

REVIEWS

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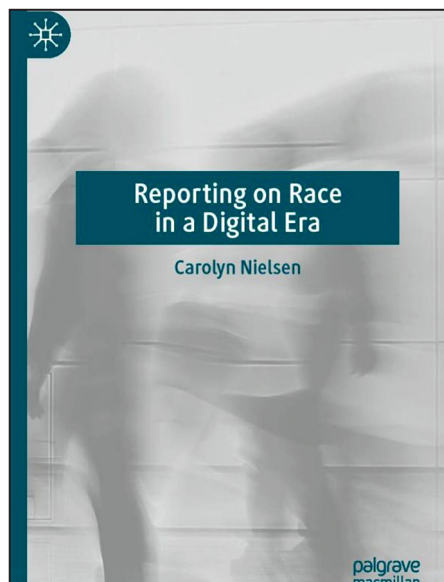
New paradigms combined with technology could change the way we report on race

Reporting on Race in a Digital Era, by Carolyn Nielsen. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. xiii, 236 pages. ISBN 978-3-030-35220-2/ ISBN 978-3-030-35221-9 (eBook)

CAROLYN NIELSEN has proposed a role for journalism in resolving political oppression, offering a case study on the crisis surrounding street killings of African Americans by police.

This United States journalism academic provides a review of prominent work since the 1970s on journalism theory and principles. She gives an historical treatment of news media coverage in race relations and criticises ‘traditional’ journalism—as a central point kicking into the corpse of ‘objectivity’ as a key value. This is late, with objectivity and a moral neutrality, as the adopted trait of journalists, already forsaken.

Journalists have taken up more sophisticated models, formulating goals like reasoned, informational and



fair coverage—perhaps individually using an objectivisation device to assist with that.

Three paradigms are set up for a description of contemporary media operations: Traditional media seen as regulating access, sourcing, agendas; the Interactive Race Beat, working for greater public engagement from the ground up and Journalism 3.0, where technology leads and gives an initiating role to users. The author wants these paradigms to be conceived through a Constructionist approach, and that Critical Race Theory be deployed to explain tragic events in the field.

New media are seen as able to produce a reformed product: better conceptualisation and provision of context, so news can ably handle process, like systemic racial oppression, not only daily events. In one example given, these media demonstrate ‘depth of news analysis, exploration of racism

in those narratives, and the way technology enabled audiences to become part of the news narrative.'

For the case study Nielsen returns to ethnographic methods common in her discipline, conducting semi-structured interviews with seven journalists from media outlets conforming to the respective paradigms. The journalists reflect on their work in terms of influences, whether at individual level, work routines or contact with social institutions. They discuss three issues: 'post racism' during the Obama years, when it was thought society might be reforming itself; the 2014 death of Michael Brown Jn, 18, in Ferguson, Missouri and Black Lives Matter.

The interviews support the researcher's perception that news media are highly engaged with the issue of racial oppression, enabled due to digital tools. Three journalists from *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* refrain from a mantra of objectivity, which is treated as evidence of traditional media being 'transformed.' For a bringing-together: 'Journalists across all three paradigms showed firmly constructionist values regarding objectivity.'

The book lacks a substantial section for synthesis and conclusions that would clinch a main argument. Readers are left to consider possible outcomes of the changes represented. The suggestion in the book that an interventionist or activist media will propel social change, will contribute to ongoing debate on possible effects of media in leading 'real life' decision-making.

While covering much ground,

Reporting on Race is not a sociological treatment of racial relations; the description and analyses of 'post racism,' Ferguson and BLM sufficing to show they have had dramatic impacts on lives and public discourse. While information and communication technology (ICT) is shown to be a determining factor there is insufficient scope to detail its workings; this is not research about the dynamics of digitisation in the new media ecology.

One omission is the adoption by many audience members of cellphone social media as their news source, especially, in the present discussion, the fake news, trolling and racist propaganda abusing the earnest work of journalists as seen by the author. It might warrant consideration as potentially a fourth paradigm.

Nielsen's proposition, clearly argued and assiduously well documented, runs its two approaches in tandem. Perhaps it helped in an anti-media climate within US scholarship, to embrace some hostility to journalists and deploy somewhat un-substantiable cultural theory, all referenced to burgeoning ICT. Yet with its dedication referring to journalists as 'part of a noble calling', the book at its core also relies on the judgment of the journalistic panel.

That method of inquiry, the researcher having served her decade in the craft, assumes some empathy, 'where reporters who created the coverage are the best source of information,' to provide insights on 'underlying values, ideologies or influences not directly observable in their ... coverage'.