

a e t h e r

the journal of media geography

Guest Editor's Introduction

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IF NEWS IS DEFINED AS INFORMATION THAT IS INTERESTING, current and consequential, it assumes those attributes because it is interesting, current and consequential to a specific, situated group of people: the news audience. What is of interest to some does not have the same appeal to others. Journalism doesn't merely serve an audience already assembled; it gathers those people together with the lure of a particular package of editorial and advertising content. The appeal of the editorial package will pertain to its topic areas, its depth, its presentation style and its value to the audience to which it is addressed. In putting together this content package, journalism occupies, defines, even *colonizes*, a coverage area, locating this space—physically, socially, culturally, politically, militarily, economically—and placing its audience within the larger world. This is the sense in which we talk about geographies of journalism.

Journalists, then, are not simply innocent bystanders or detached witnesses capturing objective, mirror-like pictures of society. Rather, they are active participants in the construction of our realities. They tell us who we are, where we live and work, what we believe in, what we care about, and they draw boundaries between “here” and “there,” “us” and “them.” As James Carey (1989) has noted, all forms of communication are best understood as cultural rituals, rather than mere transmissions of information. “A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs” (Carey 1989, 18). Carey's ritual view of communication establishes both an environment within which communication takes place and a relationship between interlocutors. “Under a ritual view, then, news is not information but drama. It does not describe the world but portrays an arena of dramatic forces and action; it exists solely in historical time; and it invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it” (Carey 1989, 19).

Journalism, that is, constructs a world and places the reader within an imaginative space, what Jay Rosen (1997, 198) calls its “positioning effect.” Journalists, Rosen writes,

“build public stages, people them with actors, and frame the action in a certain way. They create a certain kind of public space and issue us an invitation to it” (Rosen 1997, 198-9). He adds: “Like a globe, another sort of model for reality, the news as a symbolic device makes the world more graspable, reducing it to human scale – the dimensions of a front page, the duration of a newscast” (200).

In producing local stories, journalists traverse the coverage area, but most often they locate and identify those places judged to be the most reliable and plentiful sources of news—government offices, court buildings, police stations, and the other institutional hubs that comprise the public sphere (see Tuchman 1980)—and identify and give voice to community leaders. Their practice thereby draws a particular map of the social, political and economic sphere and, with it, a sense of local place to which audience members are encouraged to feel they belong. In determining which regional, national and international stories are worth coverage, journalists make connections between their community and these larger, more distant places. How are those stories relevant to “us,” what is “our” involvement, how are they newsworthy? The answers to those questions assert links and associations—as well as gulfs—between “here” and “there,” between “us” and “them.”

In delivering the news, whether through the printed word, via the broadcast airwaves and cable networks, or through cyberspace, journalists enter as well the private sphere of the home, seeking to appropriate the domestic environment within the community. It is an inclusive gesture, dependent for its success upon domestic inhabitants’ identification with the sense of community the news medium portrays. This threshold is built upon a complex set of markers—of political orientation, citizenship, education, class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and faith—and the medium’s success in reaching people in their homes depends upon their identification with the community map the medium draws.

This special issue of *Aether* brings together six papers that address news geography on a range of scales. Each speaks to the question of how the news media position the people and places that constitute their particular communities.

REFERENCES

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