

# Knowledge Landscapes North America

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FRANK KELLETER

## Four Theses on the News

No theory of knowledge is complete without a theory of the news. But any theory of the news needs to confront the news' wide-ranging, often incoherent history. This is a history of institutions, people, ideas, texts, media, and other actors that, collectively but never in unison, kept (and keep) producing theories about what they were (and are) doing.<sup>1</sup> 'The news,' in other words, exists as a praxeological historical ensemble, not amenable to philosophical abstraction exactly because philosophies of the news are bound up with the shifting practices of making 'the news.'

The best way, then, to examine this crucial sphere of modern knowledge is to advance swiftly from heuristic framings to empirical investigations: from theory to research. Let it be said that the present essay does not (yet) take this step. As a first attempt at orientation in a vast landscape of knowledge production, it takes its cue from Hanjo Berressem and Sarah Wasserman's characterization of the news "as a historical phenomenon *and* as a conceptual construct that shapes how and what we know." Drawing on the subtitle of Andrew Pettegree's 2014 book, *The Invention of News: How the World Came to Know About Itself*, Berressem and Wasserman invite considerations of modern epistemology that include the operational self-reference by which any production of knowledge in the age of mass media is not only about something in the world, but also always about itself.

This essay tries to follow up on these observations. Written, like most scholarly texts today (and certainly like all news), under a strict deadline, it is itself indicative of a culture of knowledge production for which the 'new' is most commonly associated with the 'next' rather than the 'additional.' By sheer temporal necessity, then, my essay favors theoretical pronouncements over empirical contributions. In doing so, I hope not to be acting against my own better

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<sup>1</sup> On the agential status of non-human forces of cultural reproduction, see Latour, *Reassembling the Social* and *An Inquiry*. On the pragmatic compatibility of actor-network-theory (with its interest in historically situated practices across cultural domains) and systems theory (with its interest in domain-specific self-descriptions), see Kelleter, "Diplomatie" and *Serial Agencies*.

judgment. Rather, the following four theses will try to do two things simultaneously: they want to set the frame for more precise investigations to come (*tempore volente*) and to do justice to the praxeological auto-generativity of the news itself. Certain grandiloquent generalizations—like the one just made—will not be entirely avoidable in this setup. I am aware that such generalizations often serve to heighten the theoretical charisma of academic writing but more often function as strategies to excuse oneself from the concrete work of archival exploration (both analytical and syncretical: needless to say, there is always more existing research on any topic than we recognize when we first approach it). In my defense, I can point to the tentative character of my theses. I hope they will be understood as preliminary steps toward (even) more empirical studies than currently exist, ready to be overridden by results they will perhaps have helped to prepare.

First Thesis: *Before there was “the news,” there was “the new.”*

People have always exchanged information about recent events or heretofore unknown facts—about ‘news’ in the original sense of the term. Such exchange is probably a basic property of all human culture. However, only in the sixteenth century the expression ‘the news’ (with direct article and singular verb) started to denote more—or something other—than a novelty that is being reported, namely that report itself. The OED lists the first such usage for 1532. A hundred years later, Ben Jonson’s satire *The Staple of Newes* (1631, first performed 1625) already employed the term as a matter of course. Jonson’s play offered one of the earliest literary reflections of the newly emerging pamphlet business. In the 1620s, the London publisher Nathaniel Butter had joined forces with a number of colleagues to print news bulletins that collected miscellaneous information about foreign events, culled from various sources. The Thirty Years’ War, in particular, encouraged the repeated—though not always regular—publication of international news in England (often translated from the Dutch). In 1622, some of these bulletins evolved into a periodical soon to be called *Weekly News from Italy, Germany, Hungaria, Bohemia, the Palatinate, France and the Low Countries*—the first English newspaper, published by Butter.<sup>2</sup>

The most innovative features of Butter’s *Weekly News*—periodical publication, assorted content, serial textual forms—need to be seen in the context of another innovation, occurring almost simultaneously: the shift in the epistemo-

<sup>2</sup> On Butter and early English newspapers, see Raymond; Clarke.

logical sense of the word ‘new.’ Francis Bacon’s *Novum Organum* (1620), published around the same time as Butter’s first bulletins, makes a strong—and at the time unorthodox—case for the superiority of recent over traditional forms of learning. Bacon argued that established ways of knowing the world, far from expressing the wisdom of the ages, were “idols” that stood in the way of intellectual progress:<sup>3</sup>

The idols and false notions which have already preoccupied the human understanding, and are deeply rooted in it, not only so beset men’s minds that they become difficult of access, but even when access is obtained will again meet and trouble us in the instauration of the sciences, unless mankind when forewarned guard themselves with all possible care against them. (19)

On this view, ‘new’ knowledge is no longer associated with the frivolous, the modish, or the untested. Rather, novelty now begins to signify liberation from superstition and myth. Prior to this semantic shift—which would be developed further in the so-called “querelle des Anciens et des Modernes” (1687–1716)—novelty in the world was commonly explained in one of three ways: as the result of supernatural intervention, as cyclical recurrence, or as the recombination of familiar elements. Bacon’s *Novum Organum* placed newness into yet another temporal structure. The new now became an advance, a leaving behind of something obsolete, a step forward in some larger movement: the practical indication and self-referential expression of modernity. Our own contemporary assumption that knowledge is dependent on innovation has (one of) its roots here.<sup>4</sup>

Importantly, both developments—the emergence of periodical news and the emergence of a self-assertive epistemology of newness—are intimately connected to the invention of print technology. In terms of reading practices, early modern print culture enabled a theory of cognition which based knowledge no longer exclusively on the deep, meditative study of a few authoritative texts but, increasingly, on the ongoing reading of *publications*, that is, on keeping up with the latest releases that document a current state of learning. As a result, modern knowledge—Bacon’s “novum organum”—inevitably defines itself as

<sup>3</sup> Bacon’s argument is more subtle than can be represented here. Altogether, *Novum Organum* employs a rhetorical strategy that pays honor to antique knowledge while inverting the epistemological understanding of the terms “old” and “new.” Thus, traditional learning is identified both as a necessary foundation and an outmoded forerunner of modern knowledge: as “young” in terms of its early position in human history (see Bacon 62–63).

<sup>4</sup> On various historical explanations of newness, see North. Boris Groys describes (modernist) newness as an effect of artistic-philosophical self-positioning in a larger “cultural economy” of values. On the “querelle,” see Burke; DeJean.

knowledge that progresses. In this regard, it is explicitly marked off from wisdom.

With print, then, new knowledge often appears to be the only one worth having. Historically, this development is part and parcel of a media evolution that replaces *event-based* news (pamphlets of the early modern era) with increasingly fast-paced *periodical* news (newspapers in the form of weeklies and dailies). It is in the course of this transformation that the term “news” begins to develop a specific sense, disentangling itself—though never completely—from earlier meanings, in which it referred to extraordinary occurrences, dangerous innovations, or marvelous travels. Sometimes these novelties took the shape of fantastic tales about faraway places inhabited by strange creatures. Evidently, ‘the news’ and ‘the novel’ are not only etymologically related.<sup>5</sup> As a matter of fact, both types of (modern) storytelling are often distinguished more in terms of cultural self-definition than in terms of narrative practice. This shall be my next point.

Second Thesis: *The news reports a double distinction about itself.*

The news in its modern sense—as the miscellaneous, periodical, and printed (or otherwise mediated) collection of supposedly recent and empirical information—has always been engaged in a struggle of self-definition against at least two other forms of communication with which, however, it continues to share important structural features. No matter what else the news is concerned with, it is always also concerned with its own double distinction from, on the one hand, fiction, gossip, and rumor, and, on the other hand, political or commercial types of public relations, as in government decrees, state propaganda, or advertisement.

This is not to say that the news is non-fictional or non-partisan (or even always new). On the contrary, the news is inevitably preoccupied with its structural resemblance to rumor and promotional communication exactly because it needs to stage its own distance from these other types of ‘novelty’ in order to be visible as news at all. In reality, of course, fiction and gossip (as well as old information) have always been present inside periodical news media. However, at least since the nineteenth century they have been assigned a special place in them. Typically and tellingly, newspapers have generated a clearly defined sectional order that virtually copies the medium’s evolving self-distinction from

<sup>5</sup> On the transition from pamphlets to newspapers, see Wenzel 116; Pettegree. On the changing meaning of the term ‘news,’ see Habermas 72-73 (discussing the shift from ‘Neuigkeit’ to ‘Nachricht’) and Kelleter, *Amerikanische Aufklärung* 308.

other media into the medium itself. Consider the famous *Feuilletonstrich* (or *ligne noir*) in nineteenth-century German and French newspapers which physically marked off the news from the non-news, the facts from the fiction, and sometimes the allegedly new from the tacitly old. Except that this demarcation line is always permeable so that early newspaper novels intervened directly in current affairs, while nineteenth-century political news typically unfolded like novels, that is, in continuing stories with plots, conspiracies, protagonists and antagonists, etc.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, sensationalist news (e.g., in the American penny press and later tabloid formats) makes the permeability of fact and fiction its very appeal and program. Even today, however, it does so as a clearly marked and easily recognizable news genre. Thus, for most customers who pick up papers like the *National Enquirer* at the supermarket counter to read outlandish tales about their favorite—or most hated—media characters (typical fabrications over the years have included reports about Michael Jackson’s nose falling off or Michelle Obama filing for divorce because “she has all the dirt on Obama’s 12 women!”), the thrill of such stories seems to reside less in their fictionality than in how these fictions reach us in the material guise of a news medium.

While tabloids are an extreme example—and deliberately operate as such—the reporting of distant events is a defining feature of all modern periodical news. Distance should be understood here both in terms of geography and probability. No matter where we consume the news (at home or in public), it typically claims to bring near what is far away. In other words, it tries to make us care about something that otherwise might not concern us. To this purpose, the news regularly selects the disruptive and startling as newsworthy and transforms it into an urgent matter of concern. In doing so, of course, the news also shapes our perception of what is near and probable. Several studies have shown how regular news consumption can make audiences believe that they live in more dangerous or violent worlds than is actually the case.<sup>7</sup> As a result, people in Saarbrücken, Germany can fear the loss of their pensions because of what is happening in Athens, Greece—or people in Trenton, Missouri can fear for their lives because of what is happening in Kobani, Syria.

<sup>6</sup> German periodicals and the “permeability” of the *Feuilletonstrich* are currently being investigated in the Popular Seriality Research Unit’s project “Serial Narration in Popular German-Language Periodicals from 1850 to 1890” (Stockinger, Scherer, and Grumbrecht); see also footnote 13. On European newspaper novels as “fictional news,” see Bachleitner. On American newspaper novels of the antebellum era, see Stein.

<sup>7</sup> See George Gerbner’s “mean world syndrome” and other investigations inspired by cultivation theory. The spatio-temporality of the news—its wavering between distance and proximity, the new and the old—is also explored by Alain De Botton.

To put it another way: the selectivity of the news creates realities. The fact that these creations can be doubted, like all realities, does not make them less real. Of course it can be asked why the killing of thirteen people in a Paris editorial office in 2015 is global news while the killing of hundreds of people by Boko Haram on the very same day in Nigeria is not. Why is it that the death of some 2,700 people after a terrorist attack in New York is experienced as a self-evident moment of (inter)national trauma—a turning point in history even—while comparable death tolls in other parts of the world or from less spectacular causes hardly register on our historical consciousness? The answer is that this is the reality of the world as known and made knowable by the news. In particular, the temporality of the news cycle, with its inherent interest in ‘breaking news,’ is badly equipped to represent processes of long duration. This does not mean that the news has a weak memory but that it privileges certain temporal effects over others (e.g., the single hurricane over the process of climate change).<sup>8</sup> In this manner, the news produces its own temporal realities, not only favoring but often also fostering the short-term solution, the quick response, the drastic change (rescue missions, air raids, resignations).

This tendency of the news to agitate its recipients is more than just a commercial strategy. Excitement about distant events is closely related to the second self-distinction mentioned above: the one that marks off the news from sovereignty and publicity. There is an explicitly political, often specifically republican, motif at play here. Historically, bourgeois newspapers aimed and claimed to replace arcane types of communication associated with the aristocratic court. From the beginning, therefore, broadsheets, bulletins, and periodicals liked to describe themselves as *democratic* media, and this not only in the sense that as print media they were ideally available to everyone but in the sense that their very existence was said to indicate and even to guarantee the people’s participation in public affairs. In fact, with the appearance of print news and its self-performance as a democratic medium, the very meaning of terms such as ‘the people,’ ‘the public,’ and ‘opinion’ changed in ways still not fully explored after Lippmann’s, Dewey’s, and Habermas’s classic discussions of the subject.

Thus, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a new communicative and institutional sphere called ‘the press’ readily looked upon itself—before any constitutional document did so—as a fourth power (*quatrième pouvoir* in Balzac’s later canonical description). In 1840, Thomas Carlyle retrospectively

<sup>8</sup> More precisely, global warming—as a phenomenon that is “massively distributed” in our lifeworlds (Morton 45), without any one unified cause or expression—can best be illustrated in our media by single critical events such as floods or hurricanes. Only the frequency, then, with which such crises reoccur, will turn climate change into a durable news concern. (I am indebted to Christian Kloeckner for this observation.)

ascribed this idea to Edmund Burke, who in Carlyle’s account called “the Reporters’ Gallery” in Parliament “a *Fourth Estate* more important far” than the other three (158). Similarly, Thomas Jefferson in 1787 famously wrote from Paris to Edward Carrington: “were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter” (880).

Relying on statements such as these, the bourgeois press since the eighteenth century has commonly fashioned itself as an official democratic institution, that is, as a force that operates as an agent rather than a mere observer in the creation of political legitimacy. Significantly, this self-definition rests on the press’s declared ability to professionally distinguish rumors from news, and news from government communication. In this interpretation, the news is all about the professional production of a type of information that supposedly enables a *res publica*. Whatever else the news tells its readers, it also tells them this: you need the news in order to act as citizens, for a citizen is by definition an informed citizen. Accordingly, already eighteenth-century newspapers regularly described scenes of newspaper reading. And they usually did so to depict news consumption as a civic necessity, later even a civic duty, comparable to the act of voting.<sup>9</sup>

In short, the news reports about itself that it produces citizenship. This is true even for oppositional, alternative, or group-specific versions because these, too, typically claim to make visible what would otherwise remain invisible or hidden away. Whatever else it communicates, the news always also communicates this self-understanding. Therefore, the truest manifestation of *political* news—‘truest’ to its self-image, that is—exists in the exposure of secret plots. As the U.S. *National Gazette* wrote on July 25, 1792, at the beginning of a decade of partisan newspaper wars (which were ultimately waged about competing notions of the term ‘freedom of the press’): “Whenever a government abounds with [...] mysteries, you may be assured that something is rotten.”<sup>10</sup> The most celebrated moments in the political history of the news—the French Revolution, the U.S. Alien and Sedition Acts, Watergate, etc.—are all about the bringing to light of powerful conspiracies. Thus, while news consumption normally follows a pattern of soothing regularity, the content consumed in this manner often thrives on scenarios of dramatic irregularity and sudden threats to social order. Following a similar logic of discontinuity, non-political news finds its favorite topics in natural catastrophes and spectacular interruptions of daily life. Entire

<sup>9</sup> On the republican topos of voting and newspaper reading as heroic activities, see Kelleter, *Amerikanische Aufklärung* 532.

<sup>10</sup> On the newspaper wars and opposing notions of the term ‘freedom of the press’ in the United States in the 1790s, see Kelleter, *Amerikanische Aufklärung* 592–612.

news organizations, like CNN, owe their existence to disasters and wars (which are visible and real to most observers only through their news representation). From the perspective of the news, the public is always in crisis—this is why it needs the news.

Third Thesis: *Once invented, the news returns every day.*

What does it mean that the term ‘news’ can refer both to what is being communicated (novel pieces of information) and to the professionalized institutions that do the communicating (‘the news’ with direct article and singular verb)? Already in the eighteenth century, the newsworthiness of many a piece of information was determined more by the media logic of regular publication than by the novelty—or sometimes even the relevance—of the information gathered and presented. Gradually replacing the early modern news pamphlet, which adapted its frequency of appearance to the temporality of a specific event, the modern newspaper was forced to produce news even when nothing strikingly new could be reported. This explains why periodical media can reuse old material and still look new. In this fashion, newspapers have always reprinted stories or picked up old pieces from other sources without risking immediate obsolescence.<sup>11</sup> Their media content may be repetitive but their media practice is always (again) up to date. In fact, it would be mistaken to think of such practices of reprinting merely in terms of thematic repetition. What we are dealing with is the media logic of recurrent renewal—and this logic always needs to adjust itself to the non-synchronicity of technological developments and market demands. In other words, when the production of new material cannot keep up with the speed of distribution, periodical media need to recycle existing content. The reprinting of miscellaneous items from national publications in local newspapers should be seen here, not as an insistent reiteration or ideological inculcation, but as delayed transmission within a larger media system of daily reading (even broadcast cultures know such moments of delay). Newsworthiness usually results from the temporal requirements of the news cycle, not the other way round.

To put it in a nutshell, the recycling of ‘old news’ is a strategy of systemic renewal. As such, it makes clear why modern news media can report on their own acts of reporting as if these were news events themselves: a system of self-

<sup>11</sup> On the role of syndication in this context, focusing on nineteenth-century newspaper publications of literary fiction, see Johanningsmeier. Some of my following observations have emerged from conversations with MaryAnn Snyder-Körber.

referential reproduction perhaps most visible in what in the U.S. is called punditry. Nowhere else is it more obvious—including to the actors themselves—that periodical news does not simply report or distribute what is new but that it literally *makes* news. The undying news genre of the scandal is a case in point, because unlike natural disasters (and some wars), most scandals would not even exist without the news. Celebrity scandals, in particular, are almost by definition news scandals. In fact, the coverage of public spectacles is typically concerned with people or actions made famous by exactly this type of self-referential coverage. (There are no ‘celebrities’ outside the news media.) Humanist critics tend to approach such auto-creative “media events” (Dayan and Katz) as if they were the results of manipulation. Yet, contrary to Daniel Boorstin’s suspicion, there is nothing “pseudo” about media-generated affairs. Rather, we are witnessing the unique reality of self-reinforcing technological mass communications. The media scandal and the pundit debate, it can be said, are *pure* news.

As a result of this internal generativity it is inconceivable that Western media democracies would ever experience a day *without* news. Consider what Niklas Luhmann has called the evolutionary unlikelihood of daily news, especially when they are packaged in recurring preformatted programs and time slots:

Wir sind an tägliche Nachrichten gewöhnt, aber man sollte sich trotzdem die evolutionäre Unwahrscheinlichkeit einer solchen Annahme vor Augen führen. Gerade wenn man mit Nachrichten die Vorstellung des Überraschenden, Neuen, Interessanten, Mitteilungswürdigen verbindet, liegt es ja viel näher, nicht täglich im gleichen Format darüber zu berichten, sondern darauf zu warten, daß etwas geschieht und es dann bekannt zu machen. (*Realität der Massenmedien* 53)<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Luhmann continues, referring to Lennard Davis’s study of the origins of the English novel: “So das 16. Jahrhundert in der Form von Flugblättern, Balladen, Kriminalgeschichten aus Anlaß von Hinrichtungen etc. Es gehörte beachtlicher Unternehmensgeist, eine zunächst sicher risikoreiche Markteinschätzung und eine für Informationsbeschaffung ausreichende Organisation dazu, wenn man ein Unternehmen starten wollte auf Grund der Erwartung, daß auch nächste Woche genügend druckbare Informationen anfallen würden” (54). In Kathleen Cross’s translation: “We are used to daily news, but we should be aware nonetheless of the evolutionary improbability of such an assumption. If it is the idea of surprise, of something new, interesting and newsworthy which we associate with news, then it would seem much more sensible not to report it in the same format every day, but to wait for something to happen and then to publicize it. This happened in the sixteenth century in the form of broadsides, ballads or crime stories spawned in the wake of executions etc. It would take considerable entrepreneurial spirit, a market assessment that would initially be certain to involve risk, and sufficient organizational capacity for gathering information if one wanted to set up an enterprise based on the expectation that next week

Put differently, what reaches us as news are not only reports of distant events but also our own, closest media practices. When Hegel said that newspaper reading in modern societies replaces religious worship, he was talking about a technological time regime that later observers have termed print capitalism—perhaps better: media capitalism—and that more recently has also been discussed as popular seriality.<sup>13</sup> In fact, all major news media since the nineteenth century (newspapers, radio, television, etc.) are at the same time predominant media of serial storytelling. The news evolved not only in tandem with but squarely *within* the same media as all our chief fictional serial storytelling formats. The news is in the truest sense of the term a force of popular seriality. This means, among other things, that like its fictional cousins, it creates systemic trust in the improbable reality of its own persistence. By packaging proliferating narratives and information, both old and new, into variation-prone structures, schedules, and genres, the news day in, day out sustains the illusion that the unexpected always comes in a familiar format—that there will forever be something *following* from our present-day excitements and that each disaster is at the same time a continuation of our stories, because the new and the unsettling always reach us in the reassuring shape of what is already known. Serial media reproduce a sense of infinite futurity without which capitalist market cultures would threaten to collapse at every crisis point.

Fourth Thesis: *News professionalism in the digital era provides serial self-referentiality with only little serial self-reflexivity (so far).*

We are living in interesting times, when digital media threaten traditional news formats with amateur information practices that confront professional journalism's business model with supposedly even more democratic—and certainly less cost-intensive—communications. Does this mean that social networks will

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too there would be enough printable information available" (Luhmann, *Reality of the Mass Media* 25).

<sup>13</sup> See various publications connected to the Popular Seriality Research Unit (DFG-Forschergruppe 1091: 2010–2016), based at the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies (Freie Universität Berlin) with additional projects in Göttingen, Hannover, and other places: Kelleter, *Populäre Serialität, Media of Serial Narrative*; Mayer; Denson and Sudmann, and others. On "print capitalism," see Anderson. On Hegel and the news, see De Botton 31. Hegel's *bon mot* about "the reading of the morning newspaper" as "the realist's morning prayer" ("Das Zeitungslesen des Morgens früh ist eine Art von realistischem Morgensegen") is taken from "Aphorismen aus Hegels Wastebook" (547), later popularized by his biographer Karl Rosenkranz (*Hegels Leben*, 1844). My following sentences modify observations from Kelleter, "Trust and Sprawl."

fundamentally change or even abolish what we call 'the news'? It seems fair to say that we are confronted with a process of competitive coevolution. In assessing this process, there are good reasons to distrust the maverick self-understanding of digital communication, but we should also be wary of the distinction strategies of established media. In fact, the differences between professional and amateur types of journalism may be smaller than our embattled news institutions like to claim. Consider that long before the World Wide Web, print journalism's routine invocations of professional quality control, institutionalized fact-checking, an ethos of research, etc. regularly went hand in hand with remarkable uniformity in the selection and evaluation of news. Partisan opinion polarization has characterized daily news ever since the eighteenth century. Nineteenth-century U.S. newspapers, in particular, were fiercely biased; many were founded with the explicit purpose of supporting a political party, social cause, or some local election campaign, even as they paid tribute to civic definitions of newsmaking.

Against this background, digital media do not seem to be doing something entirely new or disruptive but they certainly amplify and redirect old practices in interesting ways (while always communicating their own allegedly revolutionary nature, casting these amplifications as inexorable innovations). Thus, despite the obvious differences between professional journalism and social media, many types of digital shaming are structurally akin (in terms of their self-propelling momentum and their consequences for the people involved) to the logic of gaffe journalism, just as gaffe journalism has evolved from the more respectable modes of investigative journalism and muckraking.<sup>14</sup> And just like the democratic value of early twentieth-century muckraking was not diminished by the simultaneous existence of a yellow press, so the existence of cybermobbing in the digital age does not lessen the political force of citizens recording structural injustices on their cell-phones.

In other words, when bystanders document everyday cases of racialized police brutality in the U.S. today, such acts of civic witnessing basically function as informal productions of newsworthiness. Given professional journalism's readiness to rely on official announcements, including the time-saving but self-reinforcing iteration of its own accounts, these practices of dispersed corrective reporting usually tend to highlight just how much our professional news media are involved in the reproduction of the political and economic systems they are reporting on. In cases where it really counts (say, institutional racism, the 'war on terror,' austerity ideologies, etc.), established news outlets of the early

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<sup>14</sup> On gaffe journalism as a viral form born out of journalism's own sense of political impotence or even anonymity, see De Botton 63–64.



twenty-first century exhibit astounding similarities across the generic spectrum. (In covering the 2015 Greek economic crisis, German tabloids and German quality newspapers differed chiefly in tone, not in substance.) Thus, what is sometimes called the crisis of legitimate journalism is perhaps better described as a crisis in the institutionalization—including the vocational training—of current news media.

We find here an important difference between the news and other types of popular seriality. There is a rich body of scholarship on the high degree of auto-generativity that is typical of serial forms.<sup>15</sup> Most of these studies agree that self-referentiality is not some gratuitous extra that a producer can choose to affix to serial texts or not, but one of their defining (inherent) features. Since popular series are narratives of recursive progression (i.e., texts that continually need to readjust possible continuations to whatever information has already been established and is still remembered), they are obliged to monitor their own development if they want to be able to continue at all. Thus, in open-ended narratives which develop in constant feedback with their equally open-ended consumption—a definition that would seem applicable to the news as well—serial self-referentiality usually fulfills a *reflective* function. Put differently, the recursivity of popular series virtually forces these formats to pay attention to their own evolution, and this includes attention to the material and technological conditions of their continued existence. We can describe them as self-observing systems, in the sense that they are never just the ‘product’ of intentional choices and decisions, even as they involve intentional agents (most notably, people) for whom they generate real possibilities of choosing, interpreting, appropriating, extrapolating, objecting, and so on. In shaping the self-understanding of their actors, serial narratives attain agential status themselves; understood as praxeological networks (rather than settled narrative sequences), they almost always experiment with formal identities. They think via dispersed participants about alternative narrative possibilities, and they employ human practitioners (who are sometimes much younger than the series in question and who will often express a sense of serviceable commitment to it rather than a sense of originating authorship) for purposes of self-reproduction. In this fashion—as entities of distributed intention—popular series not only pay permanent attention to the variation possibilities of their content but typically also to the history of popular seriality itself, including changing generic options and media affordances.

<sup>15</sup> See Engell, “Historizität als Serialität,” “Ein Mauerfall,” “Fernsehen mit Unbekannten,” *Fernsehtheorie*; Sconce; Denson and Mayer; Jahn-Sudmann and Kelleter, Jahn-Sudmann and Starre. My following paragraph modifies observations from Kelleter, “Five Ways.”

Little of this is visible in the seriality of newsmaking.<sup>16</sup> While ‘the news’ as a communicative institution is highly dependent on the continuous transformation of news events into news reports and vice versa, and while in the process of doing so it has developed distinct genres, this type of self-referentiality usually does not result in the same dynamics of formal proliferation and generic experimentation that characterizes, say, serial comics, serial television, or cinematic seriality with its evolving remaking formats.<sup>17</sup> Unlike in these examples, ‘seriality’ in the news often (still?) looks like a straightforward act of narrative sequencing (one thing happening after another and the news medium following suit)—not like the networked system of mutual observations feeding back into each other that we know from other fields of popular storytelling.

Part of this has to do, once more, with the specific temporality of the news, which at the level of consumption tends to privilege the cyclical over both the episodic and the continuous. As a result, anxiety of cancellation plays a weaker role for news programs than for fictional series. Like professional sports—that other neglected field of popular seriality—the news always stresses its institutionality over its narrativity. Accordingly, when news outlets formulate critiques of newsmaking, they commonly do so in the context of competitive status conflicts (quality papers complaining about the simplification strategies of tabloids, populist channels criticizing the elitism of ‘mainstream media,’ etc.) but only rarely in the mode of serial self-reflection described above.

Another reason for this state of affairs has to do with the (so far) limited range of adaptive strategies developed by news journalism vis-à-vis interactive computational media. Of course, digital communication, more than any other technological advance, has foregrounded (not: produced!) the multilinear network character of serial storytelling in all modern media, including pre-digital ones. Journalism’s position on this subject can be called a defensive one insofar as the press’s institutional identity always hinges on its perceived superiority over amateur information practices (e.g., distinguishing ‘facts’ from ‘rumors’). Consequently, social media are featured in traditional news reports mostly in two—partly contradictory—functions: either as competitors that cannot be named as competitors (see all the critical accounts of Facebook and Twitter that refuse to admit to a situation of media contest) or as thematic resources (as if social media offered direct access to some *vox populi*). At the same time, professional journalism is naturally sensitive to charges of fictionality (‘lying’) or government sponsorship (‘state media’).<sup>18</sup> Thus, both as a commercial and as a

<sup>16</sup> The following paragraphs take up a question posed to me by Johannes Fehrle.

<sup>17</sup> On cinematic remaking as a serial practice, see Loock and Verevis; Kelleter, “Das Remake”; and Kelleter and Loock.

<sup>18</sup> See my second thesis above.

democratic institution, the news is regularly forced to give voice to the very populism from which it also wants to distance itself or which it would like to explain without effective reference to its own media strategies. What this means in a situation of intensified institutional insecurity can currently be witnessed whenever established media are trying to make sense of the rise and radicalization of anti-'mainstream' political styles while simultaneously working to profit from their considerable buzz factor. Add to this the growing time pressures of news production in the digital age—the deadline has always been an enemy of expertise—and the difference between professional and amateur reporting appears somewhat less decisive than the profession likes to tell itself.

What is most striking, then, about twenty-first-century notions of newsworthiness is not how social media make 'gossip' look like 'news' again—as if digital communication returned us to premodern times (an assumption already prepared in McLuhan's unduly successful notion of the "global village")—but how little professional journalism is presently prepared to confront or accommodate the newly individualized time regimes and customized media practices of the World Wide Web, especially in their political consequences. When we compare self-performances of contemporary news institutions with the manifold ways in which other media have taken up the challenges and potentials of the digital to rethink themselves, journalism's self-assured defensiveness is remarkable. We have seen the meta-medial turn in contemporary literary fiction; we have seen the aesthetics of "post-cinematic" film; we have seen the rise of "complex" (fictional) television; we have seen the formal revolutions of digital-age comics in works by Chris Ware, Richard McGuire, and others.<sup>19</sup> Looking for similar developments in the field of journalism, one might want to point to the rise of satirical news in the wake of Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* (1999–2015). But this is probably not the most hopeful thing to say about the state of professional news production in the early twenty-first century.

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<sup>19</sup> On meta-medial fiction, see Starre; on post-cinema, see Denson and Leyda; on "complex TV," see Mittell; on comics and twenty-first-century storytelling, see Gardner.

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