

# Actor-Networking the News

Fred Turner

*To date, journalists and most of those who study them remain wedded to a deeply modern understanding of the profession, one in which firm analytical borders separate news and newsmakers, reporters and audience, press and politics. New media technologies have begun to corrode these boundaries in practice, however. With its emphasis on socio-technical hybrids, actor-network theory offers a powerful tool for analyzing shifts in the practice of journalism under new technological conditions.*

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If Bruno Latour walked into an American newsroom today and addressed the assembled staff, he would likely be met with uncomprehending stares—at best. Likewise, if he raised the issue of actor-network theory at one of the several associations for the scholarly study of journalism, heads might turn and conversations might stop, but only for a moment. To date, journalists and almost everyone who studies them remain wedded to a deeply modern understanding of the profession. In keeping with a world view that routinely and firmly separates the natural from the mechanical and the actor from the action and its consequence, journalists and those who study them routinely separate news and newsmakers, reporters and audience, press and politics.<sup>1</sup> These distinctions have begun to break down in practice though.<sup>2</sup> As new media technologies have begun to invade the journalists' domain, they have brought with them a need for new theories with which to make sense of the production and circulation of public discourse and for the role of what Latour and others might call socio-technical hybrids in the process.

Actor-network theory (ANT) offers a powerful resource for this project. With its habit of blurring the boundaries between the human and the non-human, ANT brings with it a unique language for naming the new sorts of actors, networks and processes

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emerging in the field of journalism. The world of news in turn offers ANT not only a new site at which to practice its close readings of social life, but a new professional world in which to develop the implications of its studies of science and technology for the study of media, discourse and governance. Like scientists, journalists have long collaborated in the production of social order. And like scientists, they have done their work in relation to economic and political institutions that their work in turn has helped shape. To bring ANT into the discussion of journalism would thus extend its traditional mission of mapping the social dynamics by which truths are produced within key social institutions and ultimately, offer a way to bridge ANT to longstanding theories of the relationship between discourse, professional practices, and political power.

This is especially true in the context of new media. Over the last five years, numerous journalists have appeared on the Worldwide Web whose work straddles the line between professional and non-professional journalism and whose positions bridge multiple institutions. One of the most well known of these is Jim Romenesko, a columnist for Poynter Online.<sup>3</sup> Every day Romenesko gathers up news stories related to the American media industry, posts links to them on his web site, and offers brief commentaries on a few.<sup>4</sup> Journalists around the world scan his site for clues to industry shifts.

For traditional students of journalism, Romenesko's position confuses. In journalism and much of journalism studies, actors generally come in three flavors: sources, journalists and audience members. All are human. Though the members of any one group might at times be members of the others, they are treated as analytically distinct. Each serves as a link in a chain: sources reveal information, journalists gather and package it, and audience members receive and digest it. Information itself travels through a series of representations, relatively unchanged by each. This framework in turn supports what Michael Schudson has called the "information-based model of citizenship", in which citizens are presumed to act rationally at the voting booth on the basis of the information journalists have supplied them.<sup>5</sup>

Romenesko on the other hand serves as a news gatherer, a news source, and an audience member at the same time. His daily work blurs the analytical categories on which traditional journalism studies have long depended. Within an ANT framework however, Romenesko—and his web site—can be seen to represent and form a part of an actor-network. Romenesko does not simply channel information through his web site; instead, he and the technology with which he works translate it into something new. Together they offer a hybrid, a site that is, as Latour said of all networks, simultaneously "real, like nature, narrated, like discourse, and collective, like society".<sup>6</sup>

In this context we can read Romenesko as what Ronald Burt would call a "network entrepreneur" and his site as a loose form of something I think of as a "network forum".<sup>7</sup> As a network entrepreneur, Romenesko positions himself between multiple discursive and institutional networks, filling what Burt calls a "structural hole".<sup>8</sup> Together, he and his website translate a series of news stories produced within that network into a representation of the network and its concerns. At the same time, they transform both into sites through which members of the network can in a sense talk to one another. In that way, Romenesko builds something much less like a newspaper—that is, a free-standing representation of past reporting—and something much more like

an arena for public discussion. This discussion, however, admits primarily network members—that is, representatives of the press—and so can be seen to build the network of its audience even as it speaks to them. It is this twinned facility for simultaneously representing, bringing together and speaking to a network that marks Romenesko's site as a network forum.

Despite its brevity, this example should give an inkling of how useful ANT could be to those working to chart the coming together of journalistic practice and digital technologies. From a traditional point of view, new media simply offer new channels for the distribution of information. From the point of view of ANT, however, they and their human partners collaborate in the creation of new socio-technical formations. Digital media do not just offer professionals like Romenesko a new voice; rather, they offer them the ability to build new linkages of institutions, individuals and machines. These new linkages can be seen across the world of online journalism, in the open source community of software builders, and in a variety of other digital settings as well.

Deployed in this way, ANT stands to address the political world more directly than it has to date. In part, ANT introduces what Latour might call a “premodern” vision into studies of the social organization of journalism. If a modern understanding of journalism assumes a clear-cut boundary between individuals and institutions and their respective forms of agency, the premodern vision of ANT allows analysts to recognize and critique the hybrid actors that are becoming increasingly characteristic of journalism in a multi-media environment. In the process, ANT not only blurs traditional categories of analysis, but raises a series of critical social questions about the relationship between governance and journalism. How, for instance, should governors attend to a public that is arrayed in socio-technical networks? And how should they construe the relationship between those networks and traditional institutions? These questions in turn suggest ways in which attending to journalism might help ANT engage with theories of the relationship between discourse and political power developed in other quarters. As Bruno Latour has argued, ANT has transformed social reality from a “surface ... into a circulation”.<sup>9</sup> How is this vision of circulation different than, say, Foucault's vision of power circulating through a system of social “capillaries”?<sup>10</sup> And how does understanding the world as a system of actor-networks reshape our understanding of how symbolic resources ebb and flow through that system? And of how they pool into powerful ideologies?

By engaging with journalism, actor-network theory might well find powerful answers to these questions and others as yet unasked.

## Notes

- [1] For a fuller discussion of the relationship of a “modern” epistemology to the analysis of technology, see Latour, B. 1993. *We have never been modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [2] As new media have migrated into the news room, a number of scholars have begun to note the challenges digital media pose to the traditional practice of journalism. For the most part, these studies have focused on the ways that digital media allow audience members to produce news and allow professional journalists to have more direct contact with their audiences. For an

- overview of work in this area, see Gunter, B. 2003. *News and the net*. Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum. There have been important exceptions to this tradition, however. In his study of the integration of digital technologies into existing news organizations, Pablo Boczkowski makes a strong case for the power of SCOT approaches in analyzing technological and organizational transformations under way. See Boczkowski, P. 2004. *Digitizing the news: Innovation in online newspapers*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. See also, Klinenberg, E. 2005. Convergence: News production in a digital age. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 597, pp. 48–64.
- [3] Romenesko's work can be found on the Poynter Online web site at <http://www.poynter.org/>.
- [4] As Mark Deuze has pointed out, this sort of journalism for journalists has become extremely common on the web. Deuze, M. 2003. The web and its journalism: considering the consequences of different types of newsmedia online. *New Media & Society* 5.2: 203–230.
- [5] Schudson, M. 2003. Click here for democracy: a history and critique of an information-based model of citizenship. In *Democracy and new media*, edited by H. Jenkins, D. Thorburn and B. Seawell. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 49–60.
- [6] Latour, B. 1993. *We have never been modern*, p. 6.
- [7] Burt, R. 2000. The network entrepreneur. In *Entrepreneurship: The social science view*, edited by R. Swedberg. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 281–307. For a discussion of network forums, see Turner, Frederick C. Jr. 2002. *From counterculture to cyberculture: How Stewart brand and the whole earth catalog brought us wired magazine*. Ph.D. Dissertation. San Diego, CA: University of California.
- [8] Burt, R. 1992. *Structural holes: The social structure of competition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [9] Latour, B. 1999. On recalling ANT. In *Actor network theory and after*, edited by J. Law and J. Hassard. Oxford: Blackwell, 15–25: 19.
- [10] Foucault, M. 1994. Two lectures. In *Culture/Power/History: A reader in contemporary social theory*, edited by N. Dirks, G. Eley and S. Ortner. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 200–221: 217.

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