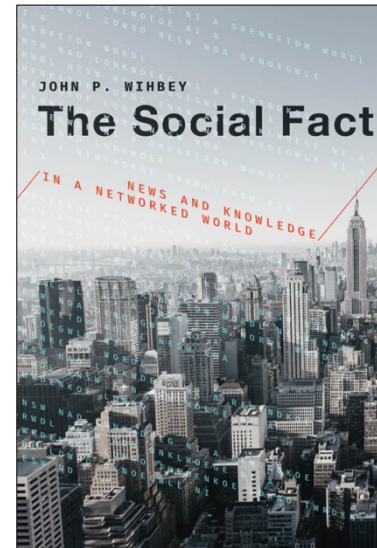


John P. Wihbey, **The Social Fact: News and Knowledge in a Networked World**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019, 328 pp., \$35.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Alexandra Hill
University of Southern California

In ***The Social Fact: News and Knowledge in a Networked World***, John P. Wihbey highlights the flashpoint faced by journalism today. He describes the structural shifts unfolding in the digital age pertaining to people’s access to knowledge and news. Wihbey contextualizes changes with historical stories and contemporary examples, from the creation of the telegraph to the rise of Facebook and Google. He asserts that intertwining changes that resulted from the rise of the Internet and the dawning of the digital age, media, and network science increased public knowledge. *The Social Fact* concludes that although journalism is threatened by the increased availability of public information, journalists can benefit by building closer ties with social science and better maintaining authenticity in reporting. Wihbey asks if journalism can remain relevant in this age of decentralized media presence and massively available information.



The author acknowledges the difficulty of obtaining truth in a sea of information. Social facts highlight the values and norms that shift societal ideas, especially in today’s digital media environment. The massive use of accurate or inaccurate information can be seen as fact, due to the mobilization of horizontal Internet-provided information sources like Google and social network use by large populations. The world’s “networked model” is the inflection point for changes to news and knowledge (p. 62).

Wihbey describes historical shifts in how people obtain news from hierarchical and less open information of the past to today’s oversaturation. The interplay between news and public knowledge shows how the fields of journalism and communication can also evolve to better understand citizen engagement with issues and prevent the proliferation of fake news and misinformation. Wihbey also urges media producers to establish the case for journalism, using analyses emerging from academic disciplines. This interpretation is increasingly necessary if journalism is to avoid being left behind by “A Nation of Googlers . . . looking for quick matches of facts” (p. 75), instead of turning to traditional news sources.

In the first two chapters, the author outlines networks of recognition as a precondition for obtaining knowledge about the world, by helping citizens to better unify through modern social media and common ties (p. 45). Chapter 2 also presents case studies relevant to the digital age—Black Lives Matter, police-involved shootings, and water in Flint, Michigan. These studies help explain the dynamic use of networked knowledge to improve democracy. Knowledge improves our understanding of human stories through journalism. The vast proliferation of information and public knowledge fosters greater recognition through journalism (p. 49). The democratization and lowering of barriers to communications increase support for

social movements like Black Lives Matter by allowing marginalized groups with little traditional influence to exercise influence by using online tools. Wihbey asserts that the proliferation of these social movements, built on media presence, expanded as citizens used social media to become journalists. He highlights how knowledge can allow citizens to unite through positive feedback that reinforces information about causes among like-minded individuals.

Chapter 3 defines enhanced misinformation and polarization resulting from technological advances. Chapters 4 and 5 then describe the implications of these negative attributes for new communication tech biases. *The Social Fact* describes communities brought together through social media, but also describes the general mistrust fostered by the spread of misleading content (p. 59). Audiences entrench their own positions through social media. They find distributed knowledge that backs their ideas, which negatively impacts the new social dynamics of democratization and mass production of communication and information platforms. Wihbey draws parallels between the positive implications of greater knowledge and the negative ideas that result from them. He highlights the paradox of information in the digital age: As connections improve within large communities, media activation can spread the contagion of false information. Social fact can triumph over empirical fact.

Chapters 6 and 7 pivot to the future of data and the news. They focus on the impact of machine learning and technology on journalism, as machines increasingly monitor social networks and analyze documents. Journalists will be the locksmiths for sensitive data in the future, as they provide “civic skepticism” about elites and institutions and real transparency of more open data (p. 133). In short, Wihbey argues that journalism will not become redundant as accessible information increases, but that journalists will instead help assure legitimacy and the spread of truth over falsehood.

The Social Fact concludes by describing internal dimensions in journalism altered during the digital age, including reduced audience engagement due to enhanced social media use and decreased public trust in institutions. Chapter 7 begins, “Journalism must become much smarter” (p. 138). Journalism should promote research and critical thinking in this data-driven, information-saturated age. As the networks of recognition extend geographically and socially, journalists need more information to stay relevant and engaged with their audiences. Journalism should play a new role by becoming more research oriented. Wihbey highlights knowledge and network competencies as key areas for journalistic reform and skills training to differentiate media’s product from social media (pp. 155–158). Another concern is that journalism needs to condense and accurately represent huge amounts of data into clear, concise stories. Today’s uncertainty for journalism raised by the vast sea of noise provided through Big Data to large populations is worrisome, and as a result Wihbey frames *The Social Fact* both in terms of journalism and Big Data’s implications on larger society.

The social facts of poor journalism and fake news in social media can take precedence over truth today. Wihbey suggests ways forward. He recommends that journalists create systematic knowledge and implicate different societal levels by articulating citizens’ stakes in issues. He cites crowdsourcing and uniting activists and policymakers in discussion as vital journalistic tasks. He also promotes establishing “value-added, knowledge-driven news products,” so “media institutions differentiate themselves” (p. 199). Lastly,

he encourages that journalism students should be taught about knowledge and network competencies for analyzing online contexts, network science, and social media management.

In sum, *The Social Fact* explores social media as it relates to journalism, and how the availability of knowledge differs over time. Wihbey describes the digital age in terms of societal shifts propelled by new technology. He argues that the cresting of social movements like #BLM, and firms like Google and Facebook, pushed society to an inflection point that changed the landscape of the public obtaining knowledge and caused the field of journalism to struggle to stay relevant as new social media sources presented breaking news stories more quickly and to larger audiences than traditional outlets. Wihbey thoroughly explains these shifts and suggests how journalists should respond to gain leverage. However, at times, the numerous threads in the book are overwhelming. At some points, it feels as if the book seeks to do too much in too confined a space, as each new thread establishes arguments and raises new questions while reading. The final chapters on journalism highlight the quandary faced by the profession today. It either needs to be expanded, providing more detail, or left to another book.

That said, Wihbey's book is vital for understanding journalism after the Internet's democratization of knowledge. It presents insights into journalism and society in general. It raises questions about the difference between "social" and "actual" fact. It considers what news will and should look like in the future (i.e., what will future journalists report? What events and data are already provided for in real-time on social media and through Google?) Finally, *The Social Fact* explores ways to maintain a socially aware population through journalism to combat the reinforcement of personal opinions with fake news.

Despite a lack of sufficient explanation in the final chapters, *The Social Fact* is a vital work that will help readers understand journalism today and how it will continue to be shaped in the digital age. Wihbey presents important insight into the evolution of information through the Internet and social media, and the extension of public knowledge by the news and journalism. The historical and current examples he describes showcase the trends in public knowledge and ground the work. Journalists and would-be journalists will especially benefit from this volume, because it will prompt them to rethink their approaches to choosing relevant writing topics and the goals of the profession itself, but it is also recommended for academics and a wider audience who want to broaden their ideas about the implications of the digital onslaught.