

26 Critical News Making and the Paradox of “Do-It-Yourself News”

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In his foundational study of television watching, Hartley (1999) describes do-it-yourself (DIY) citizenship as “the practice of putting together an identity from the available choices, patterns and opportunities . . . no longer simply a matter of social contract between state and subject, no longer even a matter of acculturation to the heritage of a given community, DIY citizenship is a choice people can make for themselves” (Hartley 1999, 178). Essentially, while earlier conceptualizations of citizenship were wrapped up in geographic or identity-based memberships—living somewhere, inhabiting demographics—Hartley suggests that contemporary citizenship also entails “semiotic self-determination” (179), individually navigating and experimenting with the range of associations and identities offered by increasingly networked and mediated civic spheres.

In many ways, this book is both an extension and critique of Hartley’s notion of DIY citizenship. Like Hartley’s television watchers, the groups described here—for example, fan communities (Jenkins’s Harry Potter Alliance, or Burwell and Boler’s *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* fan-bloggers), feminist media creators (Chidgey’s zine makers), activist networks (Reilly’s Yes Men), and craft communities (Orton-Johnson’s knitters, Rosner and Foster’s weavers, or DiSalvo’s Growbot gardeners)—develop identities and associations by engaging with media and through mediated relationships. That is, Hartley’s citizen is still engaged in semiotic self-determination, but her tools, techniques, and relationships live within a new set of materials, practices, and communities (what McKim’s essay, chapter 21, this volume, refers to as “architectures of participation”). The critical question for this new phase of DIY citizenship is: what does semiotic self-determination look like in the context of contemporary, networked information infrastructures that afford and constrain the conditions under which individuals can meaningfully explore identities and associations?

Situating DIY News

This tension between individual self-determination and information infrastructure has always been central to the practices and significance of the press. In many ways, the idea of citizenship as an individual, choice-based exercise in semiotic self-determination is at the heart of contemporary debates within the critical study of networked news. Specifically, what role can or should the self-determining individual—as an audience member, content creator, and information curator—play in the construction and circulation of news?

News organizations increasingly use sophisticated, algorithmic tracking techniques to analyze, predict, and prepare content for individual readers' preferences, while news consumers have unprecedented opportunities to customize and personalize their news environments and experiences (Anderson 2011; Lee, Lewis, and Powers 2012; Peters 2012; Thurman and Schiffrer 2012). And although there is a thriving practice and study of "citizen journalism" (e.g., see Lewis, Kaufhold, and Lasorsa 2010 and Rosen 2008 for overviews), most people's news emerges from an *institutional* environment in which audiences concentrate around and attend to a relatively small number of sources (Pew 2012; Hindman 2008; Webster and Ksiazek, 2012). For example, news organizations often mimic each other's content and publication rhythms (Boczkowski 2010); there is a significant gap between what the press produces and what readers consume or want to consume (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Walter 2010; Boczkowski and Peer 2011); readers have many opportunities to comment on and engage with news (Domingo 2011; Napoli 2011), but few opportunities to meaningfully impact the conditions under which it is produced (Himelboim and McCreery, 2012; Williams, Wardle, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2010); and even the very idea of what "valuable" news means is highly contested (Meijer 2012). Essentially, although the field of journalism looks significantly different than it did even five years ago and involves individuals with new types of agency, news still largely emerges from institutional forces that are beyond the meaningful influence of self-determining individuals.

In a sense, then, "do-it-yourself (DIY) news" is a curious and paradoxical idea. Making, filtering, or reading news *yourself* is antithetical to both the highly networked institutional conditions under which news circulates today and the normative ideal of making news a democratic and *public* product. My aim here is to explore this paradox along three dimensions.

First, for news to serve democratic functions (as opposed to simply personal or informational ones), it must pass a pragmatic test that is both social

and normative. That is, information is news—and information processing is news making—because it is, in some way, significant to *publics*. It matters to people who have no choice but to share resources and consequences—to experience outcomes from which they cannot simply extract themselves as private individuals. Second, in its ideal form, news is information that self-interest, friends, markets, or algorithms alone may not reveal. Although the mainstream press often falls short of this ideal, it earns institutional and cultural legitimacy (though not necessarily its economic health) from how well it helps publics *hear*—not how well it help individuals speak. Finally, and most pragmatically, contemporary news production is inherently intertwined and networked. It is simply not possible to “do” news yourself in any meaningful way without encountering and engaging with actors who, together, define the infrastructure of networked news production—what I call “newsware.”

Scholars from a wide variety of disciplines have noted the problematic nature of the word “yourself” within studies of DIY systems as they trace the inherently social-constructionist nature of imagining, realizing, using, and evaluating technological systems (Ratto 2011). Human-computer interaction, computer-supported cooperative work, participatory design, and ubiquitous computing all increasingly place sociological and ethnographic questions at the centers of their disciplines, encouraging scholars and designers alike to understand the relational and social contexts in which systems are designed, deployed, and interpreted (Dourish and Bell, 2011; Goodwin 1995; Simon 1996). Similarly, science and technology studies scholars reject accounts of human behavior that ascribe complete agency to people or technologies, or that presume the preexistence of a social sphere distinct from the actors and systems that, together, *create* social spaces (Latour 2005; Latour and Weibel 2005; Klein and Kleinman 2002). And, finally, while developmental psychologists have historically appreciated the role that social contexts, objects, and systems play in making visible individuals’ understandings of various concepts and phenomena (Piaget 1954; Vygotsky 1978, 19–30), contemporary learning sciences scholars and designers have increasingly focused on creating computational systems with “digital manipulatives” (Resnick 1998) that let learners “converse with materials” (Bamberger and Schon 1983; Papert 1980) in two senses: testing and asserting understandings of the world against the affordances and constraints of materials that conceptually respond to a designer’s actions, and using computational materials as starting points for conversations with others about how to instantiate ideals of the world in materials forms.

Each of these disciplines integrates social and the technological questions, rightly seeing human behavior emerging from individual agencies and social structures (Giddens 1984). But there are differences between social and political analysis—between reading sociotechnical systems for their relational features versus critiquing how they structure dependences among people who must share consequences. That is, although some human-computer interaction scholarship rightly depicts design as a value-laden activity (Friedman, Kahn, and Bornning 2006) and is beginning to see media design through the lens of public spheres (Le Dantec and DiSalvo 2013; Lindtner et al. 2011), there is still a need to understand how system design decisions structure public spheres, shape flows of power, and create the conditions under which people can discover or create shared consequences (Boler 2010; Castells 2008).

The idea of *critical* making is relevant to this need. It is, as Ratto (2011) and Latour (2005) explain, about recasting “matters of fact” (that rest upon assumptions about the world’s natural or immutable state) into “matters of concern” (that highlight the inherently contestable and contingent nature of sociotechnical relationships). Critical making offers a conceptual opportunity to connect the design of public spheres with a normative model of the public sphere as a place for ongoing contestation of identities and interests (Calhoun 1998).

In this sense, *critical* news making is never a “do-it-yourself” activity. It is not only about pursuing self-interests—learning what you want to know—but also about acknowledging the social and institutional contexts of those interests, environments, and conditions in which public goods circulate and from which it is impossible to extract yourself, ignore, or *not* care about. Although networked technologies may give individuals numerous opportunities to express themselves, filter data, and share information (activities that *look* like news making), if we are interested in understanding DIY news’s democratic implications we must ask: what counts as news, what can news do, and how should we make it?

A Pragmatic Test for News

The possibility or impossibility of doing news on your own lies partly in your definition of news. Some models emphasize the press’s informational and transactional nature—expecting journalists “to verify what information is reliable and then order it so people can grasp it efficiently” (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001, 19)—while others take a more expansive view, asking it to check power, convene publics, mobilize social movements, and

engender empathy (Schudson 2008, 12). Indeed, this latter view recognizes the press’s unique role as an institution that is, ideally, concerned with the *public’s* needs (Carey 1987), not with serving as a mouthpiece for special interests, or fulfilling the information desires of individual consumers.

Out of this image of the press emerges a particular test of news.¹ Rooted in pragmatist philosophy (Dewey 1927/1954; James 1907/1981), this test is not so much concerned with whether an utterance is “true” but, rather, on what impact its truth might have—how assumptions about its truthfulness guide people to act. Critically, this test does not judge news significance according to a particular fact’s objective certainty but, rather, in terms of the cultural and social processes that make news meaningful and actionable. Whether something qualifies as “news” depends upon the conversations *around* news and the shared consequences that result (Dewey 1927/1954). This is why news, as opposed to information, can never be the exclusive domain of private or personal interests, and cannot rely solely upon marketplace logics for its creation or significance. It is public—meaningful to a community of shared consequences—because it matters to those impacted by its perceived truth or falsity.

Therefore, deciding what “counts” as news is never really a choice that can be meaningfully made by any individual or self-selected group that creates, filters, or consumes information—be they professional news editors, system designers, or citizen journalists. It becomes critically important for those working under the rubric of DIY news to ask not “Is this information true?” but, rather, “What would it mean and whose experiences would be impacted if this information were considered to be true?” This kind of question places particular demands on system designers. It asks them to reflect upon what it means to convene publics, not crowds—to account for those who must share consequences in addition to those who choose interests.

News and a Public Right to Hear

In a sense, crowds assemble while publics are entailed. Crowds are “gatherings of people . . . sharing a common activity” while publics are “premised on the existence of common ground not only physically but also socially and politically” (Butsch 2008, 8–12). Crowds are often defined by their visibility: they have a presence and voice that can be observed, and they are often attended to and engaged with. In contrast, publics share consequences even when they do not speak. Although I might not attend an antiwar rally or complain about my city’s air quality, I might still be drafted or suffer from asthma.

It becomes necessary, then, to see participation *alone* as insufficient evidence of a DIY news system's public value. Spaces where people choose to gather and speak are not necessarily the same as public spheres since such spaces may not account for those who are absent or invisible, for individuals who cannot or choose not to speak. In its ideal form, the press is a "listening institution" that guarantees the public's right to meaningfully encounter ideas it might not hear if it were only to listen to those who chose to (or were allowed to) speak. As free speech scholar Alexander Meiklejohn wrote, in any system of democratic expression, the "point of ultimate interest is not the words of the speakers, but the minds of the hearers . . . what is essential is not that everyone shall speak, but that everything worth saying shall be said" (1948, 25).

To be clear, I am not arguing that people should *not* speak, or that some people should be silenced. Rather, my aim is to highlight two complementary ideas. First, what is critical for robust and diverse democratic communication is the free circulation of speech and active support for speech that may not survive in marketplaces or crowdsourced valuations of self-selected speakers. The US Constitution, for example, guarantees freedom *of* speech, not freedom *to* speak. Second, there exists a category of listening-as-action sometimes dismissed as passive or suboptimal in discussions of participatory, DIY cultures. Often derisively labeled "lurkers" or, more generously, called legitimate peripheral participants (Lave and Wenger, 1991) who are "listening-in" (Rogoff et al. 2003) and have yet to move to the "center," critical makers might reexamine the act of listening (Crawford 2009; 2010), recognizing its varied and valuable dimensions. Accounting for those who leave less visible traces of participation—but who are nonetheless full and legitimate members of publics who share consequences—can help highlight the listener's role as a critical member of a collective who must be willing to thoughtfully adopt, adapt, integrate, and reject new ideas being spoken (Lacey 2011).

The free circulation of speech and the sense of plurality created through listening are both essential for an affirmative account of democratic freedom. That is, it matters not only that individuals are free from illegitimate constraints on their private desires and actions, but also that they encounter ideas that could not have originated from self-interests, chosen friends, marketplaces, or crowdsourced algorithms.

It becomes critical, then, for DIY news systems not only to pass the pragmatic test of news, but also to account for listening as a political act. DIY news must acknowledge and account for those who are attentive and implicated, if not visible and expressive. Listening may never result in

measurable or observable traces, but it is just as essential to DIY citizenship as more visible forms of participation. Listening is participation, and participation requires listeners.

Newsware

Even if you disagree with these first two arguments—that DIY news is a contradiction because news must pass a socially mediated pragmatic test, and that news is ideally about ensuring a public right to hear—there is a third, more pragmatic reason that news cannot be made alone: networked boundary infrastructures I call “newsware.”

By “newsware” I mean the emerging set of often invisible and relational technologies, algorithms, interfaces, practices, and norms out of which news emerges. They are embedded in—and help create—the material, social, and ideological conditions under which publics envision and listen to themselves. Newsware does not live within any single organization, professional tradition, or software system; rather, it is a “boundary infrastructure” (Star and Ruhleder 1996, 113) in which various actors come together to enact and debate what each thinks news is, or should be.

This idea of a boundary infrastructure in which various actors have differential access to—and awareness of or power over—news production is an opportunity to question the very idea of autonomy in news making. Studies of mainstream institutional presses have noted that, although reporters claim considerable autonomy in their individual reporting (Gans 1979, 101), their independence rarely extends beyond narrowly “operational” decisions (relatively minor decisions about, e.g., who to interview, what constitutes the lede, and which quotes to use) to “allocative” issues (more fundamental decisions about the conditions under which news organizations operate, e.g., what sections a newspaper should have, when stories should appear, or who should be hired or fired) (Murdock 1977).

Consider the following three examples of newsware. First, the *New York Times*, *NPR*, and the *Guardian* all offer application programming interfaces (APIs) to let those with programming skills and interests create news websites and apps that re-present news organization stories in novel formats. These software toolkits are essentially meeting places where news organization system designers, casual hackers, software entrepreneurs, and journalists come together to create novel forms of news. Together, they constitute a “programming public” that reconfigures traditional relationships between news organizations and readers, defining conditions under which readers encounter news. Several questions arise, though, that highlight the

problematic nature of any single actor's claims to autonomy: how does a programmer access the news organization's API, how is this access monitored, and what contractual obligations is she under? Can programmers earn money by placing advertisements alongside news organizations' content? How often must the API-acquired content be refreshed, and who controls how often a news story is updated? No actor can fully participate in this API-driven network without encountering and relying upon others.

Second, consider Spot.us, a website through which both budding and experienced journalists can raise money to fund original reporting by earning microgrants from a community of donors interested in supporting news work. Aspiring reporters pitch an idea and a budget and rely upon the Spot.us community for the necessary funds. Not only does being successful mean having an idea that the community finds interesting and valuable; it also means relying upon the Spot.us designers to create a microgranting system with features that help projects raise money. For example, Spot.us labels projects "unfunded" or "almost funded"—which labeling system generates the most funding, and when does a project move from one category into the other? Which projects are featured on Spot.us's front page? Should Spot.us allow anonymous donations or require its funders to be named? How sufficiently different should projects be from one other in order not compete for similar pools of potential funders? Answers to these questions depend not only upon the would-be reporter's project or the amount of money requested, but also upon design decisions made by the Spot.us creators and the dynamics of the Spot.us community.

Third, consider AOL's "Seed" system, an infrastructure to connect contract reporters with AOL's algorithmically determined editorial priorities. Seed analyzes activity on the AOL network, determines which topics are popular with readers and valuable to advertisers, and generates a list of assignments and topics for Seed stringers to write about. Contract reporters write stories, gain visibility through Seed, and are paid by AOL according to a sliding scale that shifts depending on whether the story came from AOL or the reporter, what licensing terms the reporter has agreed to, and whether the story has appeared elsewhere. This type of system gives would-be reporters access to audiences they are otherwise unlikely to reach but raises other questions: what kind of algorithms and values drive Seed's web traffic analysis and story assignments? When is this algorithm changed, how transparent are these changes, and what prompts them? How much are reporters paid for generating their own stories versus writing those that Seed suggests, and how does this change reporters' incentives to write critical or seemingly unpopular stories? Although reporters may want to write

a particular story, their ability to do so *and* reach a wide audience depend upon their ability to navigate AOL’s concordant editorial, technological, and economic constraints.

All three examples illustrate that networked news is not something that can be done alone. If the contemporary DIY news producer’s aim is to create web presences, analyze news organization data, engage in original reporting, earn revenue, and gain visibility, she is very likely going to quickly encounter newsware that both enables and constrains her work. The key to navigating this networked terrain is acknowledging the interdependent actors, making purposeful connections among them, and interrogating what they mean for public spheres.

Conclusion

The aim here has been to explore the idea of “do-it-yourself news” and its potentially paradoxical nature along three dimensions. First, unlike generic information, news must pass a social and normative pragmatic test—it must *matter* to people who must share consequences and cannot retire to private interests. Second, news is not about knowledge acquisition, self-interest, or even self-determination; rather, it is about collectively creating and sustaining public goods. To practice and study news critically means accepting the public as your unit of analysis. Finally, even putting aside these normative and conceptual aspects of news, as the infrastructure of news production and circulation—what I call “newsware”—becomes increasingly networked and dependent upon distributed actors, it is simply not possible to “do” news yourself, as an individual.

To be clear, I do not minimize the value of individuals and self-organized teams creatively reimagining the press and constructing novel systems for news work. It is vitally important for new actors to create prototypes of what networked press could be, inventing new and compelling forms of storytelling, demonstrating novel funding models, and orienting audiences to traditionally undercovered issues.

Rather, my aim here is to draw a distinction between “DIY news” and what might be called “DIY information production and dissemination” by highlighting the normative and public aspects of news. News needs to matter to people who share consequences. It must help to ensure that people hear perspectives that self-interests, markets, friends, self-selected crowds, or personalization algorithms alone may not reveal. Essentially, DIY news projects need to design for publics, not simply users or customers who opt in. Newsware is meant to be an analytical and empirical lens for tracing

ideas of the public sphere through networked news production infrastructure—for critiquing the conditions under which publics are or could be made visible.

Note

1. Thanks to Theodore L. Glasser for the phrase “pragmatic test of news” and describing this idea.

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