of old journalistic values such as beat and investigative reporting and a stronger connection to the community they serve. At the same time, there is a celebration of opinionated writing and user-generated content that stretches the orthodox definitions of journalism. While online journalism has been recognized already with Pulitzer Prizes in the USA, most of the news stories produced online are mere clones of agency wire copy (Paterson, 2007). And there is an increasing pressure of the market logics as online media revenues are not compensating for the losses of the rest of the industry. This pressure is being addressed with divergent strategies: nonprofit initiatives based on donations explore organizational and legal solutions to find a sustainable alternative model (Downie & Schudson, 2009) side by side with the downsizing of for-profit newsrooms to save structural costs (Deuze, 2007). Also, some voices in the USA suggest that public subsidies could be one of the few ways to guarantee the survival of socially committed journalism (McChesney & Nichols, 2010), especially at a local level (Downie & Schudson, 2009), where the disappearance of professional news organizations is not compensated by citizen journalism initiatives that are too fragile and lack resources for comprehensive news production (Duffy et al., 2010). In Europe, with a long tradition of state-funded media, the validity of this approach is also vindicated, but its proponents acknowledge the need to reconsider traditional public broadcasting models in the online context (Lowe, 2010). In the meantime, traditional media companies are tempted to explore (again) ways to charge for content on the Web—fighting against the ghost of the "original sin" of online journalism—and on the pay-friendly tablets and portable devices; but few are willing to develop products that stand out from mediocre and widely available free news. . Only the leaders in each market seem to capitalize with advertising revenue their investments in excellent online journalism.

The second decade of online journalism is a decade of achievements and uncertainties.[3] New forms of news production have consolidated, though not necessarily as expected. Video has become a common offering of news websites, very much following the narrative traditions of television journalism. Multimedia storytelling is mainly confined to feature reporting because it requires complex production practices, but at the same time there is a tendency to standardize the

narrative structures of infographics, audio slideshows and other multimedia pieces. Data-driven journalism has reopened the debate in newsrooms regarding the need for news producers to have advanced computer skills (database programming, graphic design). Ubiquitous access to the Internet through portable devices has opened new revenue hopes, but newsrooms have a difficult time finding ways to present their journalism in this tiny new medium. Social networks have become a source, a promotional space and an interaction opportunity between journalists and their publics, challenging the boundaries between the professional and the individual persona of reporters. And Internet users have become used to a wider range of information sources about current events—from specialized blogs to community websites—while traditional media brands maintain their centrality as first-stop destinations of the vast majority of news consumers online. There is more journalism than ever being produced inside and outside professional newsrooms, but that does not necessarily mean that citizens are getting more or better news.

The Internet has consolidated as a primary source for news in most Western countries, usually just behind television.[4] Newspaper circulation has been declining since the 1990s and is today 31.5% less than 25 years ago in the US (PEJ, 2010a) and is also in a continuous descent in Europe and Australia (WAN-IFRA, 2010). The cruel irony is that while websites now represent a big percentage of newspapers' public, the print product is still their main source of revenue, as the websites contribute less than 10% of the advertising income (WAN-IFRA, 2010). Therefore, analysts expect a long transition to online-only news products. In the meantime, the last decade has seen newsrooms shrink their editorial staff all over the world, a phenomenon accelerated by the economic crisis of 2008; this has also shuttered more than 100 newspapers in the US, some of them surviving online with a fraction of their former staff (one such move online is detailed in Chapter Three of this volume). Downie and Schudson challenge the assumption that online news can be produced with fewer journalists than newspapers: "As newspapers sharply reduce their staffs and news reporting to cut costs and survive, they also reduce their value to their readers and communities" (2009: 24). The threats to journalistic quality multiply in a scenario of converged newsrooms, where reporters tend to assume more technical tasks, have "lower wages, less job security, and more contingent labor relationships" (Deuze, 2007: 147) and work under the pressure of an agenda that prioritizes covering breaking news. If research in the first volume of *Making Online News* already highlighted this trend, time has just confirmed that immediacy is the dominant paradigm of online journalism. Boczkowski (2010) warns that mimicry is a prevalent practice in online newsrooms today, in which reporting the same news as the competitors—faster if possible—is the quality measure.

Behind the numbers there is an industry struggling to define its future while it is being carried away by the everyday rhythm of current events and the cult for immediacy (Domingo, 2008a). The centrality that convergence has conveyed to

online journalism is a double-edged sword: everyone expects it to be the heir of the print press, but at the same time the debate about the shape of news on the Net is blurred into the wider debates about how to save journalism. This second volume of *Making Online News* is at the same time a vindication of the growing relevance of Internet journalism in today's mediascape and a call to the necessity of more specific research into the peculiarities of online news production—only close attention will allow us to depict the particular evolution of journalism in the new medium. The first edition of the book suggested that newsroom ethnography was a fruitful methodology to unravel the social processes of innovation that were shaping the development of online journalism. This second edition presents entirely new original ethnographies conducted mostly between 2007 and 2010 to continue to critically assess the challenges, decisions and practices in online newsrooms in different corners of the world.

New Volume, New Ethnographies

The first volume has been widely read and quoted by online journalism scholars. We are very happy that ethnography has been celebrated as contributing a "nuanced analysis" to the object of study and fostered new approaches that are based on the "rejection of any deterministic perspective," as Sue Robinson put it in the *New Media and Society* review of the book. The warm welcome by the journalism studies community of the first volume and the growing number of scholars applying ethnographic approaches in their fieldwork at online newsrooms convinced us that a second edition of the book was needed.

We soon decided that it would actually be a wholly new book. The nature of ethnographic research makes it hard to revisit previous studies. To update the chapters in volume one, authors would have needed to go back to the newsrooms and would have ended up producing new ethnographies. The existing research has a lot of value in itself as an insight at a moment in time, and our pedagogical guide to the book (see the Preface to this volume) highlights the lessons we might learn. Therefore, we decided to do an open call for chapters through the email lists of communication research associations. The response was impressive: 41 studies, completed or under development, reached our mailbox and we had a hard time selecting the twelve we are presenting in this volume. This is very good news for online journalism research: there is a boom of newsroom ethnography occurring all around the world and with very diverse theoretical approaches and specific objects of study.

What ethnographic research on online news has in common is that it investigates the tensions between technological innovations and the social context where they are adopted, while always aware of the general cultural framework (journalism

at large) and the particularities of the specific settings (media organizations) where decisions are being made. In a thorough review of contemporary ethnographic research on digital media, Coleman described the virtues of the method: "To grasp more fully the broader significance of digital media, its study must involve various frames of analysis, attention to history, and the local contexts and lived experiences of digital media—a task well suited to the ethnographic enterprise" (2010: 2–3). Coleman distinguished three vast areas of inquiry: the cultural politics of digital media (the communication and reinvention of identities online); the new social groups and activities that have formed within or around digital media; and the use by society of digital media in everyday life. Online newsroom research is wisely located by Coleman in the latest area, as the internet has not created an opportunity for a new social group but rather has been adopted by the existing institution of journalism and translated into work practices that at the same time accommodate to and challenge the existing professional culture.

This second edition, then, is a new collection of online newsroom ethnographies covering current issues in the evolution of news production for the Internet: we start by discussing organizational changes, new work practices and redefined professional identities, and the constraints, tensions and resistances that digitization and convergence generate. With these evolving newsrooms as the background, attention is then devoted to online news genres and the coverage of specific events. The book ends up taking a look at the context beyond the newsroom, acknowledging the increasingly crucial role of news agencies, user participation and bloggers in the configuration of online journalism.

The first section addresses the structural changes in the organization of news work. The chapter by Steve Paulussen and colleagues summarizes the factors that shape the development of collaborative initiatives across media and with citizens, two of the key trends in recent years. Anja Bechmann challenges through network analyses the effectiveness of the *superdesk* strategy that many integrated newsrooms have set up to coordinate their cross-media efforts. The work of Sue Robinson transports us to a newspaper newsroom that made the radical move to online-only, and discusses how journalists negotiated their new identity while trying to retain their core values. Nikki Usher provides the usually overlooked perspective of a radio broadcaster and shows how online innovations such as podcasts and weblogs were naturalized to fit the logics of the existing production culture. The working routines of print journalists when using the Internet as a source—in the singular context of Zimbabwean newsrooms—are explored by Hayes Mabweazara in the last chapter of the section.

The second part of the book focuses on the (re)definition of news values and formats on the Web. Jannie Møller Hartley revisits the news categories identified by Gaye Tuchman in her seminal newsroom ethnographies of the 1970s and assesses what has changed in the era of immediacy. Stepping away from the central focus

of most online newsroom ethnographies, Steen Steensen focuses on the genre of feature journalism and explores how newsroom discourses and practices of online news have shaped the characteristics of this often overlooked form of online journalism. The section closes with a case study on the coverage of an iconic news event, the 2008 US presidential elections, by Brooke Van Dam.

Section three seeks to invite the reader to move beyond the centrality of the online newsroom as the object of study for Internet news ethnography. We acknowledge the key role of the newsrooms in the decision-making processes that shape innovations, but more and more there are other actors that need to be taken into account to provide a thorough and comprehensive assessment of the evolution of online media. Andy Williams and colleagues show the appropriateness of conducting multi-site observations when dealing with a complex development such as the management of user-generated content in a big public broadcaster. Co-editor Chris Paterson draws attention to the evolution of international news agencies and how their efforts to integrate their newsrooms shape the materials that online journalists work with. Amira Firdaus points out the dire implications of market logic in the configuration of online news services through the case of an Asian national news agency. A final chapter by Chris Anderson provides a research agenda to explore "local news ecosystems," putting the online newsroom in the context of the blogosphere and sources of a specific city, in order to fully understand the dynamics of news production. Pablo Boczkowski offers an Epilogue to the book reflecting on the findings of newsroom ethnography in the context of online journalism studies and the challenges that should be addressed by scholars in the future to keep untangling the evolution of Internet news .

Taken together, the chapters of this second volume analyze over a dozen online newsrooms of all sizes and backgrounds: regional and national online newspapers in several countries; a pioneering net-native like Salon.com; a multimedia regional group with an integrated newsroom producing television, print and online media[5]; national and international news agencies; and three national public broadcasters. We believe that the diversity of cases strengthens the core rationale of the ethnographic approach: technological innovation takes place locally and in each case the solutions adopted may be different. The fact that there are many similarities in the production practices across online newsrooms is better explained if we understand how different settings shape the characteristics of online news.

The geographical diversity of the research presented in this volume is another aspect to highlight. This volume analyzes twelve experiences from seven countries: Belgium, Denmark, Malaysia, Norway, UK, USA and Zimbabwe. The Nordic countries with four cases and the Anglo-Saxon culture with five are clearly overrepresented, but that only reflects the higher quantity of production studies in those areas. Why is there more ethnographic research being conducted in Northern

Europe and the USA? Structural reasons regarding resources for research and the prevalence of journalism studies at academic institutions may be one factor, but also the fact that the development of online journalism has been often led by American and European media may explain a greater scholarly interest in the phenomenon in those countries. Altogether, the two volumes of *Making Online News* cover cases from all the continents, offering a fairly comprehensive perspective on global trends in online journalism.

. . .

We hope this second edition is as inspiring as the first one and that more and more media scholars feel compelled to wear an ethnographer's shoes and spend time among online journalists. We vindicate the value of detail and the explanatory power of narrating the nuances of everyday practices. As Coleman puts it: "This anthropological imperative posits that the devil is in the details; these details are often aesthetically valued for revealing the splendor of sociocultural life and at times are also ethically deployed to push against faulty and narrow presumptions" (2010: 11). The authors of the chapters in this volume observed journalists at work during a timespan of some months to some years, usually in visits scattered over time. Some of the most unique materials that this book provides are narrations of events observed by the researchers; moments in the life of the newsrooms that are revealing of the values, aspirations and constraints of online journalism.

A singular case is the one of BERNAMA, the Malaysian news agency (Chapter 11), where Firdaus explains how access to do ethnography was barred[6] and ended up using only one of the tools of ethnography, in-depth interviews, normally a complement to observations in the rest of the chapters. The analysis of audience participation management at the BBC (Chapter 9) included up to 115 interviews. Møller Hartley, Steensen and Van Dam have in common that their chapters add a valuable triangulation to their observations by doing content analysis of the final product. Some researchers managed to get access to the content management system and the online communication tools of the newsroom, a crucial aspect in the social dynamics at the workplaces that media companies do not always allow observers access to (Puijk, 2008).

A final word for the road ahead. So far, the focus on the newsroom has been very fruitful to demonstrate what makes online journalism what it is. And it will still be crucial in the future; ethnographic data open up the black box, as Latour (2005) would put it, of the network of decisions and definitions made and used by those who produce online news. News websites are what newsrooms have decided they will be, within the constraints of the cultural and organizational settings of their companies. But we also acknowledge Boczkowski's suggestions in the Epilogue for future research avenues: Moving on to comparative studies between media

industries, and reaching out to understand the relationship between news production and consumption. It may be due time, as Anderson very graphically puts (see Chapter 12), to "blow up the newsroom" and look beyond it–inside the media company and outside it. On one hand, the whole media company, rather than just a specific newsroom could be the unit of analysis, as Boczkowski and Ferris (2005) or Klinenberg (2005) already have proven successfully when investigating convergence experiments. Observing the marketing decision-making processes would be crucial to assess how they shape journalistic work in a time when business pressures are fiercer than ever. On the other hand, ethnographers should assess the dynamics of the relationship between journalists and citizens at news websites and social networks, combining virtual and in-situ observations both in the newsroom and following engaged citizens to understand how they produce stories and what motivates them to contribute reporting and commentary. Groundbreaking experiments of pro-am collaborations and crowdsourcing also deserve attention in order to evaluate their ability to generate new forms of information gathering and storytelling. We still need to know more about online newsroom practices for original reporting, which the first volume of the book suggested was rare: when does it happen and how are resources allocated? The differences between profit-driven media ventures and the new projects of non-profit journalism could also illustrate that, in the end, there is still room for many different ways of understanding online journalism.

ENDNOTES

1 A biennial conference organized by Cardiff University since 2007 is precisely entitled "Future of Journalism" and sponsoring journals *Journalism Studies* (issues 9:5 and 11:4) and *Journalism Practice* (2:3 and 4:3) have compiled selected research presented in that meeting. The tenth anniversary issue of *Journalism* (June 2009, 10:3) was also devoted to this discussion as well as the spring 2010 issue of *Daedalus* (139:2), the journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

2 See, for example, in the USA: ProPublica.org, VoiceofSanDiego.org, TexasTribune.org, HuffingtonPost.com; in the UK: HelpMeInvestigate.net; in France: Rue89.fr, Mediapart.fr; in Belgium: Apache.be; in Spain: Bottup.com.

3 See Mitchelstein and Boczkowski (2009) for a review of online journalism research between 2000 and 2008, and Deuze (2008a) for an assessment of the contributions of online newsroom ethnographies in the first volume of *Making Online News*.

4 See, for example, the report on news consumption habits in the USA (Purcell et al., 2010).

5 This case, Nordjyske Medier, is part of the analysis of both Bechmann's and Møller Hartley's chapters.

6 See Paterson and Zoelner (2010) for a discussion about access and professional experience in news ethnography.