

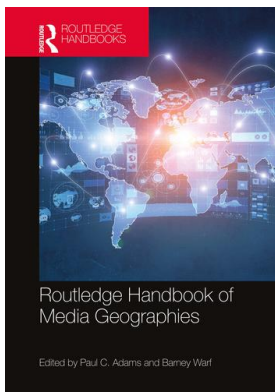
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7

NEWSPAPERS

Geographic research approaches and future prospects

Paul C. Adams

[T]he real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage it.

(Lippmann 1965 [1922], 11)

Thus did renowned journalist and political commentator, Walter Lippmann, justify the need for newspapers. In *Public Opinion*, he provided a defense of journalism as a tool bringing information to democratic citizens and thereby making democracy possible. But the quote above raises questions. What kind of assumptions lie behind his preferred “simpler model” of reality, who are the “we” who simplify the world, and who are (the presumably different) “we” who cannot deal with too much subtlety and variety?

Notwithstanding the questions a century of social theory impels us to ask, Lippmann nonetheless touched on something that needs to be kept in mind. Despite all its flaws, the newspaper serves vital social roles. Ideally, newspapers function as what Thomas Carlyle called the “fourth estate” (2019 [1841]), raising public awareness and bringing public opinion to bear on elected leaders. It has even been argued that “the public cannot come to know itself or defend its interests without journalists” (Iggers 1999, 141). However, neither of these observations ensures that newspapers will defend or define public interest in ways that are just and inclusive. Lippmann did, in fact, recognize that news functions as propaganda, coining the term “manufacture of consent,” a fortuitous term that would later be taken up by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky in their classic *Manufacturing Consent* (1988). Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model showed how corporate ownership, need for advertisers, and dependency on information sources push newspapers to protect the interests of the rich and powerful, though in theory they may be free of government control. Indeed, “the public” addressed by journalists can be envisioned in a way that is narrow and bigoted (e.g. Carlyle 1849).

Journalism serves not only to disseminate information but also to support public opinion, to define the public, and to shape relations between the public and authorities (de Haan et al.

2014, 212). Thus, newspapers have a special social role that distinguishes them from other media: they not only assume the role of translating complex phenomena into simplified stories for consumption by the masses, but they also help to define those masses in ways that are more or less broad-minded, more or less inclined to “manufacture consent,” and more or less supportive of genuinely inclusive democratic processes.

These issues have long been recognized by geographers, albeit in somewhat piecemeal fashion, in work that alternately targets, depends on, critiques and examines newspapers. First, newspapers have been treated as a venue to convey geographical research to the public. Indicative of this appeal are the occasional op-ed pieces and letters to the editor from professional geographers. Second, newspapers are used as sources of data for empirical research, furnishing archival data from distant places and times as well as from the societies in which geographers live and work. The third focus of geographic interest is critical and theory-based: newspaper articles, editorials, photos and cartoons can all be critiqued as examples of representational strategies, or *frames*, revealing how power relations shape public discourses. Fourth, newspapers can be treated as social actors that actively intervene in social processes and relations.

Newspapers therefore offer much to the discipline of geography: a venue for findings, a source of data, a source of representations to critique, an actor within the social arena. The chapter therefore is structured around these four strands of research, considering each in turn. After that we look at the transformation of the newspaper toward a post-paper medium—a process rendering “newspaper” an archaic term, as paper tabloids and broadsheets give way to news services inhabiting a digital environment and tied to the imperatives of digital surveillance.

Newspapers for academic outreach

One rarely hears calls for geographers to promote their findings on Facebook or Twitter, to make feature-length movies or musical recordings about their research, or translate their findings into modern dance. Most popular media are seen as too trivial, too complex, or too specialized to assist in disseminating geographical insights. A bestselling book would of course be a fantastic way to broaden the geographic audience for almost any geographic topic (Murphy 2006, 1), but it can take years to write a book, and few geographers master the trick of writing bestselling literature. Newspapers are therefore rather distinct among media as appropriate and accessible means for academics to conduct outreach, with op-ed pieces and letters to the editor helping to deliver geography so it is “understandable, relatable, and useful to a larger world” (Alderman 2017). This is not to say that geographers have an easy time conquering their insecurities about stepping into the public eye, or that it is easy to ignore institutional disincentives to such outreach, make time for it, or cleanse a reputation that has been muddied in public debates (Alderman 2004; Moseley 2010). In any case, newspapers are a favored venue for geographers seeking to face these challenges and reach a broader public.

Compared to other media, newspapers present particular opportunities for outreach. Unlike the social media, newspapers impose strict gatekeeping (Shoemaker et al. 2009). While this means accepting the imposition of editorial authority, a top-down power that must be viewed critically, it does have the benefit of filtering out ad-hominem responses and “flaming.” Likewise a decent newspaper can filter out the more virulent forms of nationalism and racism currently affecting public culture while offering more than television’s typical sound bite (Alderman & Inwood 2019). Newspapers therefore offer opportunities to develop, shape, and control the channeling of geographical information to the public, and

whereas writing an op-ed piece or letter to the editor is vastly different than writing an academic article, at least the adaptation does not involve learning to use a mass of new techniques and technologies.

Newspapers as data sources

Newspapers are often treated by researchers as windows into particular places and times. They profess to tell what happened, who was involved, and what they said and did. For example, geographers seeking a glimpse of Southeast England in the 18th century, Melbourne, Australia in the 19th century, Yorkshire in the early 20th century, Denmark in the late 20th century or Arab countries in the early 21st century have found valuable secondary data about those times and places in newspapers (Wren 2001; Falah et al. 2006; Griffin 2006; Rycroft & Jenness 2012; Coleman 2014). Even if we acknowledge that newspapers are not transparent windows on the world but tools for manufacturing consent, we can still look carefully through these distorted journalistic lenses and draw some valid conclusions regarding what is, or was, actually “out there” in the world at a particular place and time. Newspapers provide a sense of day-to-day life: conflicts that were occurring, details from the lives of particular people, and evidence about how various actors situated themselves in their respective societies, landscapes, geopolitical arenas and environments.

Among the materials that are regularly archived, newspapers hold a special place as geographical data archives, in part because they provide readily available data, whether preserved on microfilm, or microfiche, or in digital format. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, under “print capitalism” (Anderson 1991) the newspaper serves as a record of history. A newspaper folds the worldviews and events of a particular place and time into the world of its readers. In the words of Benedict Anderson: “the very conception of the newspaper implies the refraction” of all events, “even ‘world events’ into a specific imagined world of vernacular readers” (1991, 63). The audience recognizes itself as a public through the newspaper, and the paper’s perspective links a public or publics to a shared national story. Conversely, we can understand publics as social formations constituted through shared practices of reading, viewing or listening, so newspapers help define these publics. “Publics differ from nations, races, professions, or any other groups that, though not requiring co-presence, saturate identity... Merely paying attention can be enough to make you a member” (Warner 2002, 53).

Geographical research has acknowledged the tricky relationship between representation and reality in newspaper accounts. Griffin (2006, 39) argues, for example, that “extant provincial newspapers are by far the most important source in researching histories of popular protest,” while explicitly noting how they are biased in terms of their geographical coverage and angle. Falah et al. explain that portrayals of the United States by newspapers of Arab states are “carefully calibrated” to balance “a country’s own national political interest and its geopolitical and geoeconomic ties to Washington on the one hand, and the pressure emanating from Arab political and civil society, both national and transnational, on the other” (2006, 152). Coleman (2014) documents how a newspaper editor publicly branded a social activist as an “irrepressible busybody,” marginalizing her with gendered and class-based stereotypes. “Played out in the columns of the local daily newspapers... debates were an important site in which ideological constructs of gender and class were contested and reinscribed” (Coleman 2014). Newspapers often take part in such efforts to delegitimize and demonize women, as well as minorities and other marginalized groups, through stigmatizing labels and techniques of Othering (Wren 2001, 156). Journalistic versions of historical reality

are repeatedly drawn into these forms of positionality. However, not all journalistic opinions are regressive or reactionary; geographers have also documented newspapers undermining colonial narratives (Rycroft & Jenness 2012, 961). We would do well to recall J.K. Wright's injunction that "we are by no means deluded by all of our illusions" (1947, 8); news can be an illusion with real connections to the place and time of its origin. So the historical-geographical "truth" conveyed by a newspaper is inevitably tainted and twisted, but nonetheless essential to geographers and other scholars.

Critical analyses of newspaper texts

If the previous section suggests that geographers must struggle to look *through* newspapers at the world, this section turns to a similar but distinct strand of geographic research—work that looks *at* newspapers. We shift the focus to relationships between power and knowledge. This approach is designed to expose and disrupt exclusionary notions of the public, and this critically informed approach is the most common way in which geographers have treated newspapers over the past two decades. This work benefits from engagement with various theoretical frameworks, including content analysis and frame theory (e.g. Entman 1991; 1993; Gamson et al. 1992), studies of discursive formations and governmentality (Foucault 1991; 2003), and geographical theories of power and representation (e.g. Ó Tuathail 1996a; 1996b; Rose 2001). Some critical news analysis involves measuring media content based on predetermined categories (content analysis), while some involves interpreting the meanings embedded in texts and images (semiotic theory, textual analysis and discourse analysis).

The most accessible research in this critical, theoretical vein focuses on newspaper representations of a particular place. For example, Potter studied representations of Haiti in five leading US newspapers over a 12-month period, showing that they constructed Haiti as a *mélange* of fantasy and absurdity: a realm of voodoo, zombies, mermaids and mud-eaters, employing stereotypes that have had "tremendous impact on the people of that particular location and can perpetuate or even legitimize social inequalities" (Potter 2009, 210). Likewise a study of Israeli newspaper coverage of peripheral towns in Israel found that newspapers viewed these towns as lawless, backwards, boring, abnormal and ugly, all of which succeeded in Othering both the towns and their inhabitants (Avraham & First 2006, 75, 81). Othering is a gaze that indulges in watching, is even captivated by the spectacle, but is diametrically opposed to a regard of mutual respect. The Othering gaze is desiring and condescending, infatuated and patronizing all at once. This gaze dominates portrayals of distant places (Duncan et al. 1999), for example typifying coverage of tourist destinations and war zones, but it can also be directed toward a newspaper's hometown or city. For example, 20th century Brazilian newspapers Othered favelas although these impoverished urban areas were close at hand: "including or excluding favelas from their maps, newspapers often represented these areas through divisions of 'modern' and 'backward,' 'legal' and 'illegal'" (Novaes 2014, 202). The dynamics of Othering have preoccupied geographers who view newspapers critically, and these dynamics position the audience in a way that draws a sharp line between "us" and "them," here and there, even when the linear distance between here and there is relatively short.

Another way in which newspapers engage in Othering is by promoting what Ó Tuathail (2002) called "geopolitical scripts." Geopolitical discourses in the news weave together stories of immigration, domestic politics, international conflict, trade and science, among other things. Geopolitical scripts guided coverage of the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial Conference in Seattle by Australia's nationwide daily newspaper, *The Australian*,

demonstrating the many ways “by which heterodox understandings are delegitimized” (McFarlane & Hay 2003, 228). Geopolitical uses of newspapers include visual components of the package. Cosgrove and della Dora (2005, 375) showed how maps published during World War II in the *Los Angeles Times* drew on the visual languages of various media to justify US expansionism. Conservative newspapers customarily frame immigrants as “terrorists,” “criminals,” and freeloaders “swamping” the nation, and even seemingly innocuous features like cartoons can work to “reinforce preconceived ideas and the editorial line of the newspaper” (Robson 2019, 119). The topics of critical news analysis can be retrospective, like a study of Cold War framing devices in newspaper coverage of Yucca Mountain, a Nevada site designated for storage of radioactive nuclear waste (Larsen & Brock 2005), or they can look to more recent events, like newspaper coverage of the Mars Pathfinder mission (Dittmer 2007). What runs through these various geographical investigations—with topics spanning most of a century, addressing diverse geopolitical situations, and focusing on everything from text to maps to photos to cartoons—is an interest in how journalism reinforces dichotomous ways of thinking, creating excuses, justifications and alibis for state projects. A subordinate theme is the disruption of such dominant discourses, for example articles and editorials that directly challenge dominant geopolitical frames or adopt alternative frames (Larsen & Brock 2005, 531–534). It is of geographical interest when articles and editorials give a sense that the established geopolitical order is breaking down (Farish 2001). In these various ways, newspapers are key players in the circulation of powerful geopolitical messages.

Newspapers are also studied as sources of environmental representations. For example Boykoff considers how newspapers represent and misrepresent the “complex and non-linear relationships between [climate] scientists, policy actors and the public” (Boykoff 2007, 478) by looking at “forms and content of the texts (such as headlines, framing techniques, salience of elements, ideological stances, tone and tenor, and relationships between clusters of messages)” (2008, 556). His samples include leading US newspapers and British tabloid papers from the last decade of the 20th century and the early 21st. Similarly combining content analysis with qualitative textual analysis, DiFrancesco and Young (2010) identify a “profound disjuncture between images and text” in the climate change coverage of Canada’s major national newspapers. In this work, we can see that the relevant concerns for geographic analysis include representations of stakeholders and climate but also details of newspaper reporting and the social context of such reporting. They critically examine a social process through news stories, while simultaneously scrutinizing the role of the news. The fact that newspapers are archived and indexed more systematically than other media affords opportunities to address the historical unfolding of environmental issues in a systematic way by gathering many years of data. For example, Wakefield and Elliott (2003) studied news reports and public perceptions of a ten-year environmental assessment (EA) process for an industrial waste landfill in Ontario, Canada, and Larsen and Brock (2005) studied newspaper articles about the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste storage facility over a 14-year period. Comby et al. (2019) conducted an ambitious longitudinal study of *Le Monde*’s coverage of the Rhône River over a 68-year period. In other cases, a historical comparison of newspaper coverage at one or two selected times may be productive. An example is Rashid’s (2011) comparison of flood reporting on a 1950 and a 1997 flood in Manitoba. The different infrastructural and institutional responses to flood risk on the two dates were reflected in the coverage, but in both cases the journalists voiced opposition to Canadian government responses.

While the majority of geographers critiquing newspapers focus on constructions of geopolitical and environmental phenomena, other issues have caught attention, such as the journalistic construction of women and their lives. There are many ways in which news

narratives perpetuate patriarchal relations and gendered risks, including blaming women for the social and environmental risks they face (Faria 2008), or constructing women as emblems of both perfection and abjection (Walker 2005). Clearly more work could be done in this area. Geographical critiques of journalistic representations therefore provide an important supplement to other ways of studying social relations, geopolitics, human–environment relations and spatialized gender dynamics.

Newspapers as social actors

Newspapers also occupy the geographic literature as social actors or forces. For example, in a study of Ontario media representations of offshore farm labor, Bauder acknowledges that: “While my focus is on the discursive representations of offshore workers, I recognize that these representations are recursively linked to the material practices in the agricultural economy”; in this way news coverage contributes to the legitimation of Canada’s offshore program (Bauder 2005, 41, 42). Such comments point to the need to consider contextual aspects of news production and consumption as parts of a dialectic or cycle. The questions that need to be asked are no less about what newspapers *are* than about what they *do*. “As powerful agents of social change, the news media exercise considerable influence in the construction of public understanding of political issues through their power to mediate societal discourses” (Ette 2017, 1481). For example, women politicians are marginalized by the amount of coverage and the framing of stories, and their concerns are sidelined by this lack of coverage because “having media presence... expedites publicity” and conversely being overlooked by the news media consigns one to obscurity (Ette 2017, 1481). Ette’s use of the term “publicity” recalls the ideas of Lippmann (1965 [1922], 11) and Iggers (1999, 141), reinforcing the conclusion that news serves as the basis for democratic processes.

Finney and Robinson (2008) examine newspaper framing of asylum debates, and their critical approach aligns their work with the studies discussed above. There is an additional element to this study: consideration of how the local press relates to its community. This approach emphasizes the role of newspapers in defining a local community, as opposed to Anderson’s (1991) “imagined community” of the nation. The ideal of community is mobilized as a way to marginalize and exclude, seeking to disperse and dilute immigrants. Other research shows how a newspaper can defend the interests of a marginalized group, like the newspaper *Xtra! West* which did not just try to speak to and for Vancouver’s gay and lesbian community, but also mobilized to defend the LGBTQ community’s urban territory and economic vitality (Miller 2005, 69). This indicates how a newspaper can be a social actor, shaping lives and creating altered conditions for various groups, building or tearing down diverse publics and spatial justice. This points us back to the writings of Michael Warner, whose arguments helped to formalize the political role of a newspaper: “Our willingness to process a passing appeal determines which publics we belong to and performs their extension. [when we take part in publics the] direction of our glance can constitute our social world” (Warner 2002, 62). It is possible to infer the social role of a newspaper through the positions expressed in the paper relative to certain publics, and the way the paper becomes caught up in social dynamics around those publics.

To sum up the above arguments: the study of media geography brings focused attention to the newspaper as a vehicle for popularizing geographical insights, it relies on newspapers as sources of secondary data, it treats newspapers as samples of culturally and politically inflected representations, and it views newspapers as actors taking their place among other powerful social actors. We turn now to the transformation of the newspaper and how that change might be followed by media geographers.

What is “a paper” when it is no longer paper?

As the newspaper is undergoing a rapid transformation from paper to screen, from ink to bits, and from the one-way dissemination of information to audiences to a two-way information flow to and from audiences, the *affordances* of the medium have changed. It becomes possible for the owners of news companies, and third parties they contract with, to collect detailed information about newsreaders. The information constituting this reverse flow back from news consumer to news producer is not just information on newsreading habits, but also information about the tendencies of particular people (or types of people) to share information with others, what readers buy, who they know, how they spend their free time and even what they believe. In fact, not only are digital newspaper companies capable of gathering surveillance information from newsreaders directly, but “the news” provides a seductive and platform for others (advertisers and so-called “third parties”) to gather rich surveillance information about newsreaders and share such data with affiliated companies and subsidiaries. This situation compromises the value of newspapers as vehicles for popularizing geographical insights, complicating newspapers’ usefulness as sources of secondary data, and altering the relationships between news and democratic civil society.

Another way to say all of this is that journalism in the digital age is driven increasingly by *metrics*—measurements of how the audience engages with digital content: moment by moment, click by click, news story by news story, ad by ad. Masses of newsreader data are automatically generated once any piece of news is served online (Diakopoulos 2016), and this data is refined into metrics with names like “bounce rate,” “click-through rate,” “concurrent visits,” “conversion rate,” “engaged time,” “entry rate,” and “pageviews per visit.” These metrics are subsequently assembled into analytics (Cherubini & Nielsen 2016), summary measures that have revolutionized the routines of news production. While the scrutiny of policy-makers and the public has raised concern thus far about privacy issues with social media sites, the attention on social media is starting to be a bit misplaced since “browsing news-related websites actually exposes you to over twice as much tracking as the rest of the web” (Libert & Pickard 2015). Much of this tracking arises from the “cookies” installed on news sites—small bits of code created by the designers of the site or by third parties (e.g. advertisers and special interest groups) to allow readers and their online activities to be tracked across various sites. More third party cookies are found on newspaper sites than on websites of any other type, including sports sites, game sites, shopping sites, recreation sites and adult sites (Englehardt & Narayanan 2016). A typical newspaper page designed for online reading contains about 40 third party cookies and, disturbingly, the majority of these cookies exchange data with Facebook (Libert et al. 2018, 3, 5). The line between social media and the digital reincarnation of “the newspaper” is exceedingly thin.

Various studies have confirmed that the shift to digital distribution is profoundly reshaping journalistic practices (Podger, 2009; Vu, 2014; Cherubini & Nielsen 2016; Ihlebaek & Larsson 2016; Larsson, 2017; Belair-Gagnon & Holton 2018; Zamith, 2018). It has also been clearly shown that journalists are coming to view the nature of the audience and their own roles in new ways (Anderson 2011; Hanusch & Tandoc 2017; Peruško et al. 2017; Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc 2018). At first glance, these changes seem to shift power away from journalists and editors to readers or audiences, since the vicissitudes and minutiae of audience attention are used to fine-tune the presentation and layout of news stories (Karlsson & Clerwall 2013, 65). The “people who not long ago were called an audience” (Pisani 2006, 44) now engage with news in ways that parallel social media use; they become, in a word, “producers” (Bruns 2004; Pentina & Tarafdar 2014). This can seem like empowerment of the reader. But the reader is

being read (surveilled, analyzed, followed, typed) and if news production and consumption are converging with social media production and consumption, then all of this prompts concern regarding who ultimately benefits from the supposed “democratization” of information flow.

As activity on a digital newspaper site is monitored, measured, and fed back into news production in a cycle reminiscent of social media development (Dwyer & Martin 2017), there are implications no less problematic than the problems already well known regarding the diffusion and popularization of social media. News metrics and analytics are created above all because they help recapture vanishing advertising revenues: “the most consequential audience construction takes place at the financing and distribution nodes” (Turow & Draper 2014, 643). This means that insofar as metrics create a picture of the audience, that picture is a projection of the needs of advertisers, and hence metrics “serve as currencies for most digital advertising—clicks, pageviews, and unique users” (Cherubini & Nielsen 2016, 38). Thus, while journalism professionals have always depended on simplified ideas of “the audience,” metrics create a radically new dynamic insofar as audience members are reduced to hot buttons, and these profiles of manipulability are sold to the highest bidder as a way to micro-target ad appeals and political propaganda.

News metrics shore up the promise that digital newspapers can “navigate an ever-more competitive battle for attention” (Cherubini & Nielsen 2016, 7) in the world of convergent digital media. They are driven by the same logic that drives social media—the extraction of “behavioral surplus” (Zuboff 2019, 8), the latent value of surveilled and analyzed human actions to third parties who would seek to manipulate those actions. To subscribe to a digital newspaper, one must click “agree” on policies that allow the sharing of information about online activities with newspaper companies, their affiliates, advertisers and third parties of various sorts (Adams 2020). The pooling of newsreader data often results in the ability to intersect detailed information about the attention patterns of millions of readers. News media parent companies, including hedge funds such as Alden Global Capital, benefit in complex and largely unexplored ways from this ability to follow the process of news consumption and the formation of attitudes and beliefs, while locating individual readers within the spectrum of opinions. This affords these companies an opportunity to manipulate public attitudes via custom-tailored news. In short, newspapers are evolving into a social force that is almost entirely divorced from its original journalistic function of supporting democracy and informing readers about the world.

Geographers will continue to turn to newspapers as the go-to source of information about places both near and far. However, this research-based engagement with “the news” will be well advised to take into account the constructedness of news and the ways in which newspapers have long served as social actors. Beyond this business as usual, there is an urgent need for geographers to recognize that newspapers have undergone a radical transformation; they have new and largely unexplored capabilities that bring them in line with other media serving surveillance capitalism. This demands a careful re-thinking of the value of newspapers as venues for disseminating geographical findings, archives of historical-geographic data, samples of cultural-political representations, and actors within the social arena.

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