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Book review:

Content Moderation and Fact-Checking. A study of Journalist's Information Practices in the Contemporary News Media Landscape

Amalia Juneström (2022) *Content Moderation and Fact-Checking. A study of Journalist's Information Practices in the Contemporary News Media Landscape*. Institutionen för ABM, Uppsala University, Uppsala

In the PhD-thesis *Content Moderation and Fact-Checking: A study of Journalist's Information Practices in the Contemporary News Media Landscape* Amalia Juneström explores the conditions shaping how journalists perform their work in the contemporary news media landscape. More specifically the study focuses on two practices within digital journalism: content moderation and fact-checking, and how journalists, and other news media professionals, construct these practices in relation to problems of misbehaving users, and the spreading of misinformation. *Content Moderation and Fact-*

Checking is a well-written thesis, with a comprehensive aim and addresses the following research questions (p. 21):

- How do journalists understand the information practices they engage in?
- What discourses on the emerging information practices of journalists can be identified?
- What are the infrastructural constituents of journalist's information in relation to the problems of misbehaving users and the spreading of mis-information?
- How do new rhetorical journalistic genres emerge through journalist's enactment of information practices in the information landscape of digital journalism?

Juneström's dissertation is written as a compilation thesis, consisting of an introductory summary chapter (kappa), and four published articles. Each article takes its point of departure in practices that journalists engage in – practices that Juneström argues are permeated by information, and therefore should be conceptualized as information practices. By framing what journalists do in this particular way, the thesis is situated in information studies and its contribution to this research field is clarified.

The development of the focal practices of the thesis – content moderation and fact-checking – are situated against the backdrop of contemporary digital journalism and its interdependency with the growth of the Internet and social media outlets. Juneström is reluctant to exaggerate the role of technology in journalism. She refutes any notion of technological determinism by repeatedly pointing to a combination of interacting forces, such as institutions, people and historical forces, that brought about the practices she is studying. Still, it is evident from the background Juneström outlines, that access to platforms, such as Facebook, and the increased use of smartphones, has profoundly affected the way people access and engage with news. Thus, while not being the main focus of the thesis, Juneström recognizes that the emergence of news media comments sections and fact checking organizations are dependent on, and their importance can partially be attributed to the increased use of digital tools.

Since the objects of study are interdisciplinary in character, the thesis draws upon and relates to research from several disciplines. Studies from the field of media studies is primarily used to outline what is known about online misconduct, whereas the parts on comment sections, content moderation and contemporary fact-checking foremost builds upon research within the field of journalism. Information studies research is used to discuss misinformation and disinformation, as well as notions of trust, information literacy and information poverty. In the mapping of previous information studies research, Juneström points to the knowledge gaps that the thesis seeks to address, particularly the lacking connection between research on mis- and disinformation and journalists' information practices. Furthermore, it is argued that applying the analytical gaze of information studies might enrich and broaden the understanding of journalists' engagement in content moderation and fact-checking as these practices then are understood as situated in "an information world" rather than "within the narrower space of the news media industry" (p. 30).

In the thesis, content moderation and fact-checking are theoretically framed as information practices. This framing plays an important role for motivating the relevance and position of the study within the research field of information studies. The definition of practice used is an interpretation of that of Theodore Schatzki's (2002), stating that practices are "bundles of activities" and "organized nexus of actions" (Juneström 2022, p. 44). The thesis however does not adhere to some of Schatzki's central claims, e.g. that there is nothing outside practice and that 'sayings' and 'doings' are inseparable. Although information practice is the umbrella concept, the thesis also makes use of several other theoretical concepts and traditions, of which the most important concepts are *information landscape*, *discourses*, *information infrastructures* and *genres*. The intricate and somewhat complex relationship between the manifold of concepts and approaches used in the thesis are explicated in the theoretical chapter. Juneström, almost literally, draws her own map of their interrelationship, which is described as follows:

[I]nformation infrastructure is conceptualized as an underlying structure that supports and holds together practices and discourses within the information landscape while also tying them to the landscape. Genres are conventionalized and typified forms of practice-discourse-infrastructure bundles (p. 54).

Each of the concepts corresponds with the analytical framework of one or more of the articles, and as such each concept contribute to shed light on different aspects of the practices studied. In the first article (“Emerging practices for managing user misconduct in online news media comments sections”) Juneström explores journalists’ daily work practices of managing offensive user-generated content online. Annemarie Lloyd’s (2006) concept information landscape is here used to explore the relationship between the practices studied and the context in which they occur. The study points to the importance of values, traditions and collective experiences of the journalistic environment for how content moderation and fact-checking are performed. In the second article (“Online user misconduct and an evolving infrastructure of practices: a practice-based study of information infrastructure and social practices”) the concepts of information practice and information infrastructure are deployed in order to understand how different practices for addressing online user misconduct are interconnected and can be seen as products of socio-technical actions. The third article (“The emerging genre of contemporary fact-checking”) uses the concept of genre, understood as typified rhetorical action (Miller 1984), to explore how fact-checking has evolved into a new media genre. The results show how the fact-checkers work, their methods and ways of communicating to a large extent have become typified. Furthermore, the practice of fact-checking is not only shaped by different needs in the contemporary news media landscape but also influenced by academic practices. In this way, fact-checking has evolved into a new journalistic genre that contributes to change the journalistic information landscape. The fourth and final article (“Discourses of fact-checking in Swedish news media”) draws on critical discourse analysis to explore how fact-checking is constructed discursively in the Swedish news media. Several conflicting and contradictory discourses and sub discourses were found, which indicates the complexity of how fact-checking is conceptualized.

With the aim of studying how the practices of content-moderation and fact-checking are constructed, experienced and understood by journalists, Juneström makes use of several different methods for data collection. The analysis of the first two articles is based on ten semi-structured interviews with eleven journalists and news media professionals from nine news organizations in Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and Canada. Juneström argues that the selection of multiple countries was beneficial as it allowed for observations of significant variations among countries and assured that the data collection would yield enough material. The third article reports a study in which web-content analysis is used for analyzing the content of three well-known American fact-checking organizations’ websites. The organizations were chosen based on their renowned status, which was assumed to affect their capacity to influence how fact-checkers in general perform their activities. The last study, reported in the fourth article, was a discourse analysis of 130 Swedish news articles from two leading newspapers, covering the topic of fact-checking. The particular newspapers were selected as they, because of their reach, could be expected to represent a mainstream view of the studied topic.

With her research, Juneström brings attention to how the changing conditions of the news media landscape contribute to creating and shaping journalistic information practices, and how, in these processes, established traditions of journalistic work are entangled with practices, methods and perceived problems of emerging online cultures. The thesis thus contributes with theoretical insights into how practices emerge and change but also presents important empirical findings into how the practices of content moderation and fact-checking are motivated and performed. The findings of the thesis stress the importance of ideological ideals, values and traditions for how problems of challenging user behavior are understood and acted upon, which questions assumptions of the technology playing the determinant role in this development. Juneström manages to get these results by deploying a manifold of methods and theoretical concepts that allows the different articles to shed light on various aspects of the phenomena studied. This is a strength of the thesis, however in the kappa this advantage is turned into a weakness. Rather than recognizing that each theoretical approach has the potential of

making important contributions in its own right, Juneström seeks to force these related, but at the same time very different approaches together into one theoretical apparatus. This is problematic for many reasons. For one, discourse and genre analysis are approaches that both give priority to language as the lens through which human action can be approached and understood. Practice theory on the other hand, is a reaction against this very position. It is thus evident that there are tensions and incongruencies between the approaches used that Juneström fails to address. Secondly, the question could also be raised whether practice theory could not have offered the analytical tools needed if Juneström had not chosen to disregard central aspects of the framework. A clarification as to why complementary approaches to the main framework was called for and their roles in the fulfillment of the aim would have strengthened the theoretical discussion of the introductory summary chapter and the thesis as a whole. In general, although the theoretical framework is well described motivations behind choices could have been further explored in order to increase transparency.

This is also the case with regards to the chosen methods, which are both valuable and well-motivated, still a better description of the selection processes would have been beneficial. In particular, this concerns the countries selected for the interview study and the delimitation of the data collection to western representative democracies. Especially the latter constitutes an imperative choice of path that despite its importance for the direction of the thesis is not addressed at any length, neither in the introduction, nor in the methods chapter.

Against the backdrop of current developments in the contemporary news media landscape, it goes without saying that the topic of Amalia Juneström's thesis is of great societal relevance. To form an understanding of the driving forces behind the work performed to counter the spread of misinformation and disinformation is critical in order to ensure the continuance of this important work. There are no observable tendencies that the spreading of rumors, propaganda and the planting of fake news will diminish. To the contrary, information is at the heart of the conflicts the world is currently facing. Hence, to explore the information practices that aim to moderate and balance misinformation, disinformation and misbehaving users constitutes an important part of the ongoing work of upholding democratic governance. In that way Amalia Juneström's thesis provides knowledge that may contribute to strengthen our democracy.

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