

Digitizing the News: Innovation in Online Newspapers. By Pablo J. Boczkowski. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004. xi + 243 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$30. ISBN: 0-262-02559-0.

Reviewed by Alex Nalbach

Less than a generation has passed since the “invention” of the Internet proclaimed by Al Gore. And yet the dominance of this electronic network seems so natural that studies of the development of digital communications already read like ancient history. Archaic-sounding technologies like videotex or teletext seem as obsolete as the spinning jenny. Chimerical schemes such as receiving the daily news by fax or shopping through dedicated television terminals now sound as improbable as towing icebergs to the Sahara.

But close studies of the creation of electronic media, like all good histories, remind us that few human developments—including those we take for granted—are either predestined or “natural.” Such histories demonstrate that the decisions of individuals or groups, as well as the constraints on their choices, past practices, institutional cultures, consumer demands and skills, budgets and profitability, organizational frameworks, and technological breakthroughs, were crucial to the creation of our *particular* “information age.”

The three “ethnographic case studies” in Pablo J. Boczkowski’s *Digitizing the News: Innovation in Online Newspapers* are fine illustrations of the potential of such scholarship. Between 1997 and 1999, Boczkowski observed the work practices of three traditional print-media organizations as they developed online features, remaining four or five months at each site. He combines detailed narratives of the adoption of new technologies and sharp analyses of the material practices, institutional cultures, and organizational structures that shaped such adoption. CyberTimes, the technology section produced by the *New York Times on the Web*, was launched with the intent to publish all the technology stories from various print desks at the *Times* and add some original content. User-driven message forums were largely ignored by editors and journalists and had almost no impact on the production of articles. The producers of online material were print journalists, and so even original stories created for the online section mimicked the

content and style of print journalism. Editors assumed that users were not technically savvy, and so the interface mimicked pages of print: its front page simulated the cover of a magazine, and its stories were presented in print-style layout. As a result, print and online products resembled each other so closely that, over time, the print paper began to solicit and run contributions from the CyberTimes staff. Due to the close alignment between the online and print desks, the online section reproduced the culture of print even in its original content.

By contrast, the *Houston Chronicle's* Virtual Voyager tried to create vicarious experiences for users, "as close to being on scene as possible without actually being there" (p. 139). Almost totally divorced from the print newsroom, virtual voyages pushed the limits of multimedia storytelling through creative icons, innovative layouts, and nonprint media—audio-video files, computer animation, and 360-degree photography. Dominated by one-way information flows, the virtual voyages also exploited the dialogic potential of the Web by facilitating "interactive postcards" that allowed users to communicate with the subjects on expedition. Technologically savvy users and industry colleagues were delighted with the results. But its very innovativeness made the project a commercial failure, because it outpaced the creativity of the marketing and advertising staff (with whom online personnel had almost no contact) and the sponsors they hoped to attract.

Inspired by a populist vision of the online environment, *New Jersey Online's* Community Connection offered a free, easy-to-use web-publishing program for nonprofit organizations with little technical know-how. It allowed such groups to publish descriptions of their activities, supply contact information, post newsletters, and host discussion forums. Though it involved fewer multimedia features or design innovations than Virtual Voyager, Community Connection nevertheless constituted a radical departure from print-media culture. Unlike the highly centralized construction of traditional media, its content was not produced in the online newsroom (which was largely unaligned with the print newsroom), but, rather, through interactions among users: producers and consumers of information became one and the same. Newsroom staff became both facilitators and mediators of content. Information flowed in multiple directions, rather than moving only in one.

An effective antidote to technological rhetoric of the sublime, Boczkowski concludes that, at the time of his research, print media had taken only limited advantage of the multi-directionality or interactivity offered by online interfaces. Wholesale innovations in online content or format were difficult for media whose profitability rested on recognition in the marketplace (by both users and advertisers) and on print formulas that were already successful. Print media launched online products in response to perceived threats, rather than setting out in pursuit of new opportunities.

The case studies also illustrate that not all media produced identical, or even similar, online products. Boczkowski identifies three critical factors that shaped specific online innovations: whether the desks of traditional and new media were coordinated or segregated; whether editors saw their functions as gatekeeping or facilitating; and whether producers assumed that the consuming public was technologically savvy. The result was not media convergence—a common media form, regulated by a single technological or cultural logic. Rather, different combinations of “offline factors”—ethical, material, and organizational—produced different trajectories.

Drawing thoughtfully on recent scholarship in technology, communication, and organization, Boczkowski reminds us that it is important to study not merely the products of new media but also the social and material processes of production, including initial conditions and local contingencies. His work offers useful insights on the adoption and impact of new communication technologies, and his systematic organization of the material makes the book useful for classrooms as well as scholars.

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