Networked News, Racial Divides: How Power and Privilege Shape Public Discourse in Progressive Communities

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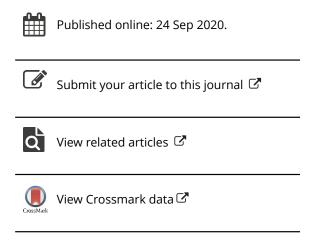View related articles 🗗

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BOOK REVIEW

Networked News, Racial Divides: How Power and Privilege Shape Public Discourse in Progressive Communities, by Sue Robinson, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, 266 pp., $29.99/£23.99 (pbk), ISBN: 9781108412322

Across the globe, journalists continue to struggle with how to cover their diverse geographies, especially white journalists covering Black communities as evidenced especially in the United States and United Kingdom throughout 2020. Even in cities said to be filled with "white allies," such as Portland, Ore., which saw U.S. federal troops suppressing protests against racial injustice in summer 2020, the very notion of Black allyship is up for debate in its effectiveness and meaningful contribution against anti-Blackness. Participatory methods have also been tried by journalists walking a line between collaboration, professionalization, advocacy, fair reporting, and digital expansion. But can "progressivism," mixed with digital media, serve to cross racial divides in these communities? Sue Robinson's *Networked News, Racial Divides: How Power and Privilege Shape Public Discourse in Progressive Communities* attempts to answer that question.

Still, it is unclear the degree to which the book does or is meant to fit into a critical race approach that is deeply needed in Digital Journalism Studies. In some ways, it certainly could serve as a valuable example of reflexivity (Robinson is white), gender (she identifies as she/her), and privilege (a university professor), all of which provides an open and honest tone for the book, beginning in the Introduction. In many ways, though, the book would not count as a critical race approach as it is so focused on normative and sociological approaches to communication, relaxed in its critical theory from the seminal voices of bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Kimberlé W. Crenshaw. It is also absent of more recent work within media and journalism studies by scholars such as Sonya Alemán and Allissa Richardson.

But this review is not about trying to make *Networked News, Racial Divides* something that it isn't. The book's strength is in its addressed complications of writing about race (particularly when white people write about Black people) and media's role in covering (and perpetuating) issues of inequality, intersectionality, and agency. The work received the 2019 Tankard Book Award from the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication for its interrogation of white liberals and their interaction with policy and publics through local journalism and social media networks. Further, Robinson won the 2019 Public Engagement Award from the Journalism Studies Division of the International Communication Association for her public and media engagement surrounding her research. Yet, the critical race question around *Networked News, Racial Divides* is important as the book deals with identity, gender, race, equality, and definitions of engagement by those of various racial and economic, corporate and citizen networks that address access to education (public, private, and charter schools) in several "college" or "university towns" in the U.S.

Robinson's work isn't easy, unpacking "institutional colorblindness" that appeared entrenched in the digital and on-the-ground networks of journalists, parents of school children, and school and other public officials, who seemingly strive to "involve" non-white communities of each city studied in public online and face-to-face discussion and debate about equal and meaningful access to primary and secondary schools. In sum, she reveals the networks of constituents who inform and experience journalism, almost all of which reiterate positions of dominant power structures. Robinson's comparative study reveals

that traditional and digital reporting and online social networking merely maintain (if not reproduce) hierarchies of power based on institutionalized racism in how models of education influence sense(s) of community, inclusivity, and equity. Indeed, her related piece on the "informational elite" (Robinson and Wang 2018) is a wonderful bite-sized discussion of how social media and "the digital age" is expanding deep social and cultural divides, not closing them.

Much of Robinson's findings about racism within media and liberal rhetoric about equality may be surprising to some readers in how journalists, public officials, and social media influencers in "liberal" cities of Ann Arbor, Mich., Cambridge, Mass., Chapel Hill, N.C., Evanston, Ill., and Madison, Wisc., thought they were making changes in educational policy "for all" yet reserving such access for mainly white families. It might also be surprising to some, and of course shameful for those involved, how journalists and public officials in the name of liberalism or "diversity" showed two faces in local debates about public educational policy. Participants expressed how they wanted to "leave the room" (the local debate, and sometimes the local geography itself) because of public officials and the press who ignored, twisted, or marginalized their words – online, in-person, and in print. Sadly, that's a sentiment many communities and collectives have toward the press and public leaders from whom they have sought justice. There comes an anger when justice unserved is justified and explained on nightly newscasts as merely the end result of a democratic process, ripe with civil discourse, and open minds. To be sure, though, "leaving the room" does not mean they aren't still engaged with their communities, working for justice, engaged in the issues and solutions at-hand. They just aren't doing it as part of some spectacle (for more, see Kendall 2020).

Another possible surprise to those wanting to use news as an inclusive zone for a public sphere – and perhaps to Robinson herself, she suggests – was frustrations over some Black citizens' refusal to be interviewed by her and mainstream media, which is in itself an act of agency. Robinson addresses issues of media trust – and the power of removing oneself from participating with media – in discussions of how and why Black participants would not speak with her, "a White [sic] academic." In these moments, Robinson writes about her own defensiveness. Being considered, possibly, a "white Savior" is scary, embarrassing, but it is also a moment of truth when white folk write about Black people. Still, what helps in addition to reflexivity that I respect the most of Robinson's work is a bit more critical context about whiteness in U.S. society. In fact, it seems necessary to strongly acknowledge historic and predominant whiteness of journalism in the U.S. (for a fascinating read, see Tischauser and Benn 2019). If we are studying digital networks, news innovation, and media trust, we must be aware and responsive to steadfast and replicated discussions in scholarship about racialized construction and interpretation of data (Noble 2018), the "paternalistic side" of data journalism (Appelgren 2018), and the celebration and spread of contemporary ethnographic and cultural interpretations of news work based on race (i.e. Heider 2014; Meyers 2013). Indeed, just because this work is published somewhere by someone, doesn't mean it should not appear prominently in new scholarship in a digital age.

The same goes for *Networked News, Racial Divides*. Not only does it inform our ideas about networks and journalism, race and complications of "community," it reminds us that we must not ever remove issues of race and wider contexts of textuality and technology (for more, see Brock 2020) from our discussions of journalism, particularly if we wish to span the scholarly field, journalism practice, and understandings of our own social influence. In the end, perhaps Robinson's recommendations about how to involve marginalized voices in online and offline discussions, particularly through digital journalism and social

justice awareness, is a powerful section that journalists and scholars alike should read. But many that deal with questioning journalistic professionalism in practice, doing self-reflection, and broadening networks should also include some of these questions: 1) What's "in it" for participants to contribute to corporate media narratives?; 2) Should journalists allow participants the same rights and privileges as editors to shape and line-edit, question, and spike stories?; 3) As individuals do we spend enough of our time and money outside of our familiar spaces neither to surveil nor to spark a new "diverse" list of sources but to spread wealth and become invested in people and places we wouldn't usually?

Networked News, Racial Divides takes on a tough battle in addressing and interpreting the "information elite" and its charter to maintain racial struggles. The question is if it requires greater interdisciplinarity and critical theory. It may be up to the reader to provide that simultaneously. Perhaps that could be a final addition to Robinson's recommendations.

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