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Book Review

Adrienne Russell: *Networked: A Contemporary History of News in Transition* Cambridge: Polity. 2011.

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In her new book *Networked*, Adrienne Russell explores how contemporary journalism has moved beyond traditional mass media and into a state of non-institutionalized and de-professionalized "networked journalism". Networked journalism, the core concept of the book, is "journalism that sees publics acting as creators, investigators, reactors, (re)makers, and (re)distributors of news and where all variety of media, amateurs and professional, corporate and independent products and interests intersect at a new level" (p. 1). Here, the practices of journalism are not confined to established media organizations, their editors, and journalists but can be conducted by virtually anyone. Accordingly, the book expands the concept of journalism so that it "refers to the wealth of news-related information, opinion, and cultural expression, in various styles and from various producers, which together shape the meaning of news event and issues" (p. 22). This is a very broad understanding of journalism, and as I shall note below, it is one with problematic implications for parts of the book.

In order to broaden the scope of what we should understand as journalism, *Networked* tells the story of how the democratization of the productive forces of news-making has deprived traditional media organizations of their prerogative to this activity and of how this development helps different publics engage in and reconnect with democracy. Russell's argument is that the current changes in journalism lead, on the one hand, to a more engaged and well-oriented citizenry as well as to a better quality of journalism while, on the other hand, the news industry still fails to fully acknowledge and adapt to this paradigmatic shift. As a result, the industry is losing its central position in the public production and cir-

culation of knowledge, rendering itself increasingly obsolete. On one of the last pages of the book, Russell sums up the overall argument:

> So far, the networked era has produced more outspoken, critical, and mobilized publics but news organizations remain largely tied to structures of ownership, authority, and professionalism that at their core clash with new modes of participation and sources of authority. (p. 154)

The tectonic plates of news-making have been moving over recent years, reshaping the landscape of journalism and the demarcation lines of what it means to be a journalist. Revolving around this development of contemporary journalism and what is probably its most important expression, namely the participation of ordinary people and other actors from outside the established news industry, this book is timely and important. It is also very well written.

Networked consists of five chapters or articles, each of which deals with more or less delimited issues within networked journalism. In Chapter 1, Russell presents the book's framework and convincingly sketches current changes and developments in journalism, contrasting the journalisms that covered the Gulf War in 1991 and the Iraq War in 2003. Journalism, she argues, has moved from its period of high modernism, where it evolved in the context of professional norms and institutions (as described by Daniel Hallin), and into its current networked condition. Chapter 2, describing the shift from one-to-many to many-to-many communication, follows the same argument and uses four empirical examples of best practice to illustrate how networked journalism can simultaneously enrich the news and facilitate social cohesion. The four case studies successfully challenge the popular "narrative of decline" to which critics of non-journalists' participation in news-making have often given voice. Chapter 3 then describes how the use of social media can improve journalism by engaging members of the public as conversation partners, information providers, fact checkers, and disseminators. Together, these first three chapters make a persuasive argument and show how a participating networking public can improve journalism and, indeed, does so in a number of instances.

As noted above, Russell's understanding of journalism is very inclusive as it comprises all of the kinds of public communication surrounding a given current event. In Chapter 4, this entails some serious weaknesses for the argument. In this chapter, the book examines fake news and remixes of current affairs as a central part of networked journalism and argues that actors using these formats can speak truth to power because they present it as satire (this being somewhat the same function as jesters undertook in medieval courts). The question, however, is whether this kind of public communication should even be considered journalism in the first place. I can understand how, for example, segments of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* that expose political hypocrisy and flip-flopping can be understood as journalism. But it might be stretching the argument to also consider the Yes Men as journalists. Although their high-profile publicity actions

have certainly influenced public discourse on social issues, it remains unclear what exactly makes them journalists rather than activists or guerilla communicators. When "they make issues newsworthy by creating spectacles for journalists to cover" (p. 118), are they not just sources – albeit unorthodox ones in terms of their highly innovative media strategies – rather than journalists?

The blurring of journalism's borders is precisely one of the chief points of the book, but especially in this chapter, the absence of a rigorous definition causes troubles for the soundness of the analysis and the strength of the argument. The chapter – as well as the rest of the book – is grounded heavily in analytical observations and provides only little room for theoretical exegesis, and when the purpose is that of mapping contemporary developments, this can be a highly effective strategy. However, as Kurt Lewin famously remarked, there is "nothing as practical as a good theory", and this chapter in particular could have benefitted from a more focused conception of journalism from the start. From my perspective, it would have helped make a stronger and more convincing argument.

Finally, Chapter 5 considers the future of news and asks important questions about how the tensions between professional and networked journalism, between journalists and publics, will develop and about how public engagement will be able to thrive "in the face of eroding civil rights, increased media concentration, and intense public mistrust of government and media" (p. 155).

In addition to the aforementioned issues that follow the very broad understanding of what journalism is, *Networked* has, I think, a weakness when it comes to cool-headedly recognizing that perhaps not all is wrong with the news industry. Established media organizations, for example, are trained to struggle with other powerful societal institutions that private individuals could have no hope of subjecting to closer scrutiny. And in spite of obvious examples of the opposite, institutional journalism also has practices for fact-checking and information verification that most bloggers and individual non-journalists have yet to match. If indeed "Bloggers everywhere serve as real-time fact-checkers and critics of the news of the day" (p. 77) and do so successfully, how is it that so much distorted and downright false information circulates in the blogosphere? Here, the book is not always successful in resisting the temptation of choosing those examples that fit the overall argument and leaving aside those that could instead have challenged it and pushed it further. I may be more conservatively inclined than the author, but it seems to me that she overestimates how ordinary people are currently helping journalism and simultaneously underestimates the continued importance of the institution.

That said, throughout the book Russell does make a strong argument for the potential advantages of having different publics participate in news-making. Even though *Networked* could have benefitted from a more rigorous definition of journalism and more nuances in its unfavorable judgment of the contemporary workings of the news industry, the book deserves to be recommended for its rich evidence of what the public can do (and often actually does) for journalism. As such, in spite of my complaints, this book is a good place

for journalism students, researchers, and practitioners to turn if they wish to know how ordinary people with digital technology can change journalism and challenge a conservative news industry.

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