

# THE LIFE INFORMATIC

# EXPERTISE

CULTURES AND  
TECHNOLOGIES  
OF KNOWLEDGE



EDITED BY DOMINIC BOYER

*A list of titles in this series is available  
at [www.cornellpress.cornell.edu](http://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu).*

# THE LIFE INFORMATIC

*Newsmaking in the Digital Era*

DOMINIC BOYER

CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS  
ITHACA AND LONDON

Copyright © 2013 by Cornell University  
All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in a review, this book, or parts thereof, must not be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher. For information, address Cornell University Press, Sage House, 512 East State Street, Ithaca, New York 14850.

First published 2013 by Cornell University Press  
First printing, Cornell Paperbacks, 2013

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Boyer, Dominic.  
The life informatic : newsmaking in the digital era / Dominic Boyer.  
p. cm.  
Includes bibliographical references.  
ISBN 978-0-8014-5188-1 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-8014-7858-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)  
1. Electronic news gathering. 2. Journalism—Data processing.  
3. Journalism—Computer network resources. 4. Journalism—Technological innovations. 5. Online journalism. 6. Digital media. I. Title.  
PN4784.E53B69 2013  
070.4'30285—dc23

2012033795

Cornell University Press strives to use environmentally responsible suppliers and materials to the fullest extent possible in the publishing of its books. Such materials include vegetable-based, low-VOC inks and acid-free papers that are recycled, totally chlorine-free, or partly composed of nonwood fibers. For further information visit our website at [www.cornellpress.cornell.edu](http://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu).

Cloth printing	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
Paperback printing	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

For Olivia and Brijzha, two originals in an age of imitation



# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
Prologue	xi
Introduction: News Journalism Today	1
1. The Craft of Slotting: Screenwork, Attentional Practices, and News Value at an International News Agency	13
2. Click and Spin: Time, Feedback, and Expertise at an Online News Portal	47
3. Countdown: Professionalism, Publicity, and Political Culture in 24/7 News Radio	90
4. The News Informatic: Five Reflections on News Journalism and Digital Liberalism	125
Epilogue: Informatic Unconscious: On the Evolution of Digital Reason in Anthropology	152
Notes	177
Bibliography	199



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A book is an authorial labor of love but also a bundle of relations, gifts, and debts. My words are necessarily briefer than the individuals and organizations mentioned here deserve. This project was funded principally by a Humboldt Foundation Research Grant from 2008 to 2010, and I want thank the staff and officers of Humboldt not only for supporting my research over the past fifteen years but also for epitomizing the best, most selfless spirit of *Kultur* and *Wissenschaft*. My German field research was further sponsored and supported by the Institut für Kulturanthropologie und Europäische Ethnologie at the Goethe Universität Frankfurt. Prof. Dr. Gisela Welz, one of the leading lights of anthropology in Germany, was the most generous and brilliant of hosts. I cannot thank her and her colleagues enough for their goodwill and intellectual engagement and for making my time in Frankfurt and Berlin so rewarding and enjoyable. The field research would also very obviously not have been possible without the generosity of the staffs of the Associated Press German Service, T-Online News, and mdr info. I want to thank them and their parent organizations for their willingness to participate in this research project. Although so many kindnesses were shown me in each of these locations, let me just thank a few individuals for going above and beyond the call of duty: Frank Biehl, Jana Hahn, Mike Heerdegen-Simonsen, Johannes Kaufmann, Dietz Schwiesau, Michael Stüber, Marc Vesshoff, Peter Zschunke. Lastly, I would also like to thank the following organizations for participating in the background research for this study: derwesten.de, dpa, Hessischer Rundfunk, *Frankfurter Neue Presse*, National Public Radio, Newseum, the Online News Association, RBB-Inforadio, *Der Spiegel*, Südwestrundfunk, *Wall Street Journal*, washingtonpost.com, and WBEZ-Chicago.

A book, especially an anthropological book, is traveling knowledge. When I set out on this adventure, I was employed by Cornell University and when I returned it was to Rice University. I want to thank colleagues, staff, and administrators at both institutions for their patience, support, and understanding of a life in transition. The writing phase of the project would not have been nearly as much fun had it not taken

place in the wonderful, vibrant intellectual community of Rice Anthropology. There exists no better, more risk-taking and rigorous place, in my opinion, to do reflexive anthropology. My senior colleagues, James Faubion and Nia Georges, have been terrific inspirations close at hand while George Marcus has supported and enlivened this work from afar. And, special thanks to Jeff Fleisher and Susan McIntosh for attuning me to the history of cybernetics in archaeology. Rice Anthropology's unique culture of graduate mentoring and faculty-student collaboration has incubated many of the ideas in these pages. For their contributions and commitment to this project and to our intellectual community, thanks to Camille Barnett, Lina Dib, Erech Empey, Nessette Falu, Mike Griffiths, Seda Karslioglu, Marcel LaFlamme, Jessica Lockrem, Ian Lowrie, Liz Marks, Val Olson, Rachael Petersen, Maria Vidart, Than Vlachos, Jing Wang, and Ethan Wilensky-Lanford (and, of course, to all our friends at Poison Girl and Double Trouble).

Books are materializations of conversations and intuitions, but above all inspirations. This project took shape over several years of talking and thinking digital media. I owe thanks to many interlocutors: Debbora Battaglia, Stefan Beck, Pablo Boczkowski, Tom Boellstorff, Don Brenneis, Charles Briggs, Gabriella Coleman, Steve Coleman, Alex Dent, Alfred Eichhorn, Patrick Eisenlohr, Tarek Elhaik, Jess Falcone, Mike Fischer, Faye Ginsburg, Andreas Glaeser, Ulf Hannerz, Ariana Hernandez, Michael Herzfeld, Charles Hirschkind, Doug Holmes, Graham Jones, Chris Kelty, Kira Kosnick, Paul Liffmann, Joseph Masco, William Mazzarella, James Meador, Anand Pandian, Mark Allen Peterson, Beth Povinelli, Paul Rabinow, Deepa Reddy, Seth Sanders, Hoon Song, Kaushik Sunder Rajan, Helena Wulff, Alexei Yurchak, Kate Zaloom and Barbie Zelizer. Your words and writings have all enriched me and you will find mutant appropriations of them somewhere herein. Two anonymous reviewers for Cornell University Press were all that an author could hope for: smart, supportive, and challenging. Peter Potter, the editor in chief at Cornell University Press, has been a close collaborator on this book and on the Expertise project as a whole. He has taught me as much as anyone about the possibilities and challenges of academic publishing in the digital era.

Finally, a book is also a phase of life. Thanks to my family, especially to my mother, father, and sisters for rock solid support *während der Verwandlung*. To my daughters for unconditional love. To the love of my life, Cymene Howe, for This joy that transects every orbit. I thank her also for being a superbly generous colleague and collaborator. Having read and commented on every page of this book at least twice, it has become hers as well as mine.

## PROLOGUE

### **This Text Informatic**

This book is an ethnography of the practices and understandings of digital information in contemporary news journalism. It is also a work of digital information in its own right. One of the most striking realizations for me in doing fieldwork with news journalists was how much of their practice was intimately familiar to another office-based, digitally enabled professional like an anthropologist. Although anthropologists happily consider themselves as fieldworkers at heart, the truth is that we spend most of our time as screenworkers, even in “the field.” Like my journalistic research partners, my average workday unfolds in front of a personal computer, often with a word-processing program open on my desktop. Like them, I check e-mail frequently (compulsively some sources say) for the purposes of professional correspondence and coordination. Although for somewhat different reasons than they do, I use online news sources frequently throughout the day and have alerts set up to inform me of events relevant to my research and interests. I, too, utilize electronic archives and search engines. My cell phone is, needless to say, also always at hand. In the course of this average workday, therefore, I find myself frequently shifting back and forth between producing texts and managing a variety of information channels, some of which demand that I respond to them on a fast-time basis.

I hasten to add that the differences between the information practices of news journalism and anthropology are also many. One of the more striking differences is that the normal production cycle of anthropological research and writing is much longer and more flexible than that of news journalism. Because we largely set our own timetables for writing, I rarely feel as though I am working on the clock; my deadlines are measured in weeks and months rather than hours and minutes, a fact that my journalist friends seem to both envy and pity.

My point is simply that contemporary news journalism and contemporary anthropology share a “life informatic”; in the digital era they have both become “information

professions.” Like so many anthropological research encounters with professionals and their “cultures of expertise,” one finds oneself studying practices that are, at least to some extent, shared within organizational environments that are far from unfamiliar.<sup>1</sup>

Being entangled in one’s objects of reflection represents, to my mind, no necessary barrier to effective ethnography. Indeed, as a long tradition of critical reflexive scholarship has pointed out, the expectation of a radical gap between ethnographer and research subject has been fantasy-laden in its own right, whether in the name of scientific objectivity, literary exoticization, or political advocacy.<sup>2</sup> In this case, I think entanglement creates a reflexive anthropological opportunity. The overlapping information practices and ecologies of anthropology and news journalism generate what news journalists might call an “echo chamber”<sup>3</sup> in which shared experiences and concerns amplify, permitting us to hear more clearly how anthropological research practice is transforming in the digital era. This could potentially become a very long and complicated discussion but in the interest of provocative brevity, I will limit myself to three reflections.

### **Anthropological Writing and Reading in the Era of Digital Communication**

I assume that many readers of this book have heard something about the current “crisis” facing contemporary broadcast journalism and especially newspaper journalism.<sup>4</sup> In short, the “business model” of the postwar period is in deep trouble: sales and advertising revenues are plummeting as viewers and readers abandon traditional media for the Internet and social media. As advertisers migrate to the digital aftermarket of search engines and social media, the expensive business of original news production is becoming increasingly difficult to finance. To many observers the eventual diminishment, even death, of newspapers and broadcasters seems inevitable and for some, desirable.<sup>5</sup>

One hears much the same story line (minus the fleeing advertisers) applied more and more to academic print publishing as well.<sup>6</sup> Digital information technology, so the story goes, has catalyzed new reading practices, which are in turn making the scholarly monograph an increasingly redundant form. On the one hand, it is said that there is a rising demand for interactivity and multimediality in academic communication; on the other, there is a demand for more mobile, flexible texts—texts that can be located and read from a laptop, tablet, or other mobile data device. Books do fall short on both these fronts and so there are genuine concerns about the print monograph’s future viability as a medium of professional communication. However, if one wishes to speak of a crisis in academic publishing it is just as important to highlight a global neoliberal reform trend in higher education since the 1980s that has sought, for ex-

ample, to reinvent university presses as market-oriented, for-profit publishing units. At the same time as many universities are cutting or reducing subsidies to their presses, administrators are making it clear that they expect presses to continue publishing the specialized print monographs that remain essential to the credentialing of the professoriate.

Publishing insiders such as Lindsay Waters have proclaimed this an unsustainable paradox with crippling implications for academic presses.<sup>7</sup> But what are the alternatives? Digital monographs (e-books) have been slow to catch on as replacements for academic books, even as short-form scholarship (journal articles) is transitioning rapidly to digital formats. Even if digital monographs became widely accepted this would not entirely solve presses' financial concerns because the reality is that review, editorial, and layout/design, which constitute the majority of the production costs of monograph publishing, remain largely constant in the move to a digital standard.<sup>8</sup> The logical response has been to create efficiencies in the publishing process (through outsourcing labor, or reducing text length, or both) in an effort to reduce costs, while simultaneously seeking out ways to increase sales volume. It is not surprising therefore that presses and acquisitions editors (including myself for the Expertise series) now express a preference for shorter, more tightly argued books that are accessible to a wider audience that includes multiple academic readerships and perhaps even nonacademic readers. All of this makes writing an academic book these days a process exquisitely overdetermined by factors that transcend the more traditional scholarly concerns of originality, substance, and quality.

But the pressures of academic publishing are not simply those of the market; they also involve basic considerations of scholarly communicability in the era of digital media. Just as for news journalists, anthropologists must process a level of information that vastly exceeds that of two decades ago, when I began my own professionalization process. E-mail is a commonly identified culprit in terms of heightened expectations for fast-time availability and communicability. And, the growing popularity of social media and mobile entertainment should not be underestimated for its demands of time and energy. But another obvious source of our growing information "overload" is the seemingly ever-expanding world of academic publishing, now often referred to as "scholarly communication." Driven by the combination of professional desires for recognition and credentials, and the commercial publishing industry's desire to widen its revenue stream, the academic journal business is expanding, meaning more journals, more articles, more "content" to produce and to process. The situation is particularly acute in the so-called STM (scientific, technical, and medical) fields where commercial publishers, with operating profit margins close to 40 percent,<sup>9</sup> charge thousands of dollars for annual journal subscriptions. In the United Kingdom, for example, 65 percent of the money spent on content acquisition at academic libraries

now goes to journals,<sup>10</sup> which means less money for buying books, e-books, and everything else. Given that academic authorial and review labor is most often nonmonetized, this is a particularly lucrative business model for commercial publishers and one that we can expect them to pursue aggressively in the future, even as it increasingly overwhelms us with content and exhausts us with expectations. One of my most cherished and erudite colleagues lamented to me over a beer one evening, “No one has the time to read anymore,” which of course means also the time to read books and journal articles, especially those unrelated to one’s immediate teaching and research interests. And, by extension, one could say that no one has the time to write books anymore, at least long and complex ones of possibly marginal interest to publishers and a distracted overtaxed audience.

For all of these reasons, I found myself thinking about *The Life Informatic* from the beginning as a short, accessible, and above all “teachable” book, at least in comparison to my previous work. I have deliberately streamlined my presentation and, wherever possible, confined references to endnotes. In view of digital searchability, there is no print index to this book. But “accessibility” means to me not only efficiency of argument and clarity of language but above all trying to recognize the aforementioned pressures facing academic readers today. It is no longer safe to assume that the average reader has the time or energy to read every word of a book, so I have organized *The Life Informatic* in a modular fashion that can be absorbed in pieces. The prologue and epilogue, for example, work together as more meta-level reflexive brackets to the core project, focusing on the impact of digital media and information in anthropology and the human sciences. The remainder of the book offers a more focused anthropological study of office-based news journalism today. The ethnographic studies in chapters 1 through 3 are also meant to be relatively self-contained units; the ethnography and analysis in each chapter is presented in such a way that the reader is not expected to have read all the other chapters. Whether or not these experiments to enhance modularity and accessibility are successful is for the reader rather than the author to decide. But as I was writing this book, I found myself confronting questions about the future of anthropological communication that are hauntingly similar to those currently circulating in the news industry as the postwar paradigm of journalism unravels without a new formation clearly in sight. What, for example, are the long-term effects for anthropological knowledge of “downsizing” ethnographic richness and theoretical elaboration in the interests of producing more streamlined, argument-driven, and teachable texts? In the world of journal publishing especially, how much longer do we want to be beholden to commercial interests who profit from our voluntary labor without compensation?<sup>11</sup> What institutional partners can we find to help extend nonprofit and open access models of scholarly communication?

## Anthropological Research in the Era of Digital Information

When I began the research for this project in 2008 I made a conscious effort to see if it had become truly possible in the age of digital information to produce a work of anthropological ethnography without setting foot in a research library. This would have been an unthinkable experiment in the late 1990s when I was writing the first draft of my previous monograph. With full disclosure, I slipped up many times, mostly in an effort to find print editions of books that were otherwise unavailable. But, I was surprised at the extent to which electronic journal databases, the proliferation of electronic versions of larger texts, and other online information resources made it possible to do the vast majority of the contextual and comparative research for this project via screenwork. As noted above, anthropology justly prizes fieldwork as its core research practice.<sup>12</sup> But there are a great many other kinds of information practice that converge in the making of anthropological ethnography, few of which receive the attention that fieldwork has.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the most important of these is the lateral research that anthropologists perform in order to historicize and contextualize their field research. This research normally bears fruit in the form of in-text quotations and citations and is thus essential to the socialization and temporalization of our texts as “timely interventions” in a field of knowledge.

Like contemporary news journalists, anthropologists have come increasingly to rely on online information sources and functionalities to perform such contextual and archival research. The implication of this, for both journalists and anthropologists, is that we increasingly rely on a similar source matrix and on parallel research and writing strategies. In just the past ten years, for example, search engines have emerged as indispensable tools for anthropological research just as they have in news journalism, tools that are used to locate relevant information sources, to fact check, to synchronize oneself with current events. Although at first something of a joke for the professoriate, blogs and wikis have also become, in a period of just a few years, essential tools of research and teaching, often vying with print resources for veracity and reliability and greatly exceeding them in terms of convenience. And despite our common valorization of original authorship, both anthropologists and journalists make frequent use of copy/paste features of browsers and word-processing software to highlight relevant information and to aid in text composition. Finally, anthropologists tend to access online news media as avidly (if perhaps not quite as continuously) as news journalists do. Alongside e-mail and social media, I would argue that such information practices have made a kind of 24/7 mobile research continuum a social reality in a way that is quite distinct from bygone generations of anthropological field, office, and library work. This book, for example, has been researched, composed, and edited on my laptop as I have traveled across North America, Latin America, and Europe attending conferences,

visiting family, giving lectures, and doing fieldwork. This is possible because laptops, tablets, and smartphones have unprecedented capacities for mobile information organization and storage: All of my field research materials as well as a great many other supporting documents are archived digitally. What I could not bring with me, I could often access via Wi-Fi. Much as reporters now carry their libraries and writing instruments everywhere with them, it seems as though the distinction between field research and other kinds of research is weakening for anthropologists. I will not comment here on whether purely online research can produce the same intimacy and quality of knowledge that we typically attribute to long-term monosited or multisited offline fieldwork because the experiences of both online and field research vary so dramatically.<sup>14</sup> But I will say that if anthropological research has long shared a common field orientation with certain forms of journalistic practice, particularly the work of foreign correspondents,<sup>15</sup> then we might recognize that the office and mobile information practices of news journalism and anthropology are becoming increasingly aligned as well.

Which also means that common dilemmas likely await us. For example, a rising concern in news journalism is the industry's reliance upon a shrinking pool of original news sources. When a multiplicity of news organizations republishes common source material, it can produce the illusion of authority through consensus even in those cases, like hoaxes, where the shared sources prove to be unreliable. Anthropologists should be concerned about this informational phenomenon as well. After all, our awareness of events transpiring in distant places very often depends upon news reporting and a great many ideas for anthropological research projects can be retraced to news stories. But the effects of this dependency are underexamined. In this book, for example, both my journalist interlocutors and I struggled with the narrative of "crisis" in contemporary news media. While none of us was fully convinced that "crisis" is the only, let alone the best, way of describing what is happening with the news, we all felt compelled to participate in this discourse to some extent, because the constant echoing of the crisis narrative in both academic and industry accounts has made it something of a baseline intuition in our epistemic environments.

## **Anthropological Knowledge in the Era of Digital Reason**

One of the more provocative claims I make in this book is that anthropology is, and has been for some time, awash in digital thinking. By this, I mean two things. First, anthropologists are familiar with various well-publicized and well-circulated notions of "the digital era," such as the ideas that digital media inevitably undermine existing organizations (especially centralizations) of power, that digital media compress

perceptions of space and time, and that digital media are in the process of revolutionizing our senses of community and individuality.<sup>16</sup> Even if my field research has made me skeptical of some of these claims, I argue not that such ideas are right or wrong but rather that we must try to understand them as part of an informatic ideology in which practical intuitions derived from experiences with digital information and communication are converted into truths about the digital era and its influence.

Second, I mean that the analytical practices of anthropology and the human sciences have been deeply, quietly influenced since the middle of the twentieth century by models of knowledge and communication that are intimately linked to the industrialization of electronic computation. In the epilogue, I detail how the information theory developed by Claude Shannon and others in the 1940s emerged from wartime research on cryptography and gunnery systems, and from the industrialization of data transfer and storage. But information theory's conversion of communication and feedback into mathematical and engineering problems also naturalized a particular formalist ideology of knowledge in which relevant signal (e.g., "information") can be sharpened via a binary (e.g., "digital") coding method that erases the (supposedly) irrelevant noise of the continuous signal spectrum. As information theory was absorbed into human scientific concept work in the 1950s and 1960s (notably in the form of structuralism) this epistemological formalism endured, redefining knowledge in terms of binary information and challenging more "analog" models of knowledge that viewed epistemic form as part of a continuum of thinking and understanding. Similarly, I discuss how the applied information theory of cybernetics influenced anthropological conceptions of culture, power, and social systematicity.

Digital thinking never exercised an absolute hegemony over anthropological knowledge by any means, but it has been strongly "informative" of key areas of anthropological thought such as culture theory in ways that have been remarkably silent. So why do we hear the echoes here and now? My argument is that the intersecting and overlapping digital information practices, understandings, and environments of news journalism and anthropology generate a critical density of digital experience that, in turn, elicits recognition of the presence of what I term an "informatic unconscious" within anthropological knowledge. In this project, the digital thinking of the anthropologist and the digital thinking of the informant amplify each other to the extent that a typical division of labor between anthropology and its research partners (where the former offers the theory and the latter, the data) is disabled. As I discovered in my earlier research on dialectical knowledge as well,<sup>17</sup> this is a case where the ethnographic "data" already prefigures to some extent the language of analysis. So rather than simply rearticulating that language of analysis in a different way (in the hopes of producing a more "sophisticated" and naturalized version of the same), I

believe we are confronted with the challenge of explaining where the doubled form of knowledge (in this case, digital thinking) comes from in the first place. That reflexive investigation is one of my underlying objectives in this work.

## Our Lives Informatic

But I will defer that objective until the epilogue. A deeper investigation of news journalism in the digital era beckons. I close here with an explanation of this book's title. Long before the dawn of electronic computation, the English word "information," drawing upon the Latin root *informare*, meant the formal aspect of knowledge, especially in the context of instruction. Formalism has therefore accompanied the word "information" from the very beginning. My title also invokes the German word *Informatik*, coined by the German cybernetic pioneer and scholar of machine intelligence Karl Steinbuch to denote not just epistemological formalism but rather the automation of information processing and thought itself.<sup>18</sup> The term "informatic" signals the convergence of automaticity, intelligence, and knowledge in the context of electronic computation and digital information. The ethnographic studies in this book describe the experiences of professional journalists who work closely, as virtually all journalists do today, with computerized digital news information technologies. They are keenly aware of this "informatic" dimension of their news practice and often feel that their information technologies exert a strong degree of influence over the organization and flow of their work.

And, yet, news journalists also feel as though they remain intellectuals and crafts-persons who resist automaticity and infuse their work with "life" by exercising their professional judgment on news value and form and by acts of original authorship and editing—in short, by "making news." My titular juxtaposition of "life" and "informatic" is meant to highlight the seemingly paradoxical condition of feeling at once automated and agentive. This is the affective and conceptual terrain of my ethnography. In the case studies that follow, we find journalists constantly oscillating between praxiological (e.g., practice-centered) and mediological (e.g., medium-centered) reflections on their practice and on the news. My argument is that neither kind of reflection is more valid than the other.<sup>19</sup> Recognizing the phenomenological adequacy, indeed necessity, of their continuous oscillation tells us, however, a great deal about the experience of news journalism today and of how news journalists make sense of that experience.

We might recognize this necessity in how we come to terms with our own academic information professions as well. Is it not possible in the era of digital media to feel that we are mobile, powerful agents of analysis and representation? Consider all the dazzling instruments of information now under our control. And, yet, upon a moment's reflection, how vulnerable and contingent our epistemic labors prove to be.

We are awash in too much information, screen-bound with no time to read and no one reading us. But, wait, in the little interface you and I are sharing right now, we are challenging this otherwise persuasive idiom: an author is being read and reappropriated. Perhaps you and I are agents after all. One sees that we too oscillate between praxiologies and mediologies of the contemporary. Such are the affective and epistemic dialectics of our lives informatic.



# THE LIFE INFORMATIC



# INTRODUCTION

## *News Journalism Today*

“The ‘truthiness’ is, anyone can read the news to you. I promise to feel the news . . . at you.”

—Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*

“The distracted person, too, can form habits.”

—Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*

### **Truth-seeker, Screenworker**

Truth may seem an ever more plural and slippery concept in public and political culture today. But news journalism retains a certain romance for its dogged pursuit of all things factual. Even in a time of endless complaints about the growing sensationalism and ethereality of “the media,” one continues to find journalists positioned in heroic roles in Hollywood films and bestseller fiction. We find the hard-nosed beat reporter, the relentless investigative journalist, the cantankerous desk editor, the fearless foreign correspondent, all fighters for the objectivity of truth against forces of deception and dissimulation.

There are so many examples one could choose from but one of the most memorable in recent years appears in Stieg Larsson’s globally bestselling Millennium series.<sup>1</sup> Larsson, himself an investigative journalist and ruthless critic of social violence and right-wing politics in Sweden, gifts us the character of Mikael Blomkvist, an investigative journalist engaged in a series of high-stakes battles with corporate and governmental villains whose conspiracies are undermining the integrity and transparency of Swedish social democracy. Driven by conscience and passion to expose elite corruption, Blomkvist is the heroic truth-seeker par excellence. Even as he is hunted, shot at, beaten, and jailed, he refuses to yield or to compromise his principles. But, most significantly, Blomkvist exhibits unwavering faith in the power of journalistic publicity, the power of bringing facts into public circulation via media. He is convinced that publishing the results of investigative work will galvanize and unleash a collective

public will to punish the spectral powers that oppose it. Concepts such as “political apathy” or “informational overload” play no role in Blomkvist’s self-imagination. As it turns out, the Blomkvist type of journalist turns out to be considerably more than just a heroic fact-finder; “he” (for we see this is a demonstrably masculinist heroism) is a guarantor of democracy itself.

Larsson’s portrait is typical of a contemporary desire to imagine virtuous guardians of the principles and powers of liberal democracy, guardians who are capable of turning back the global antipolitics of neoliberalism and its ravenous feasting upon the living flesh of all public institutions. Even unflinchingly critical portrayals of the institutional realities of news journalism today—for example, the fifth season of the brilliant HBO television series *The Wire*—leave room for characters such as Clark Johnson’s Gus Haynes, the principled old-school editor fighting management’s sacrificing of public affairs journalism for increasingly sensationalist “pseudo-news.” The brilliant satirists of news media that have emerged in the past fifteen years—most notably Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert—move between parodic ambiguity and clear signals that they feel the regime of public truth that news journalism once epitomized is still worth fighting for.<sup>2</sup>

This image of the journalist as heroic truth-seeker and guardian of public interest, while powerfully resonant, actually obscures the fact that (for a variety of reasons explored at greater length later in this book) if one were to speak of an “average” journalistic type today, it would no longer be a beat reporter, an investigative journalist, a foreign correspondent, or even a desk editor. No, the far more common type is that of the office-based screenworker. This is not an uncontroversial assessment. It is, however, an assessment that is reinforced by other recent ethnographic portraits of the practice of contemporary news journalism—a profession transformed, initially by the computerization of western news organizations in the 1980s, and then by the subsequent linkage to fast-time digital information networks in the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>3</sup> Barbie Zelizer has observed that much of the work of news journalism transpires outside newsrooms these days.<sup>4</sup> And yet, regardless of whether a traditional newsroom is the production environment, one of the most striking changes in the craft of news journalism is that it, more so than ever, transpires in front of computer monitors. Olivier Baisnéé and Dominique Marchetti have coined the term “sedentary journalism” to describe this growing trend in news practice.<sup>5</sup> If we ask why this is so, we find that journalists are in no small part increasingly fixed in their seats because there is more and more action to be observed and managed on their screens. And, typically, there is now a smaller staff to cope with the rising workload.<sup>6</sup> As journalists themselves often say, newsmaking today is as much about managing multiple fast-moving flows of information already in circulation as it is about locating and sharing “new” news. In other words, news journalism in the digital era has become as much about navigating