Using the actor-network theory to understand local journalism

Introduction

The first decades of the 21st century have shown to be a period of upheaval in the field of journalism and how information and news are shared between journalists and readers. Technological advancement that lead to changing or even evaporating business models as well as changing tastes of the consumer have been some of the primary causes for the changes we see in this media (Kafka, 2019). Broadly speaking, the changes may come across as the shutting down or consolidation of newspapers in smaller markets, a bigger emphasis on digital newsrooms in the remaining newspapers, and updated news-delivery strategies that incorporate online social media, multimedia, and traditional print media (Grieco, 2019; Deuze, 2004; Turner, 2005). These changes may have created a vacuum for news in small, local markets as people still want to be informed on what is happening in their community, which has allowed for the emergence of citizen journalists and other local organizations to fill in that space (" For Local News, Americans Embrace Digital but Still Want Strong Community Connection", 2019).

This emergence has also influenced a re-imagination relative to traditional media of how news is produced, how it is shared, and the relationship between the journalist, the audience, and the community (Spyridou, Matsiola, Veglis, Kalliris, & Dimoulas, 2013; Lazaroiu, 2012). My aim for this paper is to view how this re-imagination is playing out in local journalism and with citizen journalists through the perspective of the actor-network theory. In this paper, I would like to show how using the actor-network theoretical framework in this way is effective in explaining the blurring of boundaries between writers and readers and the emergence of a participatory, story-as-

conversation type of journalism. I will show this through platforms such as Patch. com and PlanetPrinceton. com , two hyperlocal, all-digital media entities.

A Brief Overview of Actor-Network Theory

The actor-network theory–usually associated with the writers Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, and John Law–derived from the sociology of technology and science, yet the theory has found purchase in other fields including management and organization studies, anthropology, geography, and philosophy (Cressman, 2009). When conceptualizing actor-network theory, actors can be both human and non human, such as a certain technology or an organization, and they adopt their attributes based on how they relate to one another (Spyridou et al., 2013). When looking at the actor-network theory, it is important to note that, along with people, institutions, and organizations negotiating between one another to develop systems, artifacts play a role in those negotiations (Latour, 1994). Artifacts are also members of an actor-network with their own roles and definitions that need to be considered to understand how a network evolves (Schmitz Weiss & Domingo, 2010). Networks, as noted by Spyridou et al., are the functional entities that are derived out of the activities the actors in that network engage in (2013). Networks in this case are not a map of interactions between actors but rather the associations between actors that help them define and distribute roles as well as put people and things in place to carry out those roles (Cressman, 2009). As Cressman notes, through these associations, one can describe a network's relative influence and how they become larger than others, its durability in being able to add on new actors, and where power is

derived and how it is exercised (2009). In essence, an actor-network is the result of the connections that make it up (Cressman, 2009).

Spyridou et al. also note concepts that are key to the actor-network theory, including translation, intermediaries, and mediators (2013). Translation is both a process and effect that actors in a network, along with the associations that bind them, go through by negotiating their roles and attributes at specific moments in order to achieve an objective (Spyridou et al., 2013). Intermediaries and mediators are different degrees of the same concept: delivering information. Fioravanti and Velho liken the intermediary to the postman, who delivers mail without altering the message (2010), whereas the mediator is someone who exercises independent, creative thought to alter, translate, and modify the message they share (Latour, 2005; Fioravanti & Velho, 2010).

One key characteristic of actor-network theory is its mutability, in that everything can be considered both an actor and a network, and everything can also be considered an actor-network (Cressman, 2009). There is no constant, as the contingent position each actor has may change over time depending on the balance of power, methods, and network definitions each network member has (Schmitz Weiss & Domingo, 2010). As Schmitz Weiss and Domingo suggest, when actors bring in a new technology or a tool, the technology includes potential definitions, such as how it may be used, and serves to reconfigure the network (2010). From here, it may be illuminating to tie the actor-network theory into the field of journalism.

The Actor-Network Theory in Journalism

Journalists operate within a specific culture made up three dimensions: cognitive, referring to the knowledge and techniques one must have to carry out the work; normative, which refer to the set of rules and ethics that guide how they do their work; and evaluative, which pertains to autonomy and prestige in relation to other professions (Singer, 2003; Spyridou et al., 2013). Journalism is in a state of flux and is facing challenges to its roles, norms, and daily practices from the current new media landscape (Spyridou et al., 2013). Given this and what we understand of the actor-network theory and its tendency to blur the lines between the human and non-human in networks, the actor-network theory offers the opportunity to talk about with a new language the types of actors, networks, and processes that comprise the new media landscape the field is adopting (Turner, 2005). Furthermore, as Spyridou et al. note, journalism can be viewed as a complex network of human and non-human actors who are negotiating with, for, and against one another (2013). To explain further, within this network, journalists can serve as intermediaries or mediators to translate the network and thereby influence the outcome of it by negotiating with people, such as other writers or editors, and with non-human actors, such as new technologies, tools, and rules.

These challenges and the negotiations that have sprung between actors and networks because of the introduction of new media tools have led to other processes and forms to deliver and share information with audiences (Schmitz Weiss & Domingo, 2010; Singer, 2003). Concepts such as convergence in the newsroom have taken hold, which refer to formerly distinct areas of a newsroom and a media organization increasingly

collaborating and cooperating to spread jointly produced story packages across several multimedia channels (Deuze, 2004). Spyridou et al. also note the idea of participatory journalism, which is defined as people playing a role in gathering, analyzing, and sharing the news with opportunities to participate either through simple commenting with editorial control or through collaboration at all stages of news production (2013). Mobile technology, digital cameras, and easy access to means of content distribution also allowed for the concept of citizen journalism, which has been described as open source journalism, networked journalism, and user generated content (Allan, 2011). All of these concepts have served to disrupt traditional news media actor-networks, evidence of which can be seen in local journalism.

Actor Networks in Local Journalism: <u>PlanetPrinceton. com</u> and <u>Patch. com</u>

As noted previously, the journalism industry has been in a state of flux. New media technologies have allowed for a variety of means to deliver information to people, but what these technologies give in one hand they take from another. The Internet, while providing for new platforms where journalists and audiences can meet, has also enabled technologies that served to undermine business models that had propped up traditional news production (Kafka, 2019). For an idea of how these changes have affected the current state of newspapers and newsrooms as a whole, research conducted by the Pew Research Center show that 32% of newsrooms had layoffs in 2017 and 27% had layoffs in 2018; weekday and Sunday print circulation decreasing by up 13% in 2018 from 2017; and advertising revenue falling 13% in 2018 from 2017 (Grieco, 2019; Barthel, 2019).

The practice of journalism as delivered through the newspaper followed a rather rigid process, wherein journalists developed news through sources which was then delivered through one medium to an audience, and the lines between them didn't blur (Turner, 2005). When viewing that practice through the perspective of the actor-network theory, given the relatively static nature of the processes involved in making news, the networks and the actors within them negotiated consistently similar roles. As new actors like the Internet and new media technology were introduced into those processes, it both allowed and caused for actors to re-negotiate their roles and the networks they constituted to shift. This may be especially true for local news producers and delivery systems, as they have had to adapt to changing business environments and models (Barthel, 2019).

To examine these shifts, particularly in local journalism, through the perspective of the actor-network theory, it can be helpful to look at sites such as Patch. com and PlanetPrinceton. com , two all-digital entities with a local focus. Both of these sites are re-imagining what it means to produce local news for a community, yet they are going about it in different ways.

Patch. com is an all-digital media company which runs a network of 1200 hyperlocal sites run by approximately 110 journalists who each cover several towns, or patches, within their geographic region (Kafka, 2019). They have begun creating some of their news articles, such as relatively mundane and templatable business and financial reports, through software and artificial intelligence so that journalists are free to focus on more important stories (Kafka, 2019; Peiser, 2019). It is also delivering content through other means, such as encouraging the audience to create posts and other readers

to comment as well as working with other writers to syndicate their work

through Patch sites (Kafka, 2019).

In a similar vein, PlanetPrinceton. com , which was developed by a former

reporter for the Times of Trenton, is an online forum geared toward the

community of Princeton and the surrounding areas. The site features local-

interest stories, such as traffic, police, elections, and arts and culture, as well

as events and other cultural features. Along with the web site, they also build

their community by managing channels on Facebook, Twitter, and

Instagram, and they also seek to encourage community involvement through

comments and opportunities to offer news (Knapp).

A review of both sites suggests that though both of these services are similar

in that they are digital-only and share a commitment to local news, they

appear to contrast in their focus. Patch. com features a broad network of

local sites that share infrastructure, and the company has a national

perspective through providing hyperlocal news. PlanetPrinceton. com , on

the other hand, maintains a focus on building a strong local community in a

specific area and sharing only news that pertains to that one community.

While their focus may contrast in some respects, both use new technological

tools to share news and information as well as enable participation from their

readers through new roles on social media (Firmstone & Coleman, 2015).

Furthermore. they interact with their audiences and communities in ways

that differentiate themselves from traditional journalism newsrooms. In this

context, actor-network theory can help to examine the forces at play and

how the actors and mediators negotiate their roles.

Actor-Networks as Seen Through Patch. com and PlanetPrinceton. com

As Cressman noted, everything can be both an actor and a network, and everything can in turn be an actor-network (2009). What does this look like when looking at networks and sites like Patch. com and PlanetPrinceton. com , which are digital-only, don't have the conflict and convergence issues that face media organizations that need to balance both online and traditional newsrooms, and aren't necessarily in a state of flux (Spyridou et al., 2013)? Furthermore, what does it mean for readers and journalists, especially in relation to the traditional journalistic belief of journalists determining what the public should see, hear, and read about the world. (Deuze, 2004)?

Considering these sites' digital-only format, one of the simplest ways is to examine not having to deal with paper in the delivery of content in terms of the actor-network theory. If an actor network is a negotiation of roles between human and non-human actors (Latour, 1994), paper carries with it several roles. First, it is an intermediary, in that it does not alter the content of what a journalist shares with the audience. However, as an actor, paper exerts certain limitations upon the news organization, and there are heavy costs associated with it in terms of sourcing and distribution (Lazaroiu, 2012). First, a news article shared through paper is static and can't be updated. It is also not easily archived, and it only affords one-way communication between the writer and the reader, which served to reinforce a journalist's perception of their role and profession as well as distinct groups (Singer, 2003).

By taking away the need for paper in distributing content, sites like PlanetPrinceton. com and Patch. com serve as examples of " newspapers" not being bound or defined by its medium (Lazaroiu, 2012). By taking away that actor in the news production process, they are able to re-negotiate with other actors within the network to redistribute roles and redefine the network, turning it into something new that brings together and reorganizes a community's knowledge and allows for a different relationship with the audience (Latour, 1994; Lazaroiu, 2012). In this local communication ecology, the traditional divides between institutions, content creators, and readers is not as linear as it used to be (Firmstone & Coleman, 2015).

For example, a recent story pertaining to bridge construction on a busy thoroughfare into the town of Princeton was featured on PlanetPrinceton. com . Along with the story on the site, the reporter posted it to its Facebook site and its Twitter feed. Three days after posting, the story on Facebook was shared 79 times and had 36 comments from readers, some of whom included an address and contact info for the Department of Transportation to suggest traffic light updates on the other roads leading into town to lighten the traffic load. In another recent example, PlanetPrinceton. com posted a story about a local restaurant closing , with both Facebook and the website being shared 17 times and receiving dozens of comments, with some readers providing extra context about the new owners and their plans and others providing first-hand accounts. Along with the original posting on Twitter, the author retweeted several other stories relating to the restaurant closing. This highlights both the participation that is fostered on the site as well as leveraging the affordances of social media networks, as the

comments become part of the story. In terms of the actor-network theory, the lines between the journalist and the reader have blurred because of the innovation the Internet and social media affords to both actors (Turner, 2005). It allows the reader to collaborate in the news function and the author to gain sources and update stories from the audience (Lazaroiu, 2012).

Sites like Patch. com also allow us to conceptualize the mediator in an actor-network. With over 1, 200 patch sites within the network, the possibility of story overlap between distinct localities is possible. Recently, there were several stories from the suburbs of Philadelphia, such as an alleged extortion scheme perpetrated by a Bucks County employee and the local Middletown Grange fair , that were shared across multiple patch sites within the region. Knowing their audiences, Patch. com writers are required to exercise independent judgment and creativity as mediators in order to determine on which Patch sites to share relevant articles, making updates whenever needed (Fioravanti & Velho, 2010).

Both of these sites incorporate technological tools that bring with them certain definitions for how they can be used, and by incorporating these tools and considering how the sites operate as digital-only formats, they serve to reconfigure the network that drove traditional news media (Schmitz Weiss & Domingo, 2010). Through their introduction of these tools into the network, they also create closer associations between the journalist and the reader, with the communication ecology becoming less linear and centralized as in traditional newsrooms (Firmstone & Coleman, 2015), while taking out the carried costs of newsprint and distribution. If, as Lazaroiu notes, the ethos of these sites shape the way participation opportunities are used (2012), their

ethos, as shown in the PlanetPrinceton. com examples above, is to enable readers to distribute content and create conversations to further the conversation, collaborate on the storytelling, and build and foster a community.

Conclusion

The actor-network theory provides a useful theoretical framework from which to examine local news providers, the actors at play, the networks they create, and the differences from traditional media newsrooms. The theory can help to explain the blurring of the lines between the journalist and the reader as well as the increase of collaboration and re-negotiation of their roles in the networks these actors create (Spyridou et al., 2013; Turner, 2005). From a review of local news sites like Patch. com and PlanetPrinceton. com , one can see that there is a much closer association between the content creator and the reader than in linear, centralized newsrooms (Firmstone & Coleman, 2015). They've done this by leveraging the technological tools such as online social networks that afforded more direct conversation and sharing as well as by going all-digital, thereby bypassing the limitations that arise from newsprint and all the systems and processes that go into play to deliver news in that medium. Going forward, if the strategy that these sites have taken to encourage community building by providing hyperlocal news proves effective, it'll be interesting to see how the actor-network theory may be applied to the convergent newsrooms of large-circulation newspapers if they try to use a similar strategy to reach the same market.

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