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Objects of journalism and the news

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Abstract
This article provides an overview of what an "object-oriented" approach to journalism studies might look like, based on a survey of articles collected for this special issue on journalism and materiality. We argue that focusing on the objects of journalism, rather than limiting or trivial, can provide scholars with insights into the social, material, and cultural context that suffuses our technologically obsessed world. The article pushes back against a dominant perspective in the Actor-Network Theory literature that sees the major value of that theory in studying technological innovation, calling instead for a theoretical approach open to questions of historical change, power, and symbolic practices.

Keywords
Actor-Network Theory, Foucault, materiality, power

In her address to the 2012 Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), Mary Gray (2012) celebrated what she called 'the twilight of toaster studies': the impending death of a certain strain of scholarly analysis that 're-instantiat[ed] technological objects as the center of [social] action'. 'We have reached', she argues,

> a critical moment in internet studies: we need to challenge ourselves and our publics to think about the Internet in the contemporary world in far more nuanced, socially-situated ways … Why? Because doing otherwise simply sets up emerging technologies as the next new 'toaster' to study.

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A few months later, as if to both acknowledge and satirize the scholarly trend Gray wants to put out to pasture, an anonymous group of researchers 'published' the first issue of the aptly named *The Journal of Toaster Studies* ('an academic publication about new technologies'). 'The first issue of The Journal of Toaster Studies debuted in early 2013', they facetiously claimed, 'with articles by Daniel Miller ("Does the Toast make the Toaster? An Organo-materialisties Perspective … in Trinidad") and Gary Alan Fine ("Toasty Publics: Where does the Heat Come From? Bridging the micro and macro")' (Anon, 2013). While obviously a joke, the new journal highlighted a particular – and relatively new – form of what we might call object-oriented uncertainty. What does all this focus on materiality and objects get us, really? Are we just looking at the communicative equivalent of toasters? Are we uncritically accepting the arguments of Internet evangelists who would rather we focus on the next object on the assembly line of new digital technologies and the 'innovations' these make possible?

Throughout the course of our work on this Special Issue, from organizing the pre-conference at the International Communications Association conference in London in 2013, to the call for journal papers, to the final selection of the articles you now see before you, we have been battling nagging doubts that we were engaged in building a 'special issue of toaster studies'. The objects of journalism included here – Wikipedia edit boxes, pica poles and proportion wheels, content management systems (CMSs), and others – are indeed occasionally toaster-esque insofar as they are often delightfully mundane. But we want to take issue with the argument that putting the objects of journalism at the center of our analysis 'distracts us from the social context that animates the cultural work of any technology' (Gray, 2012). Indeed, we would argue just the opposite. Starting our investigation with the objects of journalism provides a new window into the social, material, and cultural context that suffuses our increasingly technologically obsessed world. It can actually free us from a widespread societal belief that sees the digital as simply a stand-in for unthinking 'innovation'. It can provide us with nuanced understanding of power, not as it adheres to a nameless, faceless context, but as it manifests itself in what Foucault has called the 'micro-capillaries' of society. Also in Foucauldian terms, it can bring genealogy into our conversations about technology, insofar as it seeks to uncover the human decisions, cultural values, organizational imperatives, and material affordances that lead technologies to be introduced into organizations in the first place. And it actually opens us up to a relational understanding of technology rather than a deterministic one, an understanding that sees the material aspects of objects as inevitably imbricated in a web of human and non-human relations.

For the remainder of this introduction, we will briefly highlight some of the ways that the articles in this Special Issue make good on goals outlined above, in large part by tying them to some broad themes about objects, materiality, history, and power we think are worth emphasizing in journalism studies. We begin with a focus on the Actor–Network Theory (ANT) of Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, John Law, and others, showing how broadening what is usually understood as the mandate of ANT to include historical and cultural perspectives can be a useful complement to its recurrent foci on new technology and journalistic innovation. We then consider one particularly prevalent criticism of ANT, that it lacks an adequate theory of power and thus lacks a critical edge, showing how applying socio-technical theories to journalism in particular help demonstrate where

the 'criticality' of ANT might be found. By drawing on the articles contained in this Special Issue, we conclude our brief introduction by rethinking the opposition between 'toasters' and the 'social context' of toast making, or more to the point, between the objects and cultures of journalism. What is unique about the argument that discourses, humans, and objects matter for news production has less to do with ontology – about the nature of the world – than it does with the deeply *relational* underpinnings of the different objects that make up that world.

Materiality, journalism, and history

There is a clear trail of works in journalism studies that directly address the issue of materiality, primarily those drawing on ANT and the work on Bruno Latour. From Turner's 2005 short essay that introduced ANT to journalism studies (Turner, 2005), to subsequent empirical inquiries that have adopted an explicitly Latourian framework (e.g. Micó et al., 2013; Plesner, 2009; Weiss and Domingo, 2010), all embrace one of the pillars of ANT: studying humans and non-humans in a symmetrical way. In journalism studies, this philosophical principle is often reframed into another, presumably equivalent methodological stance: 'what is social is not detachable from what is material' (Micó et al., 2013: 122).

These ANT-inspired investigations into material aspects of journalism have produced valuable empirical accounts of contemporary newsmaking. They also revolve around several central themes, the primary one being that they study technological innovation and new technological tools being introduced into newswork. This emphasis on innovation and technological change is often presented as the primary focus of ANT: 'Actor-network theory is an epistemological and methodological proposal to understand *the dynamics of innovation*' (authors' emphasis), argue Micó et al. (2013). It is the technical evolution undergone by journalism in the last decades that makes ANT so useful as an analytical lens, argues Turner (2005). Weiss and Domingo (2010) write,

> We argue that an actor-network approach can be especially beneficial to trace the power relationships between the different *actors involved in the development of an innovation* in a newsroom, the conflicts around the definition of a technology and the process of reaching closure, including technical artifacts as another actor in the equation. (authors' emphasis)

In these accounts, all of them important contributions to the journalism studies literature, analyzing 'materiality' essentially means studying (new) technologies. Such an emphasis on innovation is indeed part of ANT as delineated by Bruno Latour in *Reassembling the Social* (Latour, 2005). As a critique of what Latour (2005) calls the 'sociology of the social', *Reassembling* argues that innovation is precisely a domain which traditional sociology fails to properly account for: 'in situations where innovations proliferates, where group boundaries are uncertain, when the range of entities to be taken into account fluctuates, the sociology of the social is no longer able to trace actors' new associations' (p. 11). In a parallel with the change that physics has undergone with the introduction of the theory of relativity, Latour (2005) further argues that it is the rapid pace of change that requires a shift of paradigm:

> In most ordinary cases, for instance situations that change slowly, the pre-relativist framework is perfectly fine and any fixed frame of reference can register action without too much deformation. But as soon as things accelerate, innovations proliferate, and entities are multiplied, one then has an absolutist framework generating data that becomes hopelessly messed up. (p. 12)

But technological innovation is not the only object that ANT aims to study. In *Reassembling the Social*, Latour lays out other foundations of ANT's empirical program. He points out privileged situations that allow the scientist to produce 'good accounts', situations where the social (i.e. the meshing of actor-networks) becomes more visible than usual. The study of innovation is one of these privileged circumstances, but it is not the only one. Latour also highlights other situations: when accidents or breakdowns happen, or when things stop being taken for granted as objects are put at a distance. He refines the idea of 'distance' in three ways: 'distance in time as in archeology, distance in space as in ethnography, distance in skills as in learning' (Latour, 2005: 80). Ultimately, Latour (2005) makes an argument for historical investigations: even when 'objects have receded into the background for good, it is always possible – but more difficult – to bring them back to light by using archives, documents, memories, museum collections' (p. 80).

The application of ANT to journalism studies has so far mostly fulfilled the first step of ANT's original project, by primarily focusing on technological innovation. This Special Issue aims at embracing a wider idea of materiality that is not solely confined to technological innovation, but that accounts for a variety of objects *in context*, both historical and cultural. There should be little doubt that one of the signal contributions of these articles to the study of journalism and materiality is the reintegration of history into ANT-ian considerations that are largely (although not entirely) presentist in nature. Le Cam's piece, traveling back to the newsrooms of late 19th century, is one obvious example of this. In this piece, Le Cam uses objects as both evidence (photographs) and as the focus of analysis (the object-filled newsrooms of *Le Soir, Journal de Roubaix, Belga, Le Telegramme*, and *Radio-Canada*) and the focus of her study (the discursive construction of these object-filled newsrooms themselves). By treating objects as both historical evidence and area of empirical focus, Le Cam is able to inaugurate what she calls a 'spatial ethnography of labor', a spatial turn also taken by Usher in her analysis of the *International New York Times*, although in a far different fashion than Le Cam.

In a less obvious way than Le Cam, Rodgers' article is also about history, although history of a far more recent vintage. By placing the arc of the Toronto Star's CMS Torstar Online Publishing System (TOPS) 'into digital history', as it were, Rodgers allows us to gain a glimpse of how this system evolved, not just as a finished object that newsworkers had to deal with (or not) but rather as the product of multiple, often contradictory organizational imperatives. TOPS has a history, and by examining that historical evolution, scholars of journalism can more easily open the black-box that masks the underlying tensions and discontinuities of large socio-technical systems beneath a finished, smooth surface. This surface is often perceived as smooth, we should note, even when the system in question fails. The actual situation is, of course, far more complex, a fact that a more historical and time-bound focus helps us perceive.

History is one form of context in which it is useful to embed ANT; organizational or professional culture is another. Graves' paper on the overlaps and discontinuities between the journalism of I.F. Stone and Joshua Micha Marshall (founder of *Talking Points Memo*) straddles this line between historical and cultural context. By analyzing a form of journalism (what he calls 'annotative journalism') which falls outside the traditional journalistic imaginary of 'original' reporting about discrete events in both the mid-20th century and today, Graves turns out attention to the way that professional culture often *embeds* a certain understanding of materiality itself. Graves' paper, in other words, is less about the actually existing relationship between journalism, documents, and annotation than it is about the way that journalists have *thought* about annotation, and in so doing, the attitudes toward certain journalistic objects that underlie in that stance. Usher's paper, finally, can serve as a useful bridge in combining the socio-technical focus of Rodgers, the spatially oriented perspective of Le Cam, and the material-cultural perspective of Graves. In her study of the *International Herald Tribune* (now renamed the *International New York Times*), Usher demonstrates how differential understandings of time and location, certain affordances buried within digital technologies, deep human needs (like sleep), and the contested values of brand names themselves determine how a newsroom not only operates, but indeed, is formed. Newsrooms, Usher seems to imply, are not static buildings but are rather perennially provisional spaces assembled out of a range of heterogenous materials and cultures, spaces that do indeed become solid but only through a sort of organizationally useful blindness that allows news companies to function.

Power, objects, and materiality

One criticism of ANT, along with other socio-technical theories drawing heavily on the micro-capillary theorizing of Foucault, is that it lacks an adequate theory of power; or, in Couldry's (2008) more specific language, that

> ANT's initial insights into a dimension of social order (spatiality of networks, power asymmetries) are not developed for a network's longer-term consequences for social space and its implications for power … ANT has much to contribute to understanding the 'how' of such asymmetries, but it is strangely silent when it comes to assessing whether, and why, they matter. (p. 7)

It is our hope that the articles in this Special Issue help reveal that this critique of the lack of critique, to the degree it is accurate, is as much a matter of emphasis in the earlier ANT literature as it is a permanent debilitation. It is no surprise that Braun's article on the 'hidden heterogeneities' of MSNBC's online interfaces does a particularly excellent job in laying bare the very real way that socio-technical objects contribute to the maintenance of oft-invisible power relations, given that the piece draws its theoretical framework, not from Latour, but from his co-conspirator John Law, whose writings on the socio-technical have always contained the most explicit 'critical edge'. Likewise, Ford's overview of the processes through a variety of digital artifacts contribute to the real-time construction of breaking news on Wikipedia examines not only the way that power on Wikipedia is assembled but on the ways that it, contra to Couldry's critique, *maintains itself over time*. This is an example of why a resolute focus on materiality and objects is particularly useful

for these kinds of genealogical expeditions; in an ontological sense, info-boxes and warning tags are purely digital objects, whose form is fluid and endlessly changeable. In reality, however, they quickly assume positions of centrality in the Wikipedia editorial process, positions that, moreover, are organizationally 'irrational' insofar as they were originally designed for work in constructing an encyclopedia, not a breaking news service. What was once a technological work-around, using a variety of malleable of digital tools, not only alters the breaking news workflow of Wikipedia but contributes in a real sense to the establishment of digital power dynamics that are not easily altered.

But it is Keith's article on those most mundane of newsroom artifacts, 'pica poles, proportion wheels, and paper dummies', that may speak best to the different ways an object-oriented analysis shines an unusual light on the power dynamics of news production. These items in the copy-editor toolkit are both cultural (they are symbols of an accrued social and organizational power in newsrooms) but also only exist insofar as they lie at the nexus of a specific, historically limited news production process. A pica pole that did nothing useful would be less than useless – it would be a joke, a sad, faded symbol of lost glory and technological advance. By interrogating what exactly these objects of journalism mean today, what they used to mean in the 1970s, where they are located in the newsroom, and what they do to in both today's and yesterday's journalism, we can obtain an insight into many of the transformations affecting today's journalism.

Conclusion

In the end, we want to highlight the fact that we see this Special Issue as more the launching of a long-overdue dialog than as a programmatic statement of exercise in 'flag-planting'. As Pablo Boczkowski reminds us in the brief retrospective essay written especially for this volume, studies of materiality and technology, drawing generally from science technology studies (STS) perspectives at least, have long been part of the journalism studies tradition. We think, however, that the ideas embedded in journalism studies' understandings of materiality could use some further fleshing out, along with a greater focus on historicization, power, and culture that we mentioned earlier in this introduction. To that end, we have asked several scholars from both within and outside the journalism studies tradition – Michael Schudson, David Domingo, Gina Neff, as well as the pioneering Boczkowski – to provide more reflective essays discussing the problems and potentials embedded within an 'objects of journalism' approach. Daniel Kreiss, finally, critically reflects on the issue as a whole in his concluding article.

If this Special Issue brings the underlying values and deficiencies of an 'objects of journalism' approach into greater circulation within journalism studies, then we think it will have been a success, and worth the risk of filling an entire journal issue with reminiscences about toaster-like things. In the end, we would like to believe that the various articles here do an excellent job of illuminating some of the simple and not-so-simple material objects, relations, cultures, and organizational structures which form both the background and foreground of so much of journalism production and reception in the 21st century.

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