

Book Review: The News Gap – When the Information Preferences of the Media and the Public Diverge

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/mediapolicyproject/2014/06/04/book-review-the-news-gap-when-the-information-preferences-of-the-media-and-the-public-diverge/

04/06/2014

*Drawing on extensive empirical research in North and South America as well as Europe, **The News Gap** exposes the stark differences between the information preferences and priorities of journalists and of their audiences. It identifies a “gap” between the supply and demand of news that has implications for the media industry, policy on media plurality, and the public service function of the media. The book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the dynamics of news content in today’s converged media landscape says LSE’s [Svenja Ottovordemgentschenfelde](#).*

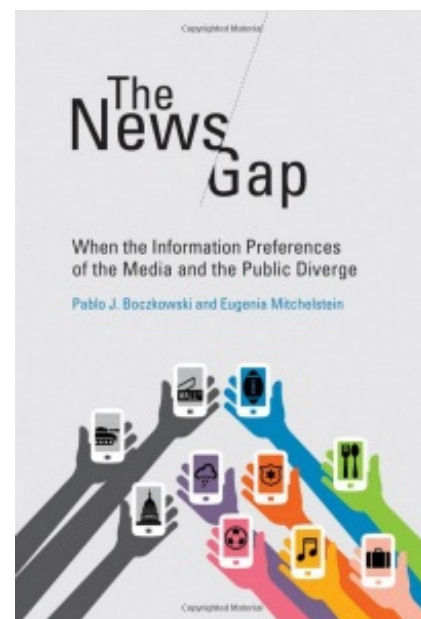


The News Gap – When the Information Preferences of the Media and the Public Diverge. Pablo Javier Boczkowski and Eugenia Michelstein. MIT Press. November 2013.

Find this book:



For the better part of the last century, the media landscape was governed by a basic information asymmetry and the journalistic logic of control over content. As a result, mainstream news organizations were in a leading market position to decide which news reached the audience. While the public has always displayed differing levels of interest in stories the media provide, the classic and linear twentieth century format of news delivery exposed the public to more content than what it preferred. In order to learn about a sports event or a policy proposal, one had to buy a whole newspaper, watch multiple segments of a TV newscast or listen to a radio show long enough to catch a desired report. The emergence of digital media facilitated an evolution of news that has changed the picture drastically: as a fragmented and post-industrial society, we now find ourselves in a hyper-saturated, competitive and high-choice media environment.



In their book *The News Gap*, [Pablo Boczkowski](#) and [Eugenia Mitchelstein](#) of Northwestern University scrutinize this development more closely and investigate the contemporary state of mainstream news media that allows us “to get the news we want and ignore the rest” (p.3). The authors juxtapose the preferences of journalists with those of the public and in doing so, their book aims to make sense of the existence, magnitude and variability of what Boczkowski and Mitchelstein conceptualize as the “news gap” between the supply and demand of information.

The News Gap presents the results of a large-scale, multi-year year study (2007-2009) that examined more than 50,000 stories published on the webpages of the 20 leading mainstream news sites in seven countries in three regions of the world (North and South America, Europe). The authors used quantitative and qualitative content analysis techniques to examine this large body of data and conducted several smaller ethnographic inquiries into the interpretative and experiential aspects of the production of online news. Unlike other recent accounts, *The News Gap* is neither concerned with production processes nor consumptions habits on their own – but with the interplay and dynamic space that exists between these two. Due to the focus on this “informational” dimension as well as the scope of the study, Boczkowski and Michelstein’s book is the most comprehensive empirical account to date of diverging news preferences as a social phenomenon.

The book examines the news gap from different analytical standpoints with multiple layers of complexity. Chapter two establishes the existence and size of the gap and the authors find that journalists consider public affairs (i.e. national, international and business topics) as the most newsworthy subjects, while the public gravitates towards non-public affairs content (i.e. sports, crime, entertainment and weather). Despite the diversity of political cultures and media systems across their sample, Boczkowski and Mitchelstein discover that the gap is immune to geographic and ideological variations.

Chapter three examines how times of heightened political activity affect the news gap. Two case studies from 2008, the U.S. Presidential Election and the political crisis in Argentina, illustrate how the news gap is a) dynamic in nature with consumer choices being more variable than those of journalists and b) narrows significantly during these periods in favour of public affairs news.

Chapter four looks at storytelling preferences and finds that both journalists and consumers favour the classic straight-news style, while consumers still prefer non-public affairs topics regardless of format. Contrary to the majority of both popular and expert beliefs, the authors argue that novel formats such as the integration of user-generated content (UGC) have a remarkably low level of uptake amongst audiences.

The book's narrative is well developed and substantiated by an impressive amount of case studies and empirical evidence. The authors include countless screenshots, graphs and data visualizations to support and illustrate their findings. A follow up study undertaken within the U.S. context is presented as the coda and provides an additional asset to the core body of the book.

Finally, the authors observe that journalists appear to be "less able to adapt to changes in circumstances than consumers, which doesn't bode well for the future of traditional news production in a fast-paced and changing environment" (p. 110). Ultimately, they come to the conclusion that the study's evidence "suggests the industry's inability to innovate" (p. 172). This indicates just how timely *The News Gap* is, as mainstream news organizations across the globe are facing similar challenges. The recently leaked [New York Times innovation report](#) illustrates that even journalists in one of the world's leading newsrooms are [struggling](#) to fully adapt to the digital age.

One of the major contributions of Boczkowski and Mitchelstein's research is the conceptual formulation of the "news gap". It accurately captures a prevailing social phenomenon which the authors describe as a tension between "what is interesting and what is important". However, it is statements like this that clearly reveal Boczkowski and Mitchelstein's vision of a classic liberal and normative vision of the press in democratic societies. They base their argument around the problems of an uninformed citizenry on the premises of a public service mission of the media, its "vibrant performance of a watchdog role" (p. 141) and its duty to facilitate civic deliberation in the public sphere.

However, this perspective is not necessarily unproblematic. The authors argue that journalists' professional logic trumps that of the market and in doing so, they risk downplaying environmental forces such as declining revenues, collapsing business models as well as harsh competition for markets and audiences as powerful macro structures that impact the supply side of news. After all, supply determines the existence, magnitude and variability of the news gap just as much as demand does.

Overall, the book is a comprehensive, insightful and valuable contribution to understanding the dynamic knowledge exchange between those who produce and those who consume news. The authors develop a novel methodology that combines traditionally separate fields of study in one project. I highly recommend *The News Gap* as a useful and well-researched text that sheds light on this yet understudied area of media research.

This blog post gives the views of the authors, and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

- Copyright © 2014 LSE