

Nikki Usher, ***Making News at The New York Times***, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2014, 294 pp., \$31.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by
David Domingo
Université libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

Print reporters long for the luxury of researching a story uninterrupted by the necessity of writing constant updates to their Web articles. Web editors obsessively reorganize the structure of the homepage even though many users never visit it. The audience is still a mystery in the age of Web analytics: Journalists know what readers click through, but they do not know what their readers expect from them. Nikki Usher's ***Making News at The New York Times*** reveals in meticulous detail the contradictions inherent in contemporary newsrooms. Instead of conducting a representative survey of hundreds of journalists, the author opted for the thick depiction and analytical insights offered by ethnography, focusing on one of the most influential media companies in the world. The fact that the *Times* has greater resources for innovative development than most other newsrooms means that its struggles with digital publishing are to be taken as a serious wake-up call for the whole industry.



I had thought that *Can Journalism Survive?* was the last newsroom ethnography (Domingo, 2014): In his study, David Ryfe (2012) convincingly suggested that to understand journalism today, we must look beyond the newsrooms struggling to innovate, putting them in the context of the many other social actors (bloggers, activists, media start-ups) that collectively shape the news. Usher had already done her fieldwork by then, and I see her book as the grand finale of a longstanding tradition in the sociology of newswork. What better way to celebrate the symbolic end of the industrial era in journalism (Anderson, Bell, & Shirky, 2014) than digging deeply into the guts of the greatest talisman of that age: *The New York Times*. Usher makes the most of a five-month intense ethnography conducted in 2010, vividly portraying the daily life of the business desk and introducing us to journalists who struggle with the contradictions between print values and online values. Their reflections are not abstract responses, but firmly grounded in specific practices and decisions that the researcher witnessed firsthand.

It is refreshing to find an academic book that speaks not only to sociologists, but also to a lay audience intrigued by the inner workings of newsmaking. While the author engages in a dialogue with the researchers who over the last decade have developed the core theoretical conceptions of online journalism, she keeps the discussion accessible and always connected to the rich ethnographic description of experiences and people. Journalists take center stage, and through them we see a profession in flux, their practices an exercise in "improvisation" (Usher, 2014, p. 194) to adopt new ways to produce the news. Usher's work confirms and gives analytical perspective to the *Times'* internal memo that exposed The Gray Lady's difficulties in pushing the entire newsroom staff to innovate in organizing the newswork (Benton, 2014). After all, "print still pays the bills and builds egos" (Usher, 2013, p. 3). The researcher does not hide a normative standpoint that makes her side with the journalists facing change: She wants them to preserve the valuable journalism for which *The New York Times* has earned a reputation. Her analysis is critical of business-driven decisions that push reporters to dilute the time they devote to

research and writing. The collective expertise of the newsroom is disrupted by the continuous business-driven demands for updates to electronic articles, production of interactive features, and new ways to foster audience participation.

The author structures the book around three central online journalism values, connected to a decade of studies that began in the same newsroom with the work of Pablo Boczkowski (2005) on early Web developments at *The New York Times* and two other U.S. newspapers. Usher updates these three classic values of hypertext, multimedia, and interactivity into a more precise trio of immediacy, interactivity (in the sense of user interaction with multimedia, explorable news products), and participation. The most striking conclusion if we compare Usher's findings with those of a decade's worth of empirical research in different countries (see Domingo & Paterson, 2011 and Paterson & Domingo, 2008) is that the routines and values of the online journalists Usher observed in 2010 are similar to the practices and identities of other online newsrooms of all sizes. In the concluding chapter, Usher takes a wider historical perspective, revisiting the pioneering research of sociologists such as Herbert Gans (1979). Despite the dramatic technological changes in news production and distribution brought on by the Internet, "many of the routines and practices of news production observed in the golden era of news ethnography remain constant" (Usher, 2013, p. 228). Institutional inertia prevails despite the sheer amount of human and material resources devoted to innovation at *The New York Times*.

The humbling antideterministic effect of Usher's study is undeniable: After all these years, even at *The New York Times*, "reporters are caught in the middle of a newspaper that has not figured out what it wants to be" (ibid., p. 139). Usher's ethnography opens up—in raw and transparent ways—how the combination of journalists' decisions and managerial strategies are shaping a contradictory set of practices that strives for relevance in a hypercompetitive environment. Reporting for the print version of the *Times* is often a solo project based on innumerable hours of interviews, research, and fact-checking. Time is still the most precious tool in the production of good journalism. Multimedia stories are a product of teamwork, with messy consequences for how a story is told in the end, as print reporters, video producers, and web developers negotiate their requirements and possibilities in time-consuming meetings. Ironically, while newspaper content passes through multiple filters of supervision before publication, the hierarchy of stories for the online homepage usually relies on the decisions of a single person and the efforts invested in multimedia content are quickly lost in the flow of breaking news. The accumulation of new online tasks and the push for constant updates result in exhausted reporters, who often feel they are "publishing for publishing's sake" (ibid., p. 134).

Usher was granted the privilege of full access to editorial meetings and production processes. And in an unusual twist, she also was able to use the names of most participants, giving an extra level of detail to the descriptions of moments and decisions. The book is yet another brilliant example of the explanatory power of ethnography. The challenge that journalism studies must now address (Anderson, 2013) is to take the method beyond the newsroom, to connect it with the other actors engaging in the collective construction of news.

References

- Anderson, C. W. (2013). *Rebuilding the news: Metropolitan journalism in the digital age*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Anderson, C. W., Bell, E., & Shirky, C. (2014). *Post-industrial journalism: Adapting to the present*. New York, NY: Tow Center for Digital Journalism. Retrieved from <http://towcenter.org/research/post-industrial-journalism-adapting-to-the-present-2/>
- Benton, J. (2014, May 15). The leaked *New York Times* innovation report is one of the key documents of this media age. *NiemanLab*. Retrieved from <http://www.niemanlab.org/2014/05/the-leaked-new-york-times-innovation-report-is-one-of-the-key-documents-of-this-media-age/>
- Boczkowski, P. J. (2005). *Digitizing the news: Innovation in online newspapers*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Domingo, D. (2014). Review of David Ryfe's *Can journalism survive? An inside look at American newsrooms*. *Digital Journalism*, 2(1), 115–117.
- Domingo, D., & Paterson, C. (2011). *Making online news: Newsroom ethnographies in the second decade of Internet journalism* (vol. 2). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Gans, H. J. (1979). *Deciding what's news: A study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and TIME*. Chicago, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Paterson, C. A., & Domingo, D. (Eds.). (2008). *Making online news: The ethnography of new media production* (vol. 1). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Ryfe, D. M. (2012). *Can journalism survive?: An inside look at American newsrooms*. New York, NY: Polity Press.