

Rena Bivens, **Digital Currents: How Technology and the Public Are Shaping TV News**, University of Toronto Press, 2014, 321 pp., \$32.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Michael W. Kearney
University of Kansas, USA

Television news has come a long way from the days when millions of Americans gathered around in unison to watch Edward R. Murrow take on Joseph McCarthy on *See it Now*. The consumption of news today, in comparison, is anything but synchronized. In addition to hundreds of TV channels—many of which are watched on digital video recording or online broadcasts—a countless number of websites, social networks, and software applications also deliver news in today's information age. As a result of these developments in digital media, journalists have entered an era vastly different than the one navigated by Murrow.



Journalists are not alone in dealing with these technological advancements. In ***Digital Currents: How Technology and the Public Are Shaping TV News***, Rena Bivens provides an account of both the journalistic and academic challenges associated with the influence of advancements in information and communication technologies on the production of television news. In this work, the author seeks to

shed light on a different aspect of the shifting relationships between journalism, technology, and society: the ways in which the public...has arrived within the daily routines that collectively operate in the production of mainstream news, and specifically television news, a news format that is seldom the focus within these wider discussions by academics and media commentators. (p. 6)

The book is thus focused on understanding the implications of “the public’s arrival in the media landscape” (p. 7).

Digital Currents is divided into eight chapters that provide in-depth examination of individual journalists and their relationships with the public, digital media, and news agencies. Chapter 1 covers key terms and describes the focus of the current study. The author’s research draws from analysis of eight mainstream news organizations as well as from fieldwork in Canada and the United Kingdom. In total, “124 journalists were either observed or interviewed; the news organizations scrutinized were CBC, CTV, and Global in Canada, and BBC, Channel 4, ITV, Sky, and APTN in the UK” (p. 16).

Chapter 2 examines academic research related to television news, placing a special emphasis on taking a social organization approach to analyzing news production processes. According to the author, a social organization approach reveals “the problems we encounter when past research has focused so heavily on constraining factors” (pp. 40–41). She further notes, “the limited research that has focused more seriously on journalistic autonomy tends to be dominated by analysis of news content as opposed to

production practices" (p. 41). Thus the selection and routines of news production, and news more generally, are described as a social construction and not merely a reflection of reality. In other words, news is made and shaped by journalists. The author then considers the ways in which constraints in news production affect television news. She thus makes a case for analyzing the ways in which journalists, as social actors, use digital tools to navigate constraints in the production of television news.

In chapter 3, the author examines journalism at the intersection of digital media and culture. Regarding today's blurred boundaries between journalists and the public, she suggests "we can strive to understand all of these fluctuations and ambiguities by considering what Bauman (2005) refers to as liquid modernity" (p. 76). With liquid modernity providing the contextual backdrop, she then introduces the Technology-Autonomy-Constraint (TAC) model in order to

reveal some of the shifts that are taking place within the production of television news while bearing in mind these foundational studies that carried so much weight in subsequent scholarly analyses, and engaging with reflections generated by the research underpinning this book and the bulk of more recent work on journalism practice. (p. 77)

In other words, "the purpose of this model is to allow us to conceive of the television news production process in light of the shifting roles of the public and of digital media" (p. 83). The author explains that a

theoretical autonomy-constraint ratio, which acts as an indicator of the ideal-typical ratio that can be associated with particular phases of news production...provides a useful tool for further analysis of the technology-autonomy-constraint relationship and the wider relationships developing with the public. (p. 78)

The TAC model proceeds in several phases, though the author notes these phases exist in a liquid state of flux. According to the model, the news production process begins with the intake and selection and assignment phases. In these phases, the inner structures of news organizations survey information from unconventional and established actors in order to select stories and assign journalists. Once assigned, journalists seek additional information from sources in the news-gathering phase. When enough information is collected, journalists enter the story-writing phase, which includes both writing and editing. In the final phase of the model, news organizations broadcast stories to the public, which, due to advancements in digital media, also supply the unconventional sources in earlier stages of news production. Bivens argues that as a result of this blurring between the public and journalists, "the largest obstacle faced by unconventional actors is concern over credibility" (p. 88).

The next three chapters provide more in-depth analysis of each stage of the news production process. Chapter 4 examines the intake phase that occurs when journalists interact with established actors, e.g., official sources and other news agencies, and unconventional sources, e.g., bloggers. The author maintains that even though journalists "argued that the use of 'unofficial' sources has become increasingly important for news coverage, which means that the public are more involved" (p. 103), "in the present study it was overwhelmingly clear that journalists rely on news agencies and that those agencies are a dominant source" (p. 94). The involvement of unconventional actors ultimately raises

concerns among news organizations surrounding safety and credibility of news discovered by unknown actors in unconventional spaces. For these reasons, "unconventional actors seem not to have made great inroads within the intake phase of television news production" (p. 125).

Chapter 5 examines ways in which newsmakers select information from the intake phase. In addition to traditional constraints like news values, stories, and institution-driven news, journalists are also constrained by advancements in digital media. For example, journalists spend more time monitoring digital feeds than pursuing investigative reporting. On the whole, however, television news values remain relatively unchanged. The author explains that although "unanticipated shifts to the planning formulated within editorial meetings can occur at any time . . . predictability remains an important, and much valued, factor within the news production process" (p. 147). If anything, advancements in digital media have further emphasized the importance of images and immediacy.

Chapter 6 focuses on the final stages of television news production in which journalists seek out sources, gather information, and edit down to the final package. In these stages, journalists experience pressures from the editing process, from top-down policies, and from journalistic norms. Interestingly, however, the author finds that departures from traditional norms on platforms such as Twitter, for example, occur mostly among "nonelite" journalists. Digital tools such as Twitter not only offer journalists more opportunities to interact with the public, they also streamline the collection of information from foreign correspondents and remote unconventional actors. Again, along with these changes, she notes an increased desire for traditional news production values:

the heightened value placed upon immediacy encourages the use of social networking services for breaking news, and Twitter is considered valuable in virtue of offering both speed and simplicity—although many news organizations are responding by re-establishing traditional power dynamics through the instruction of social media policies. (p. 219)

External pressures in news production are explored in Chapter 7. Much of the analysis in this chapter centers on the beliefs maintained by journalists about the audience. While previous research suggested a disconnected loop between journalists and audiences,

Findings in the present study diverge on this point . . . with journalists keen to discuss opportunities for interactivity and how journalism practice can develop towards a model that bears a closer resemblance to two-way communication, as opposed to the traditional one-to-many form of mass communication. (p. 222)

The author thus argues that the "more critical issue here is how journalists think about their audiences. It is clear that audiences are divided in terms of *how* they consume news, *when* they consume news, and *what* news they seek" (p. 223). The audience, in turn, plays an increasingly important role in the credibility of news organizations. The author contends that news organizations must learn to interact with or manage audiences in order to prevent the devastating effects of "exposure-gates," or intensive investigations of news organizations by unconventional actors.

Chapter 8 provides a succinct summary of main themes from the previous chapters. The author then discusses the implications on theory and future academic research of the overall relationship between journalists, digital media, and the public. She argues that in contrast to the TAC model, "The constraints-based approach also offered less flexibility to assess news production that incorporates both established and unconventional sources" (p. 262). She also examines the continued influence of traditional constraints on news coverage, stating: "despite the autonomy that journalists can exercise within their daily routines, traditional constraints continue to push news coverage in directions that are limited by elite perspectives supportive of the status quo" (p. 263). The author argues that while news agencies could feasibly alter their economic models and bureaucratic organization, a third factor of credibility remains the biggest challenge to unconventional actors.

Although the TAC model promises to be a valuable tool for analyzing relationships between technology, constraints, and autonomy in news production, future directions for research remain somewhat vague. Throughout the book, the author reminds readers "the TAC model itself is not a stable entity and . . . the prospect of 'liquid life' encourages us to think about these shifts in more flexible ways" (p. 91), but never defines or describes these "flexible ways." She does caution readers against predicting the future, noting that "interrelationships between digital media, journalism practice, and public behaviors will continue to shift, and any attempt to predict the future of news on the basis of this analysis is problematic" (p. 91). However, the author later emphasizes uncertainty while at the same time predicting an expanded role of social networking services and interactive digital media—e.g., "the dust will likely remain unsettled (perhaps a reflection of our liquid modernity) with news organizations continuing to face new scenarios as social networking services develop and future digital media ventures gain popularity and enter the media landscape," (p. 175) and, "Once again, these interactive strategies are in flux, but the future appears to be geared towards greater interactivity, particularly with news organizations devoting more time, effort, and resources to social networking" (p. 234). She likely envisions some degree of predictability—e.g., advancements in technology will continue—but never proceeds beyond the initial level of abstraction.

Moreover, while the author seamlessly integrates these findings with theory, *Digital Currents* missed several opportunities to contribute to journalism in practice. For instance, when discussing the television problem of providing more in-depth context and history—rather than discussing the possibility of more interactive or user-generated content-centered features, citizen journalism, and citizen digital media—she vaguely described limited attempts to provide more in-depth content online.

Overall, *Digital Currents* provides a rich and insightful account of television news today. Rena Bivens meticulously analyzes the intricate relationships with news organizations, digital media, and the public that both constrain and empower journalists. Her account of digital media and television news provides meaningful contributions to journalism and communications theory. *Digital Currents* reads well, though it is best recommended for those with some knowledge of the field.

References

Bauman, Z. (2005). *Liquid life*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.