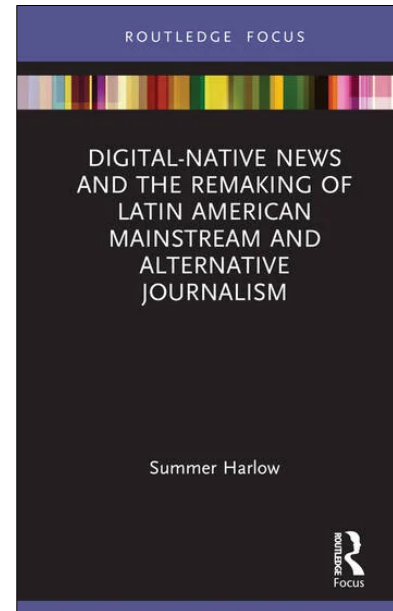


Summer Harlow, **Digital-Native News and the Remaking of Latin American Mainstream and Alternative Journalism**, London, UK: Routledge, 2022, 152 pp., \$47.96 (hardcover), \$19.96 (ebook).

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The slipperiness of terms such as “alternative media” and “mainstream media” has vexed journalism scholars for decades. Summer Harlow’s book, **Digital-Native News and the Remaking of Latin American Mainstream and Alternative Journalism**, introduces a fresh perspective to this debate. Harlow investigates digital-native news sites in Latin America that construct themselves as professional journalists committed to conventional, idealized tenets of journalism while also espousing to serve the public, human rights, and justice. Even as they criticize mainstream news media’s various failings and advance a distinct and innovative journalism, they refuse to call themselves “alternative” or “activist” media. This definitional problem serves as Harlow’s entry point to this debate, yielding rich insights into the variety of Latin American digital-native news sites (DNS, hereafter) and how they disrupt what it means to be alternative or mainstream in the context and reform the broader journalism landscape.



Harlow advocates a “nimble” approach (p. 118) in how researchers categorize journalism. Alternative, activist, and mainstream journalisms are not watertight, cohesive compartments that outlets can be sorted into unambiguously. Rather, Harlow finds that DNS presents characteristics of both alternative and mainstream journalism. A particular strength of the book is the effective operationalization of articulation theory (propounded by Stuart Hall (1986), and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985), as cited on p. 107) to study how Latin American DNS’ practices crossover and/or challenge mainstream and alternative journalism. These sites align with—or “articulate”—certain ideal type characteristics of mainstream and/or alternative media while disarticulating from others. DNS ameliorate or reform the journalism field through their articulations and disarticulations vis-à-vis the mainstream. They project a vision of what real journalism should be by creating articulations to the professionalism of mainstream media while simultaneously rejecting—or disarticulating—the concentration of ownership, biases, and commercialism, and developing articulations toward alternative journalism tenets like the pursuit of justice, participation, and diversity.

Digital-native news sites present a sui generis model, not quite alternative or mainstream, nor merely addressing deficiencies in either. Rather, they challenge the fields of journalist, activist, alternative, and mainstream, and offer an innovative approach: a distinct subfield that is motivated by the pursuit of real journalism, understood as a justice-centered professional journalism. This argument is woven through and substantiated in each chapter by focusing on how DNS articulate and disarticulate from mainstream

and alternative media based on the following criteria: financing, professionalism, audience relations, news values, practices and content, norms and ideology, and identities.

Chapter 2 discusses the financial innovation that DNS propose by using crowdfunding, direct advertising, community event sponsorships, etc., to retain their independence and cover violence, drug trafficking, and corruption ignored by the market-oriented mainstream media. Chapter 3 examines DNS' non-normative use of social media to engage their audience on an equal plane and build a sense of solidarity around the coverage of social issues. The news values, practices, and content of digital-native sites that adopt a feminist stance in resisting mainstream media's patriarchal foundations and offering a professional justice-centered journalism are examined in chapter 4. The following chapter switches the focus by surveying what *alternative* means in the context. While DNS emulate alternative media's focus on communities, commitment to social change, and prioritization of marginalized perspectives, they disarticulate by posturing as "professionals," rejecting alternative and activist labels to underline their nonpartisanship and by restricting audience's participation. We develop a finer appreciation for this posturing in chapter 6, which provides the audience's perspective. DNS respond to the audience's desire for professional, quality journalism that stands for justice, which they cannot find elsewhere in the news landscape. The concluding chapter offers a blueprint to replicate the study design to understand digital independent news in different contexts.

These chapters present an impressive distillation of a decade of qualitative and quantitative research on independent, digital-native news sites in Latin America. Focus groups and interviews with journalists from alternative and mainstream media, founders of digital sites, activists, and surveys of journalists and the audience are complemented with content analysis of social media posts and news coverage produced by DNS and mainstream media to provide a comprehensive picture of the landscape and the tensions within. The different national contexts of journalism are studied as operating within a larger, relatively cohesive Latin American model characterized by concentration of ownership, elite-capture, limited pluralism, and state censorship. Even so, Harlow uses the case-study format effectively to zoom into particular digital-native sites, contextualizing them within the specific (national) journalism field.

Particularly of note are the gender-focused sites introduced in chapter 4. Argentina's *La Nota*, *Alharaca* from El Salvador, *ContraCorriente* from Honduras, *GK* from Ecuador, and Venezuela's *Efecto Cocuyo* respond to a male-dominated media system where even as 35% of reporters are women, less than 3% of the stories deal with gender. A feminist ethic informs these sites' reportage, rejecting the mainstream media's pretense of objective, impartial coverage and instead being transparent about the reporters' biases and taking explicit stands on issues. They pursue parity in the sources cited, avoid harm, and are mindful of sensitivity in language use. Further, several outlets have dedicated mental health supports and policies to deal with trolling or harassment. Even so, these sites distance themselves from "alternative" or "feminist" labels and their pejorative connotations, partly because they seek recognition as legitimate, professional journalists. More important, they see their principles and practices not as activism but "real journalism" (p. 60). These DNS' efforts and justice-centered journalism are focused foremost on media reform, which eventually will feed into social change. Essentially, this chapter underlines why labels matter to journalists and their reformative objectives.

The book is a must-read for journalism scholars for rigorous theoretical, empirical, and analytical work and the holistic take on the debate over categorizations. For example, the chapter focusing on feminist news values also engages with financial models, professionalism, identities, and audience relationships in a seamless fashion. While it is to Harlow's credit that every chapter leaves you wanting more on Latin American digital-native journalism, a stronger engagement with the history of journalism (especially alternative journalism) is warranted. The brief summary of alternative media references its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s epitomized by the Nicaraguan revolutionary press and Bolivarian miners' radio. Their commitment to participatory development and social change, democratization of the media, and plurality of voices is noted, but not whether DNS emulated these. The extent of alternative media's popularity and social stature and why/whether alternative media went out of favor could be further clarified. This can provide a better understanding of the pejorative connotations that lead these sites to balk at alternative and activist titles. The air of novelty of DNS and the liminal, distinctive subfield they occupy can be further nuanced. While Harlow establishes that these sites' claim to distinction does not really hinge on technical innovation, technology is addressed mostly as a tool that journalists use. There is little engagement with the politics of technology and the potential conflicts it presents to DNS' reformative projects, especially on social media sites.

Another of Harlow's goals is to highlight the important work that DNS do in Latin America. She pushes against technodeterministic analyses that undermine the importance of these news sources in a context where a third of the population lacks access to the Internet. The sites she studies pose vital interventions to the journalism field, practicing the change they want to see in Latin American journalism. It is simultaneously an exhortation to internationalize media research, decentering the locales and reference points, and a questioning of the universal presuppositions of Western concepts and categorizations.