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MAKING
ONLINE
NEWS

The Ethnography
of New Media Production

INTRODUCTION
Why Ethnography?

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We use, practice, and study online journalism. It influences us in untold ways. Every year more of us turn to the Internet for news and pay less attention to the media of old. We suggest in this book that for a phenomenon that has become so ubiquitous in the lives of all but those in the least connected parts of the world, we know virtually nothing of online journalism. Scholars examine what it has to say, what those producing it say about it, what its political and cultural influence is, and how audiences relate to it—but we still know little about what matters most: its construction. Is new media journalism really a new form of journalism? If so, how?

This collection seeks to take some fledgling steps toward understanding what is at the heart of news in new media: the process of online news production. Online editors often complain that they are exploring the Internet as a new territory without a map, and educators say that they have a hard time explaining to their students the work routines of online newsrooms. This book offers tools for both of them; it will help to make informed decisions about the nature of the field, and to describe in detail developments in online news production and work practices. Perhaps most crucially, we hope it will aid understanding of all the things online journalism is not—despite utopian predictions for it, stemming from the earliest days of the Internet.

For scholars, this book is an invitation to follow the path of ethnography and counter the technologically deterministic approaches behind many studies of online news. Research can no longer take for granted that the Internet will change journalism immediately and dramatically. In fact, media gurus still often do, as lately with the debate about citizen journalism, and ethnography is the best antidote: any technological development is embedded in an adoption process where social subjects make conscious or unconscious decisions that an observer can trace.

The research and theorization presented in this volume vary slightly in approach, but are united by an understanding that our "shared reality" (Berger &

Luckman, 1966; Tuchman, 1978) is increasingly shaped by the production practices of online media professionals, and that it is impossible to comprehend the nature of that manufactured reality without getting to the heart of the manufacturing process and the shared culture of the manufacturers. Literature reviews of online journalism research (Kopper, Kolthoff, & Czepek, 2000; Boczkowski, 2002; Domingo, 2005) suggest that studies have concentrated more on content, professional profiles and attitudes and audiences than on the production routines and context. Deuze, Neuberger and Paulussen (2004) stated that there is a clear distance between the ideals shared by online journalists and their actual practices, but observed that little empirical evidence had been published about the reasons for this distance.

Ethnography in (Online) News Production Research

It is our guiding premise that only ethnographic methodologies derived from anthropological and sociological traditions can come close to providing an adequate description of the culture and practice of media production, and the mindset of media producers. As Schlesinger (1980, p. 363) explained, the ethnographic method of news production research makes available "basic information about the working ideologies and practices of cultural producers," and provides the possibility of observation—informed by theory—of the social practices constituting cultural production. This is impossible with other methods, such as surveys or web content analysis—the dominant modes of online news research. Cottle (2007, p. 2) more recently argued that ethnographic studies of news production "help to reveal the constraints, contingencies and complexities 'at work' and, in so doing, provide the means for a more adequate theorization of the operations of the news media and the production of the discourses 'at play' within news media representations."

The shift away from sociological analysis of news production—common in the 1970s—was unfortunate and premature. The title of this book pays a tribute to that work, exemplified by Tuchman's *Making News* (1978). Without those early ethnographic investigations of news production, our understandings of journalism would be limited to what little we are able to glean from the observation of news content, or from what journalists say they do (which as any ethnographer soon discovers, often varies significantly from what they actually do). Among the important and influential large scale sociological studies of news production prior to the 1980s were Buckalew (1970), Warner (1970),

Epstein (1974), Altheide (1976), Schlesinger (1987), Tuchman (1978), Gans (1980), Golding and Elliott (1979), and Fishman (1980). But the relevance of these earlier works of news sociology is becoming marginal, for modern newsrooms—even the few still producing exclusively for "old media" channels—bear an ever decreasing resemblance to newsrooms of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In their revisitation of the early research, Tuchman (2002) and Schudson (2003) commented on the benefit of vivid and thorough descriptions of work routines that explained journalism; but also noted the limitations of the ethnographic methodology. The newsroom-centric approach can be found lacking in a modern context increasingly dominated by the source-journalist relationship, which includes both the public relations professional's ability to manufacture news, and the dominance of news agencies in agenda setting (McManus, 1994; Manning, 2001; Paterson, 2007). Nonetheless, newsrooms are the actual space for decision making in the development of online journalism, where genres, routines, values, and products are tested and created.

This book presents the work of a "second wave" of ethnographers (Cottle, 2000) who are aware of the challenges of the new context and have a particular interest in technological innovation. We think this is the first time theories of new journalism have been presented in conjunction with, and in the context of, a collection of many of the most substantial ethnographic research projects on Internet journalism conducted in recent years. The purpose of this book is not only to delineate how news production for new media is different from that of traditional media, but also to ask if it is different. There is occasionally reason to doubt if online media is terribly unlike old media; the places most U.S. online news consumers go for their news, for example, closely model the traditional American broadcast network structure in many respects (Paterson, 2007). As much of the research in this volume demonstrates, additional research is desperately needed to test many of the utopian predictions once—and sometimes still—made for new technologies (Domingo, 2005).

And there are larger questions thrown up by the digitization of journalism and the evolution of a new breed of journalist. Too often academic research into online journalism has what Halloran (1981) would have termed a "conventional" or "administrative" motivation: to find more effective and efficient ways to make the product. As Singer notes in her chapter, some early online newsroom research especially was oriented exclusively toward identifying "best practices" for industry. The problem, of course, is that crucial questions about

the product, and its place in society, may be ignored. Media work (and research about that work) is not performed in a vacuum, independent of its cultural and political context. To date, for example, little of this research begins to examine the role of new media as a site of societal power struggle or to suggest the extent to which Internet journalism reproduces the cultural/ political/economic influence over society of concern to critical scholars, and documented, for example, by Glasgow (Eldridge, 1995), Gitlin (1980), or Schiller (1989). Perhaps that is asking too much of an emerging form of inquiry, but if the big questions do not shape our research from the outset, they are too often forgotten.

Online journalism research to date has mainly proven that the Internet features such as interactivity or hypertext that were meant to revolutionize the way news is produced and consumed were never extensively developed (Chung, 2007; Oblak, 2005; Kenney, Gorelik, & Mwangi, 2000; Schultz, 2000; Massey & Levy, 1999), even though professionals shared those utopian visions (Deuze et al., 2004). Some researchers, however, admitted that their methodological approaches failed to explain the factors shaping this paradox (Jankowski & Van Selm, 2000; Kenney et al., 2000) and reviewers have pointed out that most of the studies have limited themselves to denouncing the distance between the ideals and the reality without adding historical perspective or social context (Deuze, 1999; Carey, 2005) and with a lack of the empirical data and theoretical frameworks necessary to interpret the causes and consequences of these trends.

Boczkowski, whose comprehensive ethnographic project on U.S. newsrooms is a rare exception to the rule, wrote that these approaches tended to "build analysis upon a usually taken-for-granted technologically deterministic matrix" (2002, p. 279). If surveyed online journalists are convinced that they form a new breed of journalists (Quandt et al., 2006; Paulussen, 2004; Singer, 2003; Deuze & Dimoudi, 2002; Neuberger et al., 1998), we need to enter the newsrooms to see to what extent this is the case in their daily routines.

Online news production research is a paradigm that is both immature and controversial. It has many variations, sometimes with little in common apart from a shared claim to the term "ethnography" (and a number of studies which are, for all intents and purposes, ethnographic do not make mention of that term). Moreover, finding a clear and consistent definition for "ethnography" in the literature of communications studies is a challenge. One text circularly states of "the ethnography of communication" that "its methods are mostly ethnographic" (Lindlof, 1995, p. 46). But Lindlof more helpfully points out that the term sometimes means almost any form of qualitative research, accounting for

why it is slippery. Despite this lack of agreement over exactly what the method does—or should—entail, self-described ethnographers like the editors of this collection have a habit of evangelizing about the value of ethnography and calling into question understandings of technology and society which have not been informed by it.[1]

Other methodologists insist the term should apply only when a researcher observes another culture over a long period, as in the anthropological tradition. Observational research is typically conducted in conjunction with extensive interviewing, although the reverse is less often true. In addition, some form of exhaustive document research or analysis of texts created by the culture in question may accompany both of those methods.

Domingo's (2003) analysis of benefits and weaknesses of ethnographic methodology is useful for those considering the approach (see table 1). These will be helpful to any researcher weighing the costs, in time and resources, of serious ethnography against the drawbacks of the method and advantages of alternative methodologies. Domingo's suggestions restate and update those made by Schlesinger (1980) a quarter century earlier, making obvious how despite change in media technologies, proven methodologies remain relevant, as do the central questions about their application.

Table 1. Benefits and weaknesses of ethnographic methodology for online journalism research

Benefits	Weaknesses
– Gathers a huge amount of very rich firsthand data. – The researcher directly witnesses actions, routines, and definitions of technology and social relations. – The researcher can gain a confident status with the actors, obtaining insiders' points of view. – The researcher can witness conflicts and processes of evolution. – Analysis of the gathered data allows a comprehensive description of the social use of a technology and offers insights to understand the factors involved in its social construction.	– Observation is time consuming and many times actors feel disturbed by the presence of the researcher. – It is not always easy to set down everything that you witness. Technical actions are the most difficult. – Actors may ask you not to quote a confession they have made to you. – Results should not be generalized right away and you have the risk of taking an anecdote as a rule. – The researcher has to be self-reflective, aware of his/her own prejudices in order to avoid them negatively influencing the study.