INTRODUCTION

Local Journalism on the Brink

The Crossroads

In August of 2000, a hoary political institution—the Republican National Convention, assembling in Philadelphia—confronted a new kind of media network. As the national Republican Party descended on the city in the summer of 2000, its delegates were met by hundreds of convention protesters carrying cell phones, videocameras, and old-fashioned pencils and paper notebooks, all calling themselves reporters and all networked into a website that displayed reports from the street protests as news broke. Growing out of the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle in 1999 and expanding to several other American and European cities in the months that followed, these Philadelphia protester-reporters identified themselves as members of the Independent Media Center of Philadelphia (also known as the Philly IMC) and promised their readers overtly biased political reporting, by amateurs, directly from the scene of anti–Republican National Convention protests. As the political protesters clashed with Philadelphia police on the convention's second day—"thousands of roving demonstrators and helmeted police faced off in intersections around the city yesterday afternoon," the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* wrote, "trading blows at some junctures, while in Center City several delegate hotels locked their doors . . . as the two sides sparred for control of the streets"—amateur Indymedia journalists did more than simply comment on the drama as it unfolded. They were instrumental in documenting it online for a mass audience.[1] These Independent Media Center volunteers were among the first group of digital activists to directly pose the question of who counted as a legitimate journalist in an era of low-cost, digital information gathering and distribution.

Six years later, at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, a few of the radical reporters who had first stormed the journalistic barricades during the Republican Convention in 2000 sat down with local bloggers, newspaper editors, cable television executives, and new-media

thinkers to plot a future for local news. The pace of the changes buffeting journalism, changes that first announced themselves in dramatic fashion during coverage of the 2000 convention, had only accelerated in the intervening half-decade since the Republican National Convention. "Do-it-yourself journalism" was no longer a practice confined to political radicals and anarchists. It had manifested itself as part of a "war-blogging" revolution, a "mommy-blogging" revolution, a YouTube revolution, a MySpace revolution, a flash mob revolution, a "hyperlocal citizens' media" revolution, and in hundreds of other trends that lacked only a catchy moniker. Perhaps more ominously, the first signs of deep economic distress inside the news industry had begun to filter out of Philadelphia; in late 2005, the Knight-Ridder news chain, which owned both daily newspapers in Philadelphia (and had, for decades, posted double-digit profit margins), announced it was breaking itself up and selling its multiple media assets. In the face of the citizen media explosion and these distant economic rumblings, the Annenberg meeting was nothing like the occupational uprising in 2000 that saw radical journalists eviscerate the "lackeys of the corporate press" and professional journalists snidely dismiss their scruffy, decidedly non-objective challengers. Instead, participants in the oddly titled Norgs [new news organizations] Unconference" came together, in their words, "in a spirit of cooperation . . . to save local news in Philadelphia."[2] The Norgs Unconference was one of the first meetings explicitly to raise the question: could traditional journalists and the new breed of professional-amateur hybrids work together to improve local journalism?[3]

On February 22, 2009, three years after the Norgs Conference, a decade after the earliest meetings to plan a global Indymedia news network, and twelve years since the first newspapers in Philadelphia went online, the journalistic center finally collapsed. Philadelphia Media Holdings, the local ownership group that had purchased the city's two leading news institutions—the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Philadelphia Daily News*—amid much hope, goodwill, and optimism, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. The news was first broken by a local blog, analyzed breathlessly on Twitter, and reported (hours later) in lengthy, accurate depth by the bankrupt papers themselves.[4] For more than a year, the newspapers labored in a kind of Chapter 11 twilight zone, as local ownership fought a desperate rearguard action to maintain their financial control over their ailing media properties. In April 2010, these efforts were finally thwarted, with the newspapers becoming one of several media outlets across the United States controlled by banks and post-bankruptcy hedge funds. Yet even as the newspapers labored under the weight of their debts, journalistic networks at the edges of traditional media institutions continued to organize and experiment. The weekend before the bankruptcy auction, technology geeks from across the country descended on Philadelphia to brainstorm the future of news.[5] The very month the newspapers were bought by distant banks, a local foundation announced plans to fund a collaborative news network outside the walls of Philadelphia's legacy media organizations.[6] If 2008 was a year of uncertainty for Philadelphia

journalism, and 2009 was a year of bankruptcy-addled stasis, 2010 seemed like a moment when innovation and energy would outpace the general economic gloom enveloping the news industry. In 2011, continued hopes for a rebirth—the new Philadelphia Media Network announced new revenue plans and launched an in-house "startup incubator"—sat uneasily alongside fears that large news organizations were incapable of making the kind of transition needed to survive in the digital twenty-first century. These fears—fears that the journey to a new world of local news would fail before it could really even begin—only increased as word arose in early 2012 that the Philadelphia newspapers were again on the verge of being sold.

Rebuilding the News: Metropolitan Journalism in the Digital Age narrates these journalistic moments of confrontation, collaboration, and collapse, filtering them through the lens of a single American city. Written and researched during a period of tremendous upheaval in the news industry, *Rebuilding the News* argues that, in the face of the chaos pressing in on them from all sides, local news organizations made particular choices about how best to adapt to emerging economic, social, and technological realities. The book analyzes the economic, organizational, and cultural factors that helped shape and direct these choices. In particular, local journalism's occupational self-image, its vision of itself as an autonomous workforce conducting original reporting on behalf of a unitary public, blocked the kind of cross-institutional collaboration that might have helped journalism thrive in an era of fractured communication. This failure, in turn, highlights the central normative problem at the heart of this book. Local journalism's vision of itself—as an institutionally grounded profession that empirically informs (and even, perhaps, "assembles") the public—is a noble vision of tremendous democratic importance. But the unreflexive commitment to a particular and historically contingent version of this self-image now undermines these larger democratic aspirations. The story of how journalism's vision of its unified public unraveled, how long taken-for-granted practices of news reporting were suddenly rendered problematic, and how news organizations struggled to rebuild local journalism—to network the news—is the story of this book.

Journalism as Ecosystem and Assemblage

The impetus for this book began with a series of questions that grew out of developments in the news industry itself. Given the tremendous technological, economic, political, cultural, and organizational changes that appear to be pummeling the journalistic sphere, how is metropolitan journalism changing? What kind of work do local journalists do? How do they collaborate and work with other institutions? And how are changes in work and working together also changing the professional authority of local journalism? For better or worse, many books have been written about the "future of journalism" in the United States, and this is not one of them. Rather, it is an in-depth analysis of how metropolitan journalism is practiced today and the economic, cultural, and philosophical challenges

these current modes and practices pose for democracy and public life. To the degree that journalism has a future, the shape of that future will be determined by journalists themselves as they struggle within a web of institutional, economic, and cultural constraints. *Rebuilding the News* is, I would like to think, a history of the present.

The primary method used to research these questions was qualitative and ethnographic, although it was ethnography of a rather unusual kind. After narrowing my analytical object to local, metropolitan journalism in the United States, and after picking Philadelphia as the city whose news I wanted to understand, it quickly became clear to me that simply studying traditional Philadelphia newsrooms was not enough to get a sense of the real state of journalism in the early twenty-first century. Rather than understanding Philadelphia newsrooms, I wanted to understand the Philadelphia *news ecosystem*: I wanted to look not simply at professional journalists working for traditional news outlets but also at bloggers, radical media producers, foundations, computer hackers, and social media experts. To that end, these pages generally practice what Phil Howard calls the *network ethnography,* the practice of using network analysis to help determine relevant field sites and places of qualitative study.[7] In 2005, the decision to look at the news ecosystem rather than simply at news institutions might have seemed like an unusual impulse. Today, as the fragmentation of news continues to accelerate, I would argue that it was prescient. *Rebuilding the News* thus provides a narrative that moves easily from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* newsroom to bars in Northern Liberties and Fishtown and the large houses and activist spaces of West Philadelphia. A detailed account of my ethnographic method can is in the Appendix to this book.

A commitment to the ecosystemic analysis of Philadelphia news was accompanied by a second decision with theoretical, methodological, and philosophical implications. Throughout this book, I conceive of the practice of journalism as the practice of *assemblage*: assemblage of news products, institutions, and networks. What do I mean when I say that journalism can be thought of as assemblage? Journalism is in the business of drawing together of a variety of objects, big and small, social and technological, human and non-human. Through this work, journalists produce a remarkable variety of public-oriented products, from news stories and streams of tweets to entire news organizations. For working journalists and bloggers, that statement will most likely appear mundane. As reporters hustle to track down documents and struggle to secure interviews with recalcitrant human beings, it is obvious (to them, at least) that there is no a priori "difference between hard kernels of objective reality and wispy fumes of social force"—between quotes, texts, and technologies.[8] Readers interested in a more detailed elaboration of these theories and how they apply to the study of journalism might once again wish to skip ahead to the Appendix. For everyone else, suffice it to say that assemblage theory thus cuts across the methodological, empirical, institutional, and normative aspects of *Rebuilding the News.*[9]

The twin notions of assemblage and ecosystem also inform the primary empirical conclusions of *Rebuilding the News*—conclusions reached only after many years of ethnographic research. To state them plainly: first, local journalism has long rested its authority on the twin pillars of original reporting and a particular vision of the journalistic public. Second, both the nature of reporting and concepts of the public have been problematized in the digital era. Third, a variety of organizational, economic, and cultural factors have made navigating this transition extraordinarily difficult. Fourth, these factors cannot be analyzed simply as failures of management or misguided traditionalism; rather, the very cultural orientations that provide journalists with meaning to their work lives have also blocked newsroom evolution. To push that evolution forward, journalists must begin the hard process of rethinking who they are, what they do, and who their work is actually for.

Rebuilding the News is thus both an empirical analysis and a narrative about journalism in a particular place at a particularly dramatic time. Having briefly outlined my method and conclusions, I now summarize that narrative. I also describe the larger themes that snake through the story.

Themes of *Rebuilding the News*

What happened to journalism in the last years of the twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first? What did it feel like to be a reporter or editor in Philadelphia as newspaper companies were sold, bankruptcies were filed, and an audience that was assumed to be mute and passive suddenly began to talk back? How did these systemic shocks ricochet through the institutions and daily work routines of journalists, bloggers, and media activists? What can these local events in one city teach us about the future of news in general? What do these on-the-ground developments teach us about the fate of journalism, one of America's most vital democratic institutions? And how does this particular *story*—the development of a specific media ecosystem at a specific moment in time—intersect with the more theoretical claims made above? As *Rebuilding the News* unfolds, four major narrative themes emerge that connect this local study to larger questions about the evolution of news and point toward problems and opportunities that will continue to affect the news industry.

First, *Rebuilding the News* chronicles how journalists' conception of the local public began to unravel. Second, the book describes the importance of reporting within the journalistic imagination, as well as the ways that bloggers and aggregators challenged this notion of "original reporting." Third, the book discusses the "non-diffusion" of innovation within news organizations and the non-diffusion of collaboration between news organizations. I take seriously the idea that the future of journalism lies partly in networked collaboration but conclude that the creation of networks is not inherently a networked property. Deinstitutionalized organizations have a complex relationship with institutions; in many ways, they

are dependent on the stability and organizational heft of the very institutional structures they scorn. Fourth, and finally, *Rebuilding the News* describes the slow-motion collapse of the industrial work model on which much of journalistic content production is based, as well as attempts to rebuild that model on firmer ground. In sum, this book is the study of the legacy systems that made the news organizations I studied behave in deeply irrational ways. It is also a study of the attempts by individuals and organizations to overcome these often debilitating, locked-in processes, usually under situations in which they had few resources and little institutional support. This tension between stasis and change is the driving force behind the narrative that propels this book.

The first thematic development chronicled in this study of the Philadelphia news ecosystem is the *fracturing of the idea and image of the metropolitan public.* Over the course of my research, I became conscious of the degree to which "the public" occupied a particular pride of place in the journalistic imaginary. Philadelphia journalists were quick to invoke the way their daily newswork informed the local public. On a deeper level, they often talk about the manner in which their newswork called that very public *into being.* And the importance of this public was not just affirmed by status-conscious traditional journalists at the major Philadelphia newspapers. It was a claim echoed by radical citizen reporters and even by some bloggers. It was in part this unexpected rhetorical overlap that helped me first recognize the importance of the local public in the journalistic consciousness. One of the arguments of this book is that the idea and the materiality of the local public have come unbundled in the age of the Internet. Over the course of my research, the notion that "the public" was capable of being captured by any single set of work practices or institutions seemed increasingly difficult for many journalists to honestly believe. Nevertheless, it was a belief that many of them continued to voice, often in increasingly desperate tones. This gap between this rhetoric of the local public, informed and embodied by journalism, and the dawning realization that this public was breaking the communicative shell traditionally designed to house it is one of the stories of this book.

A second narrative thread analyzes the work practices of local journalism. Over the course of my time in Philadelphia, I was struck by the degree to which the act of simply "reporting the news" continued to loom large in journalists' rhetoric about who they were and what they did. When journalists wanted to validate themselves and their profession, they noted that reporting was what distinguished true journalism from other activities. When they wished, on the other hand, to denigrate themselves, many of my informants would sheepishly admit that they "didn't do reporting," and were therefore less valuable than "real" journalists. In reality, however, my research demonstrated that the practice of original reporting was far from being either pure or unproblematic. The kind of work that constituted "original reporting" seemed increasingly difficult for journalists to define. Reporting existed side by side with other forms of newswork such as blogging and aggregation, often within news organizations that heaped rhetorical

scorn on these so-called lesser practices. At the same time, these traditional institutions would reappropriate newswork practices such as blogging and news aggregation and shape them to reportorial ends. All of these complexities are described in the pages that follow. For now, I simply want to highlight this important pairing: acts of reporting and images of the public. These linked concepts encapsulate much of the narrative that follows.

A third thread, which is also concerned with newswork practices but from an ecosystemic and institutional perspective, revolves around the strange persistence of the industrial work model of traditional journalism, along with emerging challenges to that model from the edges of journalistic space. In his newsroom ethnographies from the 1970s, Herbert Gans quoted one executive saying that daily news routines are "like screwing nuts on a bolt."[10] No metaphor that I am aware of better captures the industrial processes most associated with traditional journalism. Indeed, these practices remained dominant in most Philadelphia newsrooms I studied. Reporters and editors still worked to build news stories in an assembly line-like fashion, and news organizations struggled to collaborate with people and groups outside their formal institutional walls. Around the edges of these industrial-era practices, however, there was increasing decay. Technological artifacts and communications practices pressed in on static workflows. Economic challenges made it harder and harder for news organizations to maintain the staffing levels necessary to manage the complex process of gathering the news. Insurgent news organizations harnessed digital technologies and new employment regimes in ways that allowed them to open up their work routines to outside institutions, volunteers, and loosely affiliated freelancers. The industrial-era ecosystem of news assemblage that I observed in Philadelphia appeared simultaneously solid and on the verge of collapse.

A final theme of this book, then, might be labeled the "non-diffusion of collaboration." Each of the threads above—the fragmenting of the image local public, the continued centrality of reporting, and the decay of industrial production models—would seem to point to a scenario in which journalistic innovation and cross-organizational collaboration were not only rhetorically praised but also institutionally optimal. In other words, developments in the local Philadelphia news ecosystem seemed to be creating a situation in which it made rational sense to "network the news" through institutional collaboration, hypertext linking, and formal and informal partnerships. In the first round of my ethnographic research, such collaboration and innovation not only did not occur; it seemed to be purposefully thwarted. In the second round of my research, from 2009 through 2011, the situation had changed somewhat, and active attempts at building a local news hub and news network were under way. In all, however, these networked developments were slow in coming and did not rest on particularly firm ground. Many of them seemed fragile, as if they might disappear at any time. Ultimately, I conclude that the difficulties in networking the news stem as much from journalistic culture—journalism's vision of "its" public and the

importance of the act of reporting in the journalistic imaginary—as they do from logistical or transaction-cost difficulties that can be easily remedied through managerial solutions.

Readers may note that this overview has not discussed a fifth theme: audience reception and media consumption. In one sense, questions about how consumers reacted to the changes sweeping the Philadelphia media ecosystem lie outside the scope of this analysis. Indeed, one of the analytical starting points of *Rebuilding the News* is that this very line between "producer" and "consumer" of media is more difficult to draw in an age of participatory content creation and "citizen journalism." At the same time, the book does adopt what Joseph Turow has called the "industrial construction" of audiences perspective,[11] "the ways that the people who create [media] materials think of" the people who consume that media, which in turn has "important implications for the texts that viewers and readers receive in the first place." The consumers of media are analyzed from the point of view of the producers.

Narrative Overview

Rebuilding the News unfolds as follows. Chapters 1 and 2 chronicle the emergence and growth of the online media ecosystem in Philadelphia, from the first local bulletin board system (BBS) users in the early 1990s to the early online efforts of the Philadelphia newspapers in 1997, and from the explosion of citizen journalism efforts at the turn of the century to more recent attempts by newspapers and other online media outlets to manage the implications of this transition. These chapters chronicle how the foundation of journalistic work—original reporting—became problematized in the early days of the World Wide Web. These chapters also trace what I call the expansion and fragmentation of the local news public and discuss early attempts to come to terms with the exponential explosion of "local publics" that now populated Philadelphia's communicative space. I map the networked threads that linked the Philadelphia's online ecosystem in 2008 and trace the connections that tied various nodes, institutions, and individuals together online. I also briefly examine the clustering of various micro-publics in different geographical spaces across the city. In these chapters, we see the professionally internalized notion of journalism as something that "assembles the public" first begin to fray.

Once Chapters 1 and 2 place Philadelphia news organizations in their historical context, readers might want to think about the remaining chapters as a spool of thread that slowly unwinds in parallel to the overall narrative arc of the story. I begin with micro-interactions—the way workers at news organizations reported a single news item, along with the changing definitions of news that were implicated in a close analysis of this reporting process. I then move on to describe the manner by which a news story moved out into the world, leaping over the walls of journalism organizations and diffusing across the entire local media ecosystem. From discussing the diffusion of a single story, I move on to

consider how the elements of the entire local media ecosystem linked—or failed to link—the organizations and stories into a larger, collaborative news ecosystem. Following the thread even further, I finally leave traditional journalism institutions behind and examine outside institutions and forces that are affecting the news. On the one hand, this narrative journey can be seen as the analytical equivalent of moving from "interaction to structure," or from "micro-level" to "macro-level." However, I prefer to think about it as the methodological equivalent to following a single thread, from its starting pace in the heart of the Philadelphia journalism industry out toward wherever it happens to end up.

In this spirit, Chapters 3 and 4 draw heavily on my newsroom fieldwork in 2008, tracing the simultaneous disintegration and stability of the legacy model of industrial newswork. Through an analysis of work practices at the *Philadelphia Inquirer,* Philly.com, the *Philadelphia Daily News,* the Philly IMC, Philly Future, and dozens of local area blogs, Chapter 3 describes two dominant forms of newswork in the digital age: reporting and aggregation. It looks at the impact of mobile devices on the reporting of news and the increasing role of social media in newsroom decision making. Chapter 4 provides a newsroom-based overview of the diffusion of one news story across the entire local media ecosystem. In Chapter 3, the tension between reporting and aggregation alluded to in Chapter 2 is elaborated, as are the oddly paired strains and durabilities of the assembly-line newswork model. Chapter 4, in its overview of the diffusion of the story of the so-called Francisville Four, analyzes the local news ecosystem in action. These chapters describe the day-to-day processes by which news is networked together in the twenty-first century.

Zooming back from the newsroom, Chapter 5 chronicles the inability of local Philadelphia institutions, networks, and bloggers to create significant collaborative networks in the years between 2005 and 2008. It is here that I take assemblage theory up on its promise to help analyze networking the news on an *inter*-organizational as well as an *intra*-organizational level. Although all of the social, cultural, technological, and economic trends in journalism seemed to be pointing in a particular direction—toward newsrooms' increasingly "working together" to report the news—these collaborative networks were not built in Philadelphia, at least not during my first fieldwork period. Between 2005 and 2008, I witnessed cross-institutional innovation at the edges of news space and occasional attempts by network entrepreneurs to build new collaborative forums. For the most part, however, I observed fading institutions that were slow to change and organizations—even newer, more digitally native ones—whose rationalized structures enabled the production of valuable journalism but also erected high barriers around a variety of networked collaborative possibilities. Although Chapter 5 opens with two small collaborative successes—the so-called Norgs Unconference of 2005 and the Next Mayor project in 2005–2006—it quickly demonstrates that the temporary successes masked larger, more systemic collaborative failures. I discuss the eventual decay and disintegration of the "norgs group," as well as the early difficulties faced by two very different news institutions—Philly.com

and the Philly IMC—when they attempted to formalize their commitment to digital hyperlinking. All the while, the ultimate "network failure"—the bankruptcy of the major Philadelphia newspapers—looms on the horizon.

If you had told journalists working at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Philadelphia Daily News* in 2005 that their newspapers would be bankrupt in less than five years, they would have scoffed. Journalism was in a precarious state in 2005—the Internet had disrupted many certainties and professional models—but the financial collapse of solid, profitable organizations like the companies that owned the Philadelphia newspapers was hard to imagine. Even the Philly IMC reporters who pioneered the original acts of citizen journalism in 2000—who told everyday citizens "not to hate the media but to be the media"—would have found it hard to imagine a Philadelphia in which the *Inquirer* and *Daily News* were bankrupt. The opening pages of Chapter 6 describe some of the darkest days of Philadelphia journalism. It shows how the act of reporting the news had become an increasingly precarious enterprise in 2008 and how many of the digital news organizations were highly fragile enterprises, driven by love and sweat equity more than money and prone to collapse at any moment. The chapter also sheds more light on changing journalistic visions of "the public," particularly how this public comes to be increasingly segmented and quantified by various digital measurement procedures inside newsrooms.

The story, however, does not end in wreckage, with the collapse of Philadelphia journalism. The second half of Chapter 6 chronicles the bankruptcy's aftermath, from 2009 to 2011, when a new group of innovators struggled to network the Philadelphia media ecosystem on their own terms and a reborn "Philadelphia Media Network" attempted to retrofit its legacy newspapers for the Internet era. It shows how local institutions, including several area foundations, started to push for a more collaborative journalistic environment. The chapter concludes with a discussion of a group of young technology entrepreneurs who sought to rethink journalism's core reporting practices in light of the emergence of data-driven technologies and analytical systems and briefly analyzes the changes that loomed on the horizon for the Philadelphia newspapers as they were sold yet again.

In Chapter 7, finally, I draw my research together to discuss the broader lessons that Philadelphia's attempts to "network the news" might hold for other news organizations and for concepts of digital culture and public life more generally. I consider the role that institutions, reporting, and journalists' visions of "the public" played in the story I recount here and the manner in which these concepts will continue to shape the future of metropolitan news.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, practices of newsgathering in America have been transformed. Just as the 1830s saw the invention of the penny press and the 1960s saw the rise of an aggressive form of national investigative journalism, the last years

of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first century constitute an equally important moment in the history of news production. During the time period studied here, some news organizations in Philadelphia thrived, while others literally struggled to survive. This book focuses on the slow-motion collapse of a major urban institution—Philadelphia's local newspapers—and the many attempts to reform and rebuild the larger news ecosystem in which they are embedded.

Rebuilding the News describes the emergence of citizen journalism in Philadelphia in 2000. It describes how the local news "went online" between 1997 and 2010. It describes some attempts at collaboration between journalistic amateurs and their corporate counterparts. It zooms in on local news practices and describes how, exactly, local news gets made in 2013, as well as how that news circulates on- and offline. And it chronicles how Philadelphia's newspapers slid into bankruptcy and how other institutions, individuals, and journalists struggled to rebuild Philadelphia's media ecosystem—to "network the news"—at a moment when the odds seemed decidedly against them. The book spends time inside the newsrooms and editorial suites of Philadelphia's major news organizations. It travels to gentrifying neighborhoods with names such as Fishtown and Northern Liberties to see how ordinary citizens are creating their own, quasi-journalistic practices of digital communication. It looks to Philadelphia's suburbs to chronicle how a new breed of bloggers is rewiring the production of sports journalism. And it lingers in the neighborhoods of West Philadelphia, where the first citizen journalism organizations rose up in opposition to the "corporate media," never honestly expecting that, ten years later, the mainstream media organizations would themselves be struggling to survive. These varied thematic threads—of individuals, institutions, collaboration, competition, and collapse—weave the narrative of this book together. Together, they tell the story of local journalism at the dawn of the digital age.