News form and the media environment: a network of represented relationships

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US newspapers did not assume their modern form until well into the 20th century. Through the 1880s, all but the largest metropolitan dailies limited themselves to four pages in length and featured very little illustration. Until the 1920s, most dailies crowded dozens of items on their front pages, producing a Darwinian struggle for the citizen’s attention. By the 1960s, newspapers came to look fully modern, with all the cues of expert explanation incorporated into their appearance and organization, accommodating a citizenry with little time or inclination to read. Soon after that, the modern moment began to erode.

For the most part, historians have ignored these changes in appearance, implicitly judging the form of news to be insignificant compared with the movement of information through the newspaper or the explicit engagement of news-workers in the political realm. This is a mistake. The form of news has as much to do with its work in the world as its content does. Changes in form signal deep changes in the role the newspaper has played in the civic life of the nation.

Transmission, ritual, form

Form matters because news media function ritually. Carey (1988) drew the now-familiar distinction between ritual and transmission models of communication: Although journalists and scholars tend to think of the news media as working by transmitting information to readers (who will then feed back
their preferences by choosing among available alternatives), the media also work to enable groups of people to live together as a community (if not actually, then at least in their imaginations). On the level of the individual reader, this means that reading the newspaper (or watching the evening news) allows one to feel connected to a polity. On the level of the polity, this means that something called the people is summoned to attention on a daily basis. It is the form of the news that does this. The content, the information, changes every day, and different information could be presumed to produce different effects and affect, but the news performs the same ritual function day after day because the media package it into the same form.

Besides understanding communication as a plumbing system carrying messages from senders to receivers (the transmission model), and as a daily reaffirming of community ties (the ritual model), we find it useful to think of the news as an environment. The newspaper environment sets up a panorama of distant events and invisible forces (what environmentalists call an exosystem, Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and readers feel empowered because otherwise inaccessible places come within their reach. Against that backdrop, the newspaper sets up an intimate diorama filled with the familiar faces and voices of reporters, columnists, letter-to-the-editor writers, and even cartoon characters (a microsystem). Readers enter the newspaper environment willingly because it is both comfortable and unpredictable. They get jostled and annoyed, but feel smarter and better connected, if only because they know what to grumble about. The news environment is like the weather, surrounding people, providing an outlet for discontents and lubricating small talk.

If one approaches news as an environment, then changes in the form of news should alert us to deep changes in the civic function of news. Changes in form indicate an alteration in the rituals that the citizen-reader is expected to perform. But these changes, unlike the weather, do not come out of thin air; they express the routines of news-workers and the realities of the news business, a simple observation that carries with it a rather more complicated package of observations about the media as media.

Etymologically, media means something like ‘things in the middle’ or ‘in-between things’. Media studies, in trying to foreground the media as things in themselves, can lose sight of their middleness or in-betweenness. Thus vivisected, the media can seem to be collections of artifacts, or of texts, or of text-producing organizations. That is to say, one might look upon the New York Times as a paper-and-ink product, or as the text of today’s Times, or as the New York Times Company. It is, of course, all of these things and more. If we keep its middleness in mind, it is the network of relationships between all of the producers and receivers and buyers and sellers that connect through it.
It is easiest to think of these connections or relationships as channels through which material things pass. So, for instance, a newspaper takes box scores from major sports leagues or wire services and transmits them to fans, or takes stock quotations from the markets and transmits them to investors, or takes advertisements from department stores and transmits them to shoppers. At the same time, it takes money from subscribers and sends them papers and takes money from advertisers and sends advertisements to readers. So on this level the newspaper is a dense network of channels for sending data one way and dollars the other.

In addition to the material level, where dollars and data circulate, there is also a represented level of relationships. For newspapers, more than any other medium, the represented level is about citizenship. Newspaper workers, owners and readers alike imagine that the real work of newspapers is to allow democracy to function (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001). The news media are represented as the infrastructure of the public sphere, as providing the space in which citizens receive information, deliberate, and form public opinion to guide the polity.

The material and represented levels of the media-as-relationships do not always work together. In the West, there is, in practice, a grand schism between the two which, in theory, is reasoned away. We more or less paraphrase Jürgen Habermas (1989) in analyzing this problem. In Habermas, the public sphere is the space between civil society – which we may modify by calling the market – and the state. In the market, people are supposed to pursue self-interest with a kind of freedom that requires no reckoning of the common good. Market freedom produces inequality, but the market mechanism will guarantee, with its invisible even-handedness, a rough fairness. No one will get screwed too badly. Regarding the state, on the other hand, people are supposed to be citizens, pursuing self-rule, which requires some kind of consideration of the common good. Citizens operate by a different sort of freedom – freedom of expression and freedom of conscience, which are somewhat conditioned by virtue. Finally, all citizens are supposed to be equal.

In this model of democratic society, then, two relatively autonomous spheres balance each other out. The economic sphere is dominated by market forces; individuals compete against each other for self-interested gain and inequality results. The political sphere is dominated by the deliberative mechanisms of public communication; citizens reason together to arrive at a consensus on how best to steer the polity and equality results. (In real life, the economic sphere tends to overpower the political sphere. The actual exercise of democratic equality is confined to elections, which have limited influence over the distribution of real political power: no one elects central bankers. ‘One dollar, one vote’ trumps ‘One person, one vote.’)

US news media have traditionally been granted a uniquely ambidextrous position in this system. On the one hand, they are supposed to be market
supported. On the other, they are supposed to support public deliberation. They are meant to be communicative Robin Hoods, stealing from the economic sphere and giving to the political. Unlike other corporate citizens, the media – through a kind of magic – transform their self-interest into public service. (In real life, of course, the kinds of deliberation that the media support are hardly so transparent.)

**History of form**

Looked at this way, the history of the form of news is quite complicated. On the most obvious level, it is an aesthetic history, a form of art history, about choices regarding the best look for news. But these choices have always been made under some constraint. Constraining factors include the division of labor and the techniques of production. When 18th-century printers made decisions, they applied different standards than did the professional designers at the end of the 20th century. Likewise, when compositors hand-picked lead type from cases, different decisions were made from today, when pages can be constructed on a computer screen. But these considerations are all in-house. Many other factors outside the print shop inflected the form of news: the telegraph and the rise of the wire services, department store advertising and the expanded graphic capabilities it introduced, public relations and the rise of all sorts of informal subsidies for information. All of these material considerations interacted with large ideological processes (what environmentalists call a macrosystem) encompassing all of the ways people in and out of the media thought about their proper function in the polity.

These general theoretical comments grew out of a series of studies we began in 1987 (see Barnhurst and Nerone, 2001), when we started looking at front-page design elements and how they had changed over time. Gradually we expanded our interests to include all sorts of things – illustrations, reporting techniques, the division of labor in the news workplace – all elements of ‘form’, by which we mean the recurring structural features that define the way content appears in the newspaper. We moved from a narrow focus on visual communication to a broader focus on civic culture. Our big question became: ‘How does the form of news enable or disable civic culture?’ By civic culture we have a utopian notion in mind, combining critical deliberation and multicultural recognition – a culture where news makes people smarter and more active politically, and where people get a fair shake.

In an effort to schematize the braided histories of not only design and illustration styles but also the systems of news production and the ways of conceptualizing the role of newspapers in society, we came up with a
timeline (see Tables 1 and 2). Style (and its subset, phase) refers to the look of the newspaper. It includes all of the elements of make-up and organization that give the newspaper a particular appearance (the microsystem). Type refers to mode of production, which includes the division of labor, the state of technology, and the relationship of the newspaper to its market and to other entities, such as advertisers and syndicates (which is like the mesosystem of environmental studies). Ideal refers to the prevailing ideology or dominant metaphor of the newspaper (as an element in the macrosystem). The ideal summarizes represented relationships that the newspaper is supposed to embody, just as the type summarizes material relationships. At certain points, a particular style or phase, type and ideal congeal into a formation. Three of these – the printerly, partisan and Victorian – appeared during the 18th and 19th centuries, and a fourth – the modern – emerged in the 20th century.

The modern formation has been an especially complex one in terms of style, and so we have broken out a series of phases that started out early in the 20th century, reached a high point after mid-century and then went into decline. Although the modern moment seems defunct, we remain agnostic about the rising newspaper formation. Perhaps we might nominate the digital.

**TABLE 1**

Early newspaper formations: a timeline of the principal formations and the style periods, newspaper types of production and controlling ideals that comprise them

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formation</th>
<th>Printerly</th>
<th>Partisan</th>
<th>Victorian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 1780</td>
<td>1790 1800</td>
<td>1810 1820</td>
<td>1830 1840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style Federal</td>
<td>Transitional</td>
<td>Partisan</td>
<td>Imperial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type Printer’s paper</td>
<td>Editor’s paper</td>
<td>Publisher’s paper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal Town meeting</td>
<td>Courtroom</td>
<td>Marketplace</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 2**

Modern newspaper evolution: a timeline of the stylistic phases, types of production and ruling ideals for transitions in the modern newspaper formation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formation</th>
<th>Victorian</th>
<th>Modern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 1890</td>
<td>1900 1910</td>
<td>1920 1930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase Traditional</td>
<td>Proto</td>
<td>Classicist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type Industrial</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal Department store</td>
<td>Social map</td>
<td>Index</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Founding forms

Early American newspapers were printer’s newspapers. The chief figure in the production of the newspaper was the printer, who selected the content, writing some of it him- or herself, and, with the help of a few workers, set the type, pressed the pages, distributed the paper, managed the subscription list and advertising accounts, and usually ran other printing jobs and a bookshop on the side (Botein, 1975; Clark, 1994). With such a diverse bundle of tasks, a printer would not likely devote detailed attention to reporting, editing or designing the paper. Content consisted of what came to hand through the mails, in other newspapers, or from correspondents.

Printers followed a global sense of History and arranged their news according to where they got it, starting with the most distant points of transmission and moving closer. In colonial Boston, for instance, news from Europe, and especially from the London newspapers, came first, followed by news from the Americas, then North America, then finally local news. All of the news gathered from a particular locality would be printed under a locational head. So a large LONDON would be followed by dated entries, signaling to the reader that this item, which might concern a battle in Spain on 10 March, appeared in a London newspaper on 17 March. LONDON might be followed by BARBADOS and PHILADELPHIA, NEW YORK, PROVIDENCE and finally BOSTON, where the printer would include original material, and perhaps even a sentiment or two.

Printers spent most of their time producing what they called neat or tidy pages. They had the ideal of the book in mind and wanted their papers to read comfortably like a book for readers who, they presumed, would read every word. Because these papers were only four pages long, this expectation was reasonable.

The four-page paper (the normal length for all but the largest newspapers until the 1890s) did not feature prime material on page 1. Because of the technics of printing, printers tended to print the outside pages first, then do the inside pages. This practice allowed them to collect and print older and more durable matter, including recurring ads, first, then do the most recent matter last. The most timely matter – the BOSTON head, especially – appeared on the inside, on page 2 or page 3. When the paper was folded, the outside pages, with drier ink, would be the ones that carriers or postal officers would handle. And readers would then be likely to turn first to the inside pages, and read the paper inside out. The look of the printer’s newspaper thus expressed a specific type, or mode of production.

It also expressed a news sociology. Passive news gathering, bookish style and many other features of the printer’s newspaper – high cost, overwrought diction – indicated that it considered its audience to be gentlemen. The content of the newspaper required a fairly high initial
cultural and political literacy for any reader to really make sense of it. So the colonial newspaper took the form of a virtual coffeehouse. It simulated the experience that a commercial gentleman would undergo on a visit to a good coffeehouse, one that featured a broad range of browsing material and an intelligent and talkative clientele. A visitor to such a place would pick up the most important papers first, then scan down to the local news, meanwhile picking up opinions and commentary from fellow gentlemen. The visitor, then, like the reader, would feel affirmed in his (rarely her) membership in an informed elite group.

The American Revolutionary controversy modified this sociology. The newspaper retained much of its look, but now it was supposed to energize and support a political movement, meaning it was to be read by a larger number of people, and to provide justifications for the controversy. After the Revolution, the broader publicness of the newspaper was retained to supply a source of legitimacy for government – the continual representation of popular consent. Political thinkers like Thomas Jefferson envisioned a press system that would allow for the transparent formation of public opinion through universal information and universal access to deliberation – the same vision that informed Internet enthusiasts two centuries later. The master metaphor for the press became the town meeting.

The coffeehouse metaphor and the town meeting metaphor presupposed a similar sociology. Both assumed that readers would be intelligent, rational, active citizens who would be persuaded by facts and strong arguments and would be discerning about falsity and fallacy. Both presumed the power of truth to candid minds. Buried in these notions are deep unvoiced assumptions about race, class, gender and party. The readership of the printer’s paper was generally assumed to be white, male, propertied and non-partisan – in other words, gentlemen, and sometimes more inclusively citizens. The etiquette of the printer’s paper – the insistent ritual of disclaiming ‘partiality’ and ‘personality’, even by printers with clear party affiliations – underscores these assumptions. In this sense, the printer’s newspaper had inscribed in its form a deep social and political ignorance or delusion.

**Courtroom of public opinion**

Newspapers could not remain a gentleman’s medium. Unlike handwritten newsletters, printed newspapers appeared to invite a universal readership. And, of course, printers as small business people would want to expand their markets. As the costs of running a print shop declined with more reliable supplies of paper, ink and type, and as advertising became a more reliable second stream of income, prices gradually fell and printers slowly expanded circulation. A big drop in price came in the 1830s, and historians
have devoted a great deal of attention to it (Schiller, 1981; Schudson, 1978), but the trend had been in place for a long time.

The greatest impetus for newspapers to broaden their appeal came from the rise of popular politics. Electoral politics of any sort invites an expansion of the electorate, as the party winning power enfranchises new groups of voters, who will then be loyal to the party that gave them the vote. In the early Republic, property requirements for voting fell, until universal manhood suffrage became the norm. Accompanying this process was a grand popularization of politics. Unlike the austere statemen of the Revolutionary generation, who cultivated the appearance of staying aloof from party and who delegated any electioneering or unseemly controversy to supposedly independent henchmen, the next generation of politicos developed a political culture that cast permanent partisan competition as a positive good rather than an occasional and barely tolerable evil. The Age of Jackson enjoyed a good campaign, and the campaign became the tail that wagged the dog of the governing process.

The partisan newspaper embraced a new master metaphor, the courtroom. The newspaper acted as an advocate for a candidate or party, like a lawyer in the courtroom. The public appeared as a jury. Unlike the town meeting metaphor, the new ideal supposed the newspaper to be active and the public passive. When this public acted, it was not in the public forum of the press, or in an act of deliberation, but in the quasi-private setting of a polling place; voters act as individuals and not as a deliberative body. Meanwhile, the agents conducting public deliberation, the editors of the party organs, would construct their arguments so as to include only matter that would contribute to their client’s eventual victory.

The partisan newspaper developed a particular look and a characteristic way of organizing the news. The look was frankly austere. Republican simplicity seemed to require grey from newspapers. Also, a continual increase in the quantity of content bumped up against the four-page limit. The resulting dense pages were broken only by occasional bold heads and horizontal rules. Advertising matter became more differentiated, although, oddly, illustrations diminished. Partisan newspapers organized news in a hierarchical stream of paragraphs. Like earlier newspapers, party papers put their prime material on the inside pages, pages 2 and 3. Unlike earlier papers, however, partisan papers preferred national politics to global history as their organizing narrative, and preferred editorials to news items. So, on the inside pages, the leading items, appearing under a column-wide nameplate, were original editorial paragraphs, followed by clipped items from other newspapers, each introduced by the editor and usually attributed to another newspaper in a small italic dateline. Unlike the European press, US newspapers took the paragraph as their basic unit, for the most part, and editors prided themselves on their ability to pack a complete argument, along with a little mustard, into a tidy square of type. Coinciding with
extremely high rates of voting participation, partisan newspapering indicates an opening of the political process, a will to represent ordinary people, even if people were frequently alienated from politics. In fact, despite arguments for the pristine privatization of the US citizenry (Schudson, 1998), the very forms of alienation – the abolitionist, populist, socialist and even nativist insurrections – display an infatuation with the model of polity that the form of partisan newspapering promised but failed to deliver.

All of this preceded the intense commercialization of the press that occurred in the 1830s. It is a truism in journalism history that the urban penny papers of that decade produced the first modern newspapers (Tucher, 1994). In fact, historians have exaggerated the difference between penny papers and partisan papers; the two might better be understood as complementary moments of newspaper development.

**Commercialization and industrialization**

The confluence of market forces and party energies made the Partisan formation unstable. Partisanism, feeding off mass politics and riding on the postal system (John, 1995), implied a system rooted in the distributive logic of the republic: one person, one vote. Commercialism, feeding off the market revolution and riding on the new technologies of the telegraph and railroad, implied a system rooted in the distributive logic of the marketplace: one dollar, one vote (Baldasty, 1993). Partisanism pushed a decentralized and open-ended newspaper system. Commercialization pushed a system concentrated in the largest cities, where the largest newspapers would be able to turn their content into a commodity to be sold to other newspapers.

Eventually the commercial impulse overwhelmed the partisan one. This yielded hybrid newspapers, papers that featured a partisan newspaper as the meat sandwiched between two slices of commercial news – a front page that carried the latest news from the wire services and a back page that carried city items, commercial news and ads. In the largest cities, dailies expanded to eight pages, and the editor’s newspaper continued to occupy pages 4 and 5. The editor’s paper never disappeared, but it was eventually confined to today’s editorial and op-ed pages, where it retains its claim to being the heart of a newspaper.

Instead, the publisher’s function became the key to the identity of the newspaper. The dominant metaphor shifted from the courtroom to the marketplace, beginning as early as the 1850s. Newspapers began to stock themselves like aggressive shops and to think of their front pages as shop windows. The publisher’s newspaper was also more aggressive in gathering news, hiring reporters and buying wire service and syndicate copy.
The publisher’s paper in turn yielded to the industrial newspaper. Industrialization, like the rise of mass politics and the market revolution, produced deep systemic changes in the ways newspapers were produced. Mass production required new machinery, which imposed enormous new fixed costs that required mass distribution to reach ever larger readerships. All this was subsidized by new mass advertisers (such as department stores), but it required regular, massive supplies of content, which in turn required the industrialization of news-work. Reporters of the era labored as scavengers and pieceworkers, and, in turn-of-the-century photos, news-rooms look like garment shops of the same era with typewriters in the place of sewing machines (and men sitting at them instead of women).

The industrialization of the newspaper altered the master metaphor from market to department store. Organized content replaced the chaos of the marketplace. Readers browsed topical pages, just as they might browse the various departments at Carson’s in Chicago or Macy’s in New York, enjoying an artificial atmosphere of worldliness and control (Leach, 1993). Coincidentally, department stores and other large concerns bought display ads that expanded the number of pages and the graphic capabilities of the newspaper while driving its division into sections. By the 1920s, typical urban dailies had pages for sports that displayed automobile ads, pages for amusements that displayed play and movie ads, and pages for women that displayed grocery store and clothing ads.

The look of the Victorian newspaper emphasized abundance. A crowded front page beckoned the reader, sometimes with a vernacular version of formal hierarchy, sometimes with photos or other illustrations framed with frilly borders, the same pretensions that department stores used to surround their displays. Meanwhile, typographical techniques for emphasizing the editorial content were transferred from advertising matter into the news matter. Headlines, for instance, had their origin in advertisements. Victorian headlines were titles, labeling the item. The largest – dizzy stacks of headlines in varied type – outlined the stuff that followed. They did not summarize or tell the reader the point of the story. They used nouns more than verbs.

Industrialization introduced economies of scale that moved the news industry as a whole toward monopoly. Urban markets showed the characteristics of natural monopoly by 1920, while similar tendencies appeared earlier in the wire services. Meanwhile, as the power of news magnates grew, so did popular suspicions. Public alarm, interacting with the occupational ambitions of reporters (who wanted the respectability of doctors and lawyers), encouraged publishers, who wanted both respectability and the confidence of the public, to embrace professional values. Reporters were beneficiaries of this embrace. When power within news businesses had shifted from editors to publishers, reporters had become the ever more numerous pieceworkers of the newsroom. Being men (usually)
of letters, they viewed themselves as intellectual workers and resisted unionization, which would compromise their independence. But they also resisted the low pay and lack of autonomy that industrial newsrooms offered. Professionalization promised them higher status. It also promised publishers an excuse to exercise monopoly power.

Professionalization

The modern, professional newspaper was a reporter’s newspaper, and the reporter was no longer a scavenger. He (usually) was an expert, a privileged observer of the social and political scene, a super citizen. As experts, reporters deserved a byline, not to lay claim to authorship, but to reassure the public that their authorship did not matter. Hence the irony that news reporters achieved bylines only when they agreed to remove their voices from their stories.

The rise of the reporter as expert drew support from the rise of illustration in news matter. As pictures took on much of the descriptive and affective work of the news, textual reports abandoned the present tense and moved into the future, explaining the implications of events. This division of labour between text and picture became more fixed with the advent of photorealism at the turn of the century. Photorealist illustration excised the hand of the engraver in the same way that objectivity excised the voice of the reporter; where artists had endowed engraved illustrations with narrativity and iconicity and lucidity, modeling events for what we call a civic gaze, photos offered immediacy, realism and emotion, cueing rather than competing with textual accounts.

Professionalism intersected with other elements of the modern and modernism to produce a newspaper that would work as a social map. Streamlined in appearance and displaying clear hierarchy and segmentation, the modern newspaper looked like an authoritative representation of the social world.

Until the late 20th century, the progression of styles, types and ideals worked together to produce a clear story. In the development of this, two lines appear. The first involves how the reader is hailed by the form: initially, in the printerly era, as a gentleman, who became in turn a partisan voter; then as an industrial consumer; and finally as a modern spectator. Each formation added ways of hailing the reader without entirely abandoning the old ways. The second story line concerns what voices the news employ. The printer’s paper was multivocal, allowing many gentlemen to speak through the medium. The editor’s paper became monovocal, channeling all news through the party editorial line. The publisher’s paper reverted back to multivocality, allowing many voices to hawk their wares.
The modern reporter’s paper returned to monovocality in the form of professional uniformity.

This story falls apart as it reaches the present. The high modern moment in news has come to an end (Hallin, 1994). Symptoms of this include the return of a partisan voice (in talk radio and on cable TV), the erosion of national monopolies (especially the network evening news), and the decline of a stable regime of routines, beats and rules among reporters. The end of the high modern moment has deep roots in the economics of the news business – the rise of what we call the corporate newspaper – and in the cultural disappearance of hegemonic identities. Even for someone who refuses postmodernism, the existence of a postmodern condition is unavoidable.

De-formation

The rise of the Internet as a delivery system is the grand event in the form of late modern news. The Internet de-forms the newspaper in interesting ways. It replaces the newspaper-as-map with the newspaper-as-index, allowing readers to browse automatically, not just in the content of the newspaper, but also in the content of the newspaper’s information providers. The advantages this offers for the reader – autonomy and interactivity – are so often proclaimed that we will not repeat them here. Instead, we return to the idea of the media, where we began.

The digital form unveils the plumbing system of the newspaper, and in the process deconstructs the newspaper itself as an artifact. Today’s New York Times is no longer the same for you as it is for us – for you it might include the comic strip ‘Doonesbury,’ or have only the business section, or be just a location for chat rooms. The newspaper becomes more of a portal. As its function as a network of material or transmission relationships grows, its ability to represent other relationships diminishes. The Web version of the Times does not represent an elite national public the way its print version does. And in this, one might argue, it submits the distributive logic of the republic (one person, one vote) increasingly to the distributive logic of the market (one dollar, one vote). Certainly the great virtue of the Internet for newspapers is the ability of the technology to allow narrowcasting of ads to target demographics. In a curious reversal of the traditional line, the Web version uses the political to subsidize the market, attracting readers with news so that it might sell them more effectively to advertisers.

It is clear that Web versions of newspapers do the ritual work of the newspaper poorly. Readers read fewer items, with less pleasure, and with less of a sense of joining a public. The voice of the newspaper disappears almost entirely into the endless array of options presented to the reader.
the editor’s newspaper is buried in the corporate newspaper, it is an even smaller aspect of the digital newspaper.

We end on a rather dyspeptic note. The present age is not a happy one for people interested in civic culture. News does not seem to make people smarter, and the world appears continually less fair. It is hard to believe that this political culture is meaningfully related to self-government. Some of this failure certainly has to do with the forms of news. We came to study newspapers out of a love for the form, which we grasped in our adolescence and re-imagined as something powerful, magical, unexpected: the infinitely public news of the day, the transparent window on politics, the stable platform for public reason, or something like that. But this trans-historical form has never existed, even as an ideal, in the historical formations we’ve described.

This failure of the newspaper form to fulfill its civic potential is a failure not of every newspaper but of the mainstream. We have focused on hegemonic forms because early in our research we discovered that no one had offered a systematic account of them.

If the form of news does create an environment, one that negotiates the contradictions of material and imagined realities, then we must next look for the counter-hegemonic forms that will encourage civic life. We can also hope that the pressures from the Internet will push newspapers to combine the best aspects of the newspapers of the past and present. This would mix the participatory opportunities found in printerly newspapers with the civic gaze of early illustrated news, the universal reach of the industrial newspaper and, finally, the factual reliability of the modern newspaper.

Note

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References


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