

Book reviews

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Andrew Chadwick

The hybrid media system: Politics and power

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 272 pp. ISBN 0199759480

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Andrew Chadwick's book *The Hybrid Media System* offers something important and rare: an empirically grounded and theoretically rich account of how and why the assumptions that have historically guided journalism studies and political communication cannot explain contemporary media. The book argues that 'the media' is no longer (if it ever was) located only in and among news organizations, social movements, political campaigns, government offices, and communication consultancies. Rather, 'the media' is best understood as 'technologies, genres, norms, behaviors, and organizational forms' (p. 4) that, taken together, define a field of forces within which actors vie for power. As Chadwick shows through a diverse set of in-depth case studies, such contests are unsatisfyingly resolved if viewed from any single perspective: No actor ever wins, no dispute is ever fully understood, and thus no account of media dynamics focused on a single type of actor suffices. Instead, 'the media' is a 'hybrid media system' in which actors struggle for independence from one another while implicitly acknowledging that such separations are impossible and undesirable.

Chadwick's overarching argument – the scope of which is dizzyingly multidimensional, but ultimately correct – is that politics and journalism in the age of digital communication networks can only be understood by tracing 'media logics' that cut across places and practices often assumed to be independent. In this spirit, his work has much in common with multi-sited ethnography (George Marcus might say 'follow the media logic'), neo-institutional sociology (the book implicitly applies Powell and DiMaggio's new institutionalism to political journalism), transmedia studies (Jenkins' convergence culture is thoughtfully extended), and actor–network theory (Latourian actants abound). To be sure, media scholars have long studied such institutional distributions – Cook's *Governing with the News*; Sparrow's *Uncertain Guardians*; Benson and Neveu's *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*; Couldry's *Media, Society, World*; and Bennett et al.'s *When the Press Fails* are all complementary texts – and Chadwick similarly traces the decentered nature of social power and mediated sense-making. But by closely interrogating media actors' own logics and tracing them across multiple places, events, and contests, Chadwick explains how and why they do not always have the power they might think they do.

Chadwick starts by situating the Hybrid Media System (HMS) within an 'ontology of hybridity'. Sampling literature from political science, organizational sociology, science and

technology studies, and even musicology, he shows how processes of ‘simultaneous integration and fragmentation’ (p. 15) create contests over seemingly ‘reserved domains of practice’ (p. 21). That is, places that ‘old’ or ‘new’ media actors assumed or expected to rule (think press conferences, government offices, social media sites, technology platforms, or newsrooms), are, in fact, places of hybrid governance. Chadwick’s HMS is novel because it resists becoming a predictable and familiar narrative about legacy institutions being overtaken by networked upstarts. Where others have seen simple domination or irreversible disruption, he sees sustained contestation and mutual shaping (rightly drawing parallels to Carolyn Marvin’s historical accounts of technological domestication).

In a series of case studies using both primary and secondary materials, Chadwick unpacks the HMS. The traditional ‘news cycle’ has not simply given way to a flood of unruly, 24/7 cable news chatter fed by random tweets; it is instead a ‘political information cycle’ governed by journalists, politicians, and quantified audiences all strategically and observably vying for types of power. WikiLeaks is neither the story of displaced news organizations nor institutionally tamed cyberactivism; it is instead about the emergence of ‘hybrid media actors’ who simultaneously shun and crave the cultural authority of legacy news organizations – who are, in turn, scrambling to leverage and contain the kind of transparency that WikiLeaks demands. Similarly, the 2008 US presidential campaign was not simply about replacing the generic messages of top-down, broadcast media with horizontal, networked information systems targeting would-be voters and donors with personalized messages; rather, it was also about the ‘continuing importance of physical gatherings and big television events’ (p. 136) as candidates, journalists, staffers, and voters used a mix of television, online video, and mobile technologies to take political action and create public identities. Finally, and perhaps of greatest interest to journalism scholars and practitioners, Chadwick shows how traditional UK media institutions both adapt to and influence bloggers and social media practitioners as he considers ‘the meanings actors ascribe to their roles’. Westminster’s ‘secretive and restrictive’ (p. 160) system of news patronage now uses ‘social media to bypass professional journalism’ (p. 165); organizations like the *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Evening Standard*, and the BBC all rely upon and distance themselves from blogs like Tory Troll and Left Foot Forward; and Channel 4 News’ Fact Check emerged as a kind of news beat of its own by using social media streams, website comments, a converged newsroom, and the power of broadcast television to verify politicians’ statements in near real-time.

The assemblages of journalists, technologies, and political actors Chadwick traces offer compelling evidence for the HMS and many starting points for future study. What might the biographies of Julian Assange, Bill Keller, Chelsea Manning, Glen Greenwald, Edward Snowden, or Joe Lieberman look like if they were not seen categorically as activists, journalists, whistleblowers, or politicians but, rather, as hybrid media actors shaped by technologies, genres, norms, behaviors, and organizational forms that they simultaneously rejected and revered? This type of question highlights one limitation of an otherwise outstanding book: What meanings of ‘political’ are privileged within the HMSs governing political communication? What distributions of power should exist within them and why? The analytical framework Chadwick gives us might be complemented by normative critiques asking whether the HMS produces the kind of democracies that governments claim, activists call for, journalists promise, or publics need.