

When News Was New: how history can save journalism

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If journalism is going to survive and thrive in the digital age then it will need to go back in time to discover its future. We need to learn the lessons of media history and here's a book that helps.

Terhi Rantanen's [When News Was New](#) is much more than a narrative of journalism history. This is an investigation into the very nature of journalism as it changes through the centuries. Her quest is to understand how the definition of journalism has changed according to technology, society and the business and production models that create it. Her focus is mainly on the electronic global media of news agencies of the 19th and 20th centuries. But in a stimulating epilogue chapter she brings the historic argument to the present debate about what kind of journalism is emerging from the Internet.

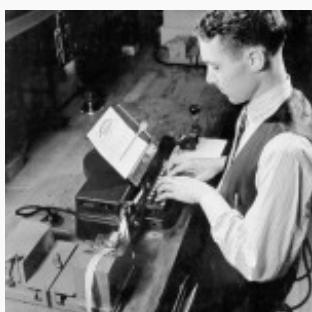


I argued in [SuperMedia](#) that journalism is changing profoundly through new media technologies and that the [Networked Journalism](#) that emerges might be more valuable to society. Rantanen doesn't take sides in this debate but she provides some much-needed intellectual structure to the analysis. The point is that news changes all the time and at key historic moments it changes so much that it becomes something new. When that happens it matters for society as well as journalists.

The book looks at what we mean by the idea "of news as something that tells us something 'new'". She looks at how the news media has been globalised for longer than we realise – perhaps even before the telegraph. And she describes the way that news became a national product and how it changes our very sense of place. These are all key ideas if we are to work out how journalism is going to be consumed in the future:

"Only by looking at the historical development of news can we understand when and how news became new".

Rantanen even goes back to pre-print models of media such as the medieval topical balladeers and compares them to bloggers: "The era of pure news is over: everybody who has access to technology can now be a singer of new stories." In the end she "asks whether news, as we think we know it, actually exists any more".



Old New Media

Rantanen shows how mass media created a sense of time for the news consumer that helped give the modern world its clock-based structure. This is something now being undone in the digital age where information becomes both superfast and timeless at the same moment. Because 'new' information can now be replicated instantly on a global scale the moment it is revealed, it immediately loses the premium of newness. So, in the 19th century the great news agencies came to deals to protect their copyright in the electronic age. But as the [BBC's Richard Sambrook](#) said famously, in the Internet age news organisations don't own the news anymore.

And those same news agencies such as Reuters and SP and AFP were also part of a media system that generated a sense of place. Originally news was something that happened to you and your community where you lived. Then in the electronic news age, agendas were shaped around the emerging nation state governments. News was described in terms of home and foreign. The physical technology of the telegraph meant there had to be cables under the seas, hubs where

information was collated and legal agreements to define markets:

“like time and place, electronic space also became not only commercialised but monopolised. Electronic space became territorialized.”

While the new technology connected people across distance it also defined the physical barriers between them.

There is a paradox with this new globalised news. History shows that it puts people in touch with remote events but it also dissolved their ‘localness’:

“When news began to be delivered from remote places by mass media, it began to lose its immediate connection with people’s lives”

The attempt to re-establish that connection and solve the paradox of globalised news is the key task of contemporary journalism. We have to make news relevant again to the consumer.

Again, this academic argument really matters if you are seeking a business model for news media in the 21st century as Rantanen explains in the chapter, subtitled “How To Sell News”. She shows how news is different to most products. The News Media is a business but one that trades in a cultural good delivered by institutions that usually define news as a ‘public good’ as well. In the past the news organisations (and governments) standardised the product and regulated its trade to safeguard profits and quality. Now, says Rantanen, we are returning to a pre-Mass Media time when news was not controlled:

“In the Middle Ages new stories were mostly shared stories, but news carried by couriers was exclusive and easy to steal.. With the Information Age news is so multifaceted and transmitted in so many ways from so many sources that it loses its timelessness and originality almost instantly... News is again easy to steal because of its electronic availability.”

So how does journalism survive in these New Medieval times? First it has to recognise that the very idea of news is changing. For example, the Internet has created a new sense of time that is not linear:

“People do not have to wait for news, because news is everywhere even when one travels. News has stopped being a marker of time, because the flow of news is constant. ..News is linked to other news and this network of news constantly updates itself without a need to specify its source”

Rantanen identifies four developments reshaping the definition of news:

1. *The difference between events and news is disappearing*
2. *The difference between information and news is disappearing*
3. *The difference between news and comment is disappearing*
4. *The difference between news and entertainment is disappearing*

Of those, I think that the first is the most important. You only have to think for a moment about spin and political news to realise how rarely stories are about facts or something actually happening.

Rantanen is no economist, she isn't a journalist either. She quite rightly observes that there is a vast over-production of news at the moment. One of the solutions she proffers is more 'tailored news'. But there is little in the way of practical help on offer in this book. The real value of these jam-packed 130 pages to media folk is to make them think again and to think on a much bigger scale:

"Considering the historical trajectory of news from news hawkers in the Middle Ages to bloggers in the Information Age, it is possible to argue that we are now witnessing the death of 'modern news', as conceived in the nineteenth century. In this situation of multiple change, serious thought is required about what constitutes news. Everybody thinks they know what news is, but in fact nobody can define the twenty-first concept of news. The boundaries are again becoming blurred. News may again become just new stories"

[When News Was New](#) Terhi Rantanen (Wiley-Blackwell 2009)

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