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Newspaper journalism and the changing publics of multimedia cities

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Introduction

Metropolitan (or local, regional) newspapers have often been seen as intrinsic media in the political constitution of cities. Amongst his writings on human ecology, Robert E. Park (1925) – a former journalist (see Lindner, 1996) – wrote vividly on the connections between media communications, urban knowledge and the politics of cities. He saw the city newspaper as a kind of natural communicative emergence that reproduced a village-like community, countervailing the increasing complexity and size of early 20th Century American cities. For Park, not only did newspapers make these large cities knowable, they also uniquely mobilized the city as a governable space and social-political body (see also Barth, 1980, Fritzsche, 1996, Nord, 2001, Wallace, 2005). Yet if such talk of urban community ever designated actually existing phenomena, such a communal urban public is now undoubtedly being reworked. Various literatures on contemporary cities now commonly refer to the relational, mobile, transnational, and connected nature of cities as social and political spaces (e.g. Jacobs and Fincher, 1998, Graham and Marvin, 2001, Amin and Thrift, 2002, Sieverts, 2003, Amin, 2004). Moreover, the longstanding and continuing proliferation of new media and communications are inherent technologies and practices changing such urban spaces. Indeed, to view contemporary metropolitan newspapers as Park did would surely be anachronistic. Yet where does this leave their political status in the multimedia city?

In my own recent doctoral research (Rodgers, 2006) I address only some dimensions of this very big question. My study considered the changing political geographies of the *Toronto Star*, specifically via the urban geographical imaginations and spaces entailed in the organization and practices of political journalism. Deploying an ethnographically focused methodology (participant observations, interviews, content tracking and documentary research), and fusing cultural geography, media sociology, practice theory and organizational studies, the research approached the metropolitan newspaper somewhat differently in relation to past urban research. Most research across interdisciplinary urban studies has seen newspapers as variously involved in urban politics along one of two pathways: theories about the local political economy of newspapers (e.g. Logan and Molotch, 1987); or, analyses of the urban representations produced by newspapers (e.g. Parisi and Holcomb, 1994). The alternate path taken in my research emphasized how intersections of social practices and material arrangements (cf. Law, 1994, Schatzki, 2002, Latour, 2005) continuously and heterogeneously assembled the *Toronto Star* as a media organisation oriented to the politics of Toronto and its region. This was a metropolitan newspaper composed of invoked ‘history’ and ‘tradition’ in the city, of the imaginative geographies of editors and managers, of the hybrid political sites of beat reporters, columnists and editorialists, and more.



Below I present a rendition of the poster that was presented at the ESF conference ‘Cities and Media: Cultural Perspectives on Urban Identities in a Mediatized World’, held 25-29 October 2006 in Vadstena, Sweden. This comprises a brief survey of one major theme of the doctoral work summarized above: the future orientations of editors and managers – the attempts made to project the political (and economic) standing of the *Toronto Star* into the present and near future ‘multimedia city’. While the mantra everywhere was and is of the dying newspaper, considered here are the ways that (relatively well resourced and obdurate) media may become active participants in transforming the future communicative spaces of cities.

1 Articulating urban subjectivities/identities



The *Toronto Star* is an exemplary metropolitan newspaper, oriented strongly towards its urban-region. A celebrated, longtime editor was noted for his requirement that *Star* reporters approach every story with the question: what does it mean for Metro (Toronto)? The newspaper was arguably responsible for the recent emergence of 'Greater Toronto Area' (or GTA) as a term and geography of everyday usage. The *Toronto Star*, in other words, had enrolled the Toronto urban region as a reading public, as well as lucrative media market.

Yet threats to this audience-orientation and business model were afoot. The Toronto audience was working longer hours, living in suburbs/exurbs, commuting long journeys. There were two-income families, single-parent families, families forming at much later stages in the lifecycle. Youth, subscribers of the future, were apparently uninterested in newspaper reading. Not to mention the dramatic increase in the ethnic diversity of the Toronto region. Along with this were the proliferating newer-news media. Drive-to-work and drive home radio, 24-hour news, free commuter newspapers, news websites and web blogs – a differentiated and mobile 'instant news' environment for a city region of increasing diversity and mobility.

The immigrant experience in this country has changed ... we try to reflect that in the way we interact with our readers ... (Publisher)

... the 905 (suburbs) will increasingly define how the entire metropolis lives and acts ... If we care about reflecting our community then we ... have a responsibility to see the broader picture. (City Editor)

... it's important to ... have one medium where most people, or a good number of people, in the community, make reference to, and follow. So that they're part of the same conversation. (Editor-in-Chief)

It's a cultural change in some ways ... we are the metropolitan newspaper ... in this region, metropolitan region. So we have to be really, really good on urban issues ... so, thinking about content, the nature of the content, ... the execution of what we want, and the presentation of it, which is much more important than it was before. (Editor-in-Chief)

The theory is that what we want to do is ... push down authority, and ... the generation of news ... I personally believe in the philosophy of journalism, that the best stories are going to come from the reporters (City Editor)

Such transformations were a major concern for editors and managers. Though the strategies deployed to deal with their emerging dilemma were many, one overarching strategy was to make adjustments to the daily flow of work, drawing on experiments at other newspapers. Editors hoped to spur the creative diversities of their writers; to step back and 'flatten' authority across the newsroom. In the City Department, 'teams' focused along topical areas were created (e.g. 'New Toronto', 'GTA Politics'). Attempting to make the newspaper appeal across diverse subjectivities – while at the same time underwrite common urban identity – editors tried to enliven the diverse voices of the *Toronto Star*.

2 Visualizing the city

A major facet of appealing to diverse urban publics was the demand for more sophisticated visual presentation. Market surveys and focus groups, trade literature, and journalism conferences had all told editors of a rising 'magazine sensibility'. This was something particularly projected for younger audiences, for whom visuality and design were seen as paramount. With a major staple of *Toronto Star* content being urban coverage, the introduction of such new forms of visual presentation often meant assembling new techniques and technologies for visualizing the city. Charts, graphs, diagrams, 'infographics', integrated page display, artist renderings and so on.

... expectations are changing in terms of quality ... the depth, the context, the implications of stories ... but also the presentation, in terms of the design quality. Um, you know, the younger readers in particular, I think, ... have much more of a magazine sensibility. Their expectations, in terms of design, are very different than people who grew up with older fashion newspapers. (Editor-in-Chief)

(Graphics are) a way of providing ... entry points into stories, or giving people information in a quick way, or juxtaposing things ... (City Editor)

... you want the graphic to be almost like, not re-telling the story, but, telling another part of the story that doesn't really fit as part of the narrative, but can be told better visually. (Deputy City Editor)

I've tried to push occasionally for, you know, whole stories should basically just be graphics. (Assistant City Editor)

The graphic journalist, I mean, you know, if you'd said that even five years ago, uh, people would have laughed. Uh, it's not funny, (laughs)) it's actually, I mean you can see it. (City Editor)

... a magapaper means, more emphasis on photography, more time spent in the writing process and editing, more attention, better attention to layout and the look of it. (Sunday Editor)

The most overt and experimental attempt at magazine techniques was a newly redesigned Sunday *Toronto Star*. The Sunday edition had traditionally remained the ‘forgotten’ weekend edition in relation to the voluminous flagship edition on Saturday. Yet as a weekend paper it had a lengthy lead-time (a week or more), and a generous availability of page space (due to less advertising take-up). Sunday was an ideal edition to re-launch as a new experimental ‘magapaper’ in early 2005. Full-page photos, liberal use of art and graphics, and longer, more contextual feature stories. While the Sunday edition continued to be something of an exception, it simultaneously introduced one way to a possible future for the *Toronto Star*.



New approaches to page design

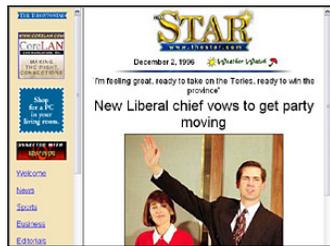


Examples of ‘Infographics’



The redesigned Sunday ‘magapaper’

3 Urbanizing digital space



Early website – December 1996



11 September 2001



February 2006 (with added blogs, podcasts and other new features)



The future? (next major re-launch planned for late 2006)

The translation of print-based news media to web-based platforms is often characterized as a next-to-inevitable future for newspapers. Yet such a translation is replete with tensions and paradoxes. As a media form, metropolitan newspapers have been distinguished by tailoring their content to a diverse urban-regional audience. While internet technology offers a potentially global audience, metropolitan newspapers delineate their audiences by the fact that they share a more local turf: the reader-circulation geography defined by the city and its surrounding region. To some extent, then, moves by the *Toronto Star* or other metropolitan newspapers to display and circulate their content via internet technology could involve (as it has so far) an 'urbanizing' of digital space.

'Translation' is an appropriate term to describe a move to a web-based platform because of the consequences of the internet to the form and pacing of news content. The current version of the *Toronto Star* web edition mixes longer, contextual content prepared for the print edition with continuous postings of breaking news. And these two types of content interplay with one another: breaking news from a wire service might be posted moments after it is released; a reporter might then follow up with a longer related story for the print edition; and a web reporter might further enhance or expand the print edition story with information or angles that could not be assembled by the print deadline. An internet-only metropolitan newspaper would potentially entail a more complex and deeper change to city-focused coverage, where the timings of publication are adjustable throughout the day, and presentation and placement of content could shift just as rapidly as editors might make changes.

Editors at the *Toronto Star*, however, deliberately retreated from implementing any truly significant moves towards an internet newspaper. For one, the existing technologies supporting the internet as well as monitor displays greatly restricted the usage of graphics and advanced page presentation that were concurrently being developed for the print edition. Linked to such visual limitations were comparative limits to advertising display possibilities. But perhaps the deepest source of reluctance for an online-only metropolitan newspaper was in maintaining a space for the authority of professional journalism in the politics of the city, against the potentially anarchistic character of internet-based communication.

It is still local. It's a little less local than the paper perhaps. (Senior Editor, Internet)

... we lean toward our tradition as a newspaper to a certain extent. The newspaper doesn't just print anything. They're careful about what they print. And, I would say a lot of newspaper websites do they same. They have their tools available to them, they have the possibilities, but they keep a fairly tight rein on them. (Senior Editor, Internet)

I would argue in a world of more and more information, ... and in a world in which, to some degree, everybody can be a journalist, and therefore it becomes harder and harder to know ... what's true and what isn't, that the true reporting function, ... and the editing of this mass of information into some form which is accessible and manageable for people, ... is gonna have as much value, or more value ... (Publisher)

I think that we are gonna have to get ourselves to the point where we start embracing (the internet) much more actively, and that we start thinking of it as being perhaps even our principle means of publication... (Publisher)

Can we create a situation where advertisers are interested in purchasing, you know, kind of, essentially adjacencies to our content, which is the newspaper model. (Publisher)

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