Digital Communication Networks and the Journalistic Field: The 2005 French Riots

Adrienne Russell

Coverage of the 2005 riots in France underlined the multimedia and transnational nature of contemporary news. The controversies that spun out of the coverage even as it was being produced extended larger debate about emerging journalism practices and products. This case study, centered on the meta-discourse of the riots and the relationships among the diverse media covering the riots, underlines the relevance of Pierre Bourdieu’s influential field theory to studies of new media and suggests a critical update to Bourdieu’s conception of the field. Bourdieu placed the norms and values of the participants of a field at the center of his analysis, but his theory, as it has been applied to journalism, rests on a stark division between journalists and their audiences. The news story of the French riots was very much a new-media product in that it was created by professionals and non-professionals. In Bourdieu’s vocabulary, the amateurs at the middle of the riots and in nations around the world contributing news product constituted new “agents” whose influence on the field has yet to be fully considered. The rise of the audience-participant poses compelling new challenges to field study. This article points out some of the areas scholars across disciplines and methodological approaches might take up for research.

Keywords: Bourdieu; Field Theory; Networked Journalism; Transnational Media; Online News; French Riots; Amateur News; Blogs

Introduction

The 2005 riots and protests in France sparked by the death of teenagers Bouna Traore and Zyed Benna in the Paris suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois were facilitated in part by new-media technologies and covered extensively by new-media consumers and...
French youth used digital communication tools and networks to coordinate with one another, exchange opinions and information, and to circulate calls to action. Activists used digital media to complain about what they viewed as biased and inaccurate reporting at some of the major national and international news outlets. Thus, the deaths of Traore and Benna, and the ensuing unrest, generated heated debate not only about immigration and racial discrimination in France, but also about news coverage of these issues and about the role of new media in facilitating more coordinated social protest and violence. Government officials claimed the riots were orchestrated through mobile phone instant messaging. Police arrested bloggers and threatened hip-hop artists for supplying the provocative and downloadable soundtrack to the violence. Bloggers from all over the world critiqued coverage in real time and engaged mainstream journalists in online debates. Mainstream outlets adopted new media tools and tactics. Politicians submitted to interviews by bloggers and used the Internet to garner support for their plans for restoring order and addressing the issues at the heart of the unrest.

The unrest as an extended news event offers rich examples of journalism products and practices emerging in the new-media environment. When considered in light of Pierre Bourdieu’s influential field theory, these emerging products and practices point to a significant evolution in journalism. Facilitated by new media, the shift features the rise of the news media consumer-participant as a de facto member-architect of the profession. Here I examine ways that new media use may be expanding the field as Bourdieu (1995/2005, 1996/1998) outlined it during what he saw as a previous era of change.

Just before the dawn of the digital age, Bourdieu lamented the declining quality of news. He described an expanded field of production pulled closer to the economic field, which he believed was responsible for the decline. To understand journalism, he argued, one must examine how it is practiced and which power relationships are at play. For Bourdieu the key unit of analysis in media research is the universe of journalists and media organizations acting and reacting in relation to one another. He argued that the “institution” is shaped most significantly by participants’ responses to varying degrees of political and economic pressure and by the ways that journalists position themselves within a tradition and among their peers. Bourdieu’s field approach to media studies is more relevant than ever given the context of today’s media landscape, where the codes and norms that guide reporters and editors and that shape the content of news stories are being worked at by increasing numbers of people contributing news product through, for example, weblogs, so-called meta-news or commentary sites, mobile phone instant messaging, do-it-yourself (DIY) journalism, and real-time video sites. All of these play loosely with standards and stream easily across editorial borders. Indeed, debates over news standards and practices are now a routine part of the news cycle. Discussions about clashes among old- and new-media products are carried out across the cultural spectrum—by journalists, but also by scholars, politicians, artists, filmmakers, and religious leaders.

This case study of the debate over coverage of the French riots and of the expanding digital-information environment attempts to underline the relevance of
field theory to new media. I interrogate Bourdieu’s influential configuration of the journalistic field in order to raise key definitional questions about emerging journalistic communication. Bourdieu’s national and mainstream institutions and practitioners have become transnational and networked, augmented by non-institutional mass media and by new forms of news product. This article provides a snapshot of select “new-form” journalism regarding events in France in 2005 and presents a reading of French- and English-language meta-discourse—the coverage of the coverage—as it appeared in mainstream as well as in autonomous or DIY news outlets. The controversies surrounding the coverage show how journalists and members of the news public are articulating their working conceptions of journalism—its usefulness, obligations, successes, and failures.

Of course, field theory stresses that journalists’ perceptions and practices are shaped by multiple and various factors—economic, cultural, political, and technological. The “universe of journalists” is influenced by the universe of businesspeople and of politicians, etc. (Benson, 2005; Bourdieu, 1995/2005, 1996/1998; Couldry, 2003). My analysis, however, centers on the forces at work within the field. This is because questions concerning the place of new-media participants in journalism are yet to be fully articulated, the demographic of contemporary field participants being a particular area of potential flux. I acknowledge that many additional outside factors must be considered before drawing any wider conclusions. Research showing that journalism norms are particularly subject to contestation and debate in times of political crisis (Gitlin, 1980 p. 273) is persuasive. Nonetheless, now—as the field is widely but mostly instinctually held to be in transition—it is worth systematically describing emerging forms of news media and participation that shed light on challenges to contemporary understandings and practices of journalism.

Methodology

I analyzed news content that explicitly focused on coverage of the riots in November–December 2005 in the French and U.S. daily press and at independent or DIY outlets. I intentionally used an expanded definition of journalism that includes not only blogs, but also emerging forms of commentary, such as digital video remixing, in which mainstream news content is used as raw material, and machinima, in which gaming software is used to construct original narratives. Lexis/Nexis located the bulk of press material analyzed here. I also mined the archives of individual online newspapers, including Libération, Le Figaro, and Le Monde. In total, I analyzed 73 newspaper articles from the French and Anglophone press and a sample of approximately 200 French- or English-language blog entries over the same two-month period. All of the material analyzed specifically addressed news coverage of the riots.

I selected blogs by following links from one to another; by using Google France, which indexes blog entries based on key words; by following recommendations from U.S. and French media scholars and activists; and by using Technorati, an Internet search engine that indexes more than 23 million weblogs. The blogs, many of which
are written by professional journalists, all deal explicitly with current events and politics. I also examined transcripts of radio and TV broadcast coverage and reams of comments by blog readers.

Professional Norms and Practices

In treating coverage of the unrest I draw on research demonstrating increasing internationalization and dominance in the mainstream media worldwide of the professional model of journalism that has prevailed in the United States since the end of World War I (Hallin & Giles, 2005; Schudson, 1978). This model has been advanced by U.S. government-sponsored programs, journalism schools, academic and industry research institutions, internationally circulated media such as the International Herald Tribune and CNN, and by popular culture products, including novels and films. British and American news organizations maintain their position partly by distributing content through multiple channels. CNN video segments are routinely used by the BBC. Beyond its syndicated material, which is picked up all over the world, The New York Times provides weekly English-language “supplements”—roughly eight-page inserts—to newspapers throughout Europe, Asia, and Africa, as well as weekly Spanish-language supplements distributed within the United States and throughout Latin America.

The business of British/American-style news production has been likewise powerfully disseminated. In December 2006, the French government launched France 24, a state-funded 24-hour news station providing English- and French-language channels; France 24 is based on and designed to compete directly with CNN and the BBC. American consulting firms commonly advise European publishers and broadcasters on how to produce commercially successful products (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). And magazines and newspapers throughout the world, including renowned publications such as Le Monde, are revamping their format, content, hiring, marketing, and corporate structure to mirror more profitable American and British models (Kuhn, 1994; Rieffel, 1984; Thussu, 2001). Alternatives to the twentieth-century American news industry model, including state-owned and government-controlled media, have been largely discredited. Indeed many argue that the triumph of democratic capitalism over Soviet communism, the so-called end of history celebrated after the toppling of the Berlin Wall, marked the triumph of the American news and entertainment media (Hachten, 1996; Steiner, 1990).

Thus, despite continuing differences that have mostly to do with lingering government support and a traditional journalistic style, most analysts and observers agree that the differences between French and U.S. news are less dramatic today than they were a generation ago and have grown increasingly less dramatic in the past ten years (Hallin & Giles, 2005; Kuhn, 1994). The challenges posed by the material presented below to the journalistic field are challenges to norms shared across U.S. and French media. These center on the evolving relationship between production and consumption of news in the increasingly transnational digital-media environment (Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2006). In France, as elsewhere, the balance of power between
news providers and news consumers is shifting. Web publishing tools and powerful mobile devices combined with increasing skepticism toward mainstream media has prompted news consumers on a mass scale to become active news producers and distributors (Jenkins, 2006; Russell, Ito, Richmond, & Tuters, in press). Their products and practices therefore pose questions at the heart of the profession: Who has the right to define truth? Which forms and practices yield the most credible product? How do consumers measure value among, on one hand, elite media institutions, with their gatekeepers and resources and professional codes and training, and on the other, the bloggers and wiki-ists and emailers, with their editorial independence, collaborative structures, and merit-based popularity?

**Structuring Dimensions and the Amateur Variable**

Bourdieu’s wide-lens approach to media research represents a significant break from works about a specific medium (Benson & Neveu, 2005); the latter approach is decreasingly useful as media organizations, products, and producers overlap, reference, borrow from, challenge, and compete with one another. Bourdieu (1995/2005) also usefully articulated two major dimensions along which the field of journalism is structured: one subject to cultural and economic resources and the other to the contest between the old and the new. New agents, he argued, can be a force for transformation or conservation. At the managerial level, as Bourdieu framed it, individual agents are more likely to act as a force for transformation through their efforts to make their mark through distinctive creations. New agents with “ruling class” contacts and resources often have more motivation and capacity to bring about change, whereas less well-connected and less wealthy entrants will be less apt to take risks or to challenge the status quo. The numbers of entrants is a significant factor as well. When there is a large disparity in the number of jobs relative to the number of applicants, those who get the jobs are likely to conform. Conversely, when the number of positions increases, rule-bending innovation will increase (Benson, 2005).

Gillmor (2004) asserts that new media facilitate a movement toward what he calls “We Media,” more inclusive media that, in his mind, benefit both citizens and business, because consumers of news can more directly shape the news product. But this interpretation fails to consider the divisive tensions between traditional and DIY models. Marvin and Meyer (2005) acknowledge these tensions:

> Fearing to be confused with amateurs who lack professional standing and whose standards they deplore, some established journalists and critics are predictably alarmed. But as a stimulus to public debate, the scrappy, rasping journalism for which blogs are known stacks up well against an established journalism that too often takes cover under bland civility that reflects cowardice and indifference rather than professionalism. (p. 408)

Skeptical of both utopian and dystopian effects discourses, Boczkowski (2005) argues that they overlook the complex dynamic of social and material infrastructure and new technical capabilities that influence changes in the culture of producers (and consumers). Having studied the early efforts of three mainstream news outlets to
incorporate new-media tools and practices, he argues that new media are revolutionizing the news industry not through technological change but, rather, by merging the structures and practices of existing media with newly available technical capabilities. Innovation in online news is a process in which different contexts and conditions yield different results. Boczkowski suggests that readers’ online participation is changing the definition of what is considered news. “The news moves from being mostly journalist-centered, communicated as a monologue, and primarily local, to also being increasingly audience-centered,” with the audience increasingly becoming content producers (p. 138).

A critical body of scholarship seems, in any case, to be arguing that this entry of amateurs into the realm of production introduces a new variable and represents a significant break from the traditional influences on modern journalism products and practices (Benson, 2005). The question is what user-centered new-media forms of journalism and the proliferating meta-coverage of new-media user-participants tell us about how the “amateur variable” may be shaping the field.

New Media and New Journalism

From the material I examined, I selected six examples of “new form” journalism that are notable for the questions they raise in relation to contemporary constructions of the field. They include: (1) on-the-ground mobile phone instant messaging; (2) a hacked French government website; (3) a blog set up by a Swiss weekly to cover events in France; (4) the real-time-authored Wikipedia entry on the unrest; (5) a downloadable podcast interview granted by then-Interior Minister of France Nicolas Sarkozy to popular French blogger and web entrepreneur Loic Le Meur; and (6) a machinima film.

Mobile phone use was cited repeatedly by politicians, mainstream media, and bloggers as the preferred frontline communication medium of the rioters and young residents of the banlieues (the working class suburbs). A front-page *International Herald Tribune* article (Crampton, 2005) headlined “Blogs and Text Messages Spread Call to Violence,” detailed how young people were communicating plans, police movements, and updates on events by punching out messages on their phones to send with camera-phone photos. *The New York Times* ran a version of the same article the next day. Some of the communication that circulated via mobile phones leaked onto the blogosphere, thereby countering intentional information blackouts regarding the spread of the unrest. Mainstream media had acceded to the blackouts. Jean-Claude Dassier, director general of the French 24-hour news channel LCI (La Chaîne Info), for example, admitted to limiting coverage of the riots for fear of encouraging support for far-right politicians (Cozens, 2005). According to *Le Monde* (“La Crise,” 2005), other journalists said they were loathe to provide momentum to the rioters, who they thought would be energized by reports relating the successful spread of the uprising throughout France and into other European nations. For those on the call lists, the messages were news. More than that, they were highly prized
multimedia reports from the battlefields, a form of abbreviated digital wire stories, information the news public and professional journalists were eager to sample.

Hacking was another new-media form of news. Government websites, including most (in)famously the site for the city of Clichy-sous-Bois, where the unrest began, were hacked into and forced to host alternative sites or messages. At the Clichy-sous-Bois site, hackers posted on the homepage a mock-official article announcing the mayor’s resignation, referencing his failings, and giving their own take on the unrest. Anyone searching for background information on the formerly little-known city in the crucial twenty-four hours after the outbreak of hostilities came upon the “news” report or commentary authored by the hack journalists of the banlieues, constituting a relatively enormous instantaneous audience of interested readers.

Blogs, of course, played a key role in the coverage. Bloggers within France and throughout Europe and North America parsed reports and offered opinions, hearsay, gossip, photos, and information—largely free of official editing concerns. Indeed, some sites were monitored by French police, who arrested three bloggers suspected of inciting violence in posts they wrote on Skyblog, a blog service hosted by Skyrock, a French youth-oriented radio station, with more than 4.6 million members (http://skyblog.com). Mainstream media also hosted “riot blogs.” The French daily Libération, the Swiss weekly L’Hebdo, and Le Monde, among other professional news outlets, used blogs as a central part of their coverage. Libération promoted its blog as up-to-the-minute live reporting. L’Hebdo used its blog to post in-depth analyses by reporters sent to act as participant-observers on a rotating basis in Bondy, one of the northern Paris suburbs close to where the rioting began. The public was encouraged to comment; L’Hebdo editors then chose the best excerpts to publish in its printed news weekly. Such public note-taking represents a significant departure from the practices of traditional journalist culture. The editors at L’Hebdo later passed the keys of the blog on to the inhabitants of Bondy by sending aspiring youth from Bondy to Lausanne for a week-long training funded in part by French-language radio and TV broadcast corporation Télévision Suisse Romande and Radio Suisse Romande. Announcing the program on its “Bondy Blog” (Jeannet, 2006), L’Hebdo acknowledged the irony of what it referred to as the “Bondy Blog Academy,” a thinly veiled effort to diversify the news while exploiting Bondy youth for “bloggy” content—content prized for seeming to be diverse and unfiltered. The Bondy bloggers had no journalism training other than the extemporized L’Hebdo “academy” but gained immediate access to major news audiences.

In the years since its 2001 inception, Wikipedia has become an instant reference to world events as well as an instant record of analysis and shifting understandings. The Wikipedia entry “2005 Civil Unrest in France” is contested, and so it carries the site’s trademark disclaimer: “The neutrality and factual accuracy of this article are disputed.” It is Wikipedia policy to make the online deliberation of a contested entry available for viewing. More than fifty pages of deliberation appeared at the “French Riots” entry during the weeks of the unrest. The material includes round-ups of news stories, and debates about the accuracy, evidence, and language of the story as
it was unfolding; for example, what to call the young people at the heart of the events was contested (Wikipedia, 2005).

Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy agreed to do a podcast interview with Loic Le Meur. It was the first ever podcast featuring a French political leader. *Business Week* (Matlack, 2005) said this “marked a startling break with customary etiquette, as Sarkozy and Le Meur addressed each other with the familiar ‘tu’ rather than ‘vous’ during the 30-minute meeting.” The interview drew plenty of posted comments at Le Meur’s blog, which hosted the interview. Some took issue with Sarkozy’s using the format as a stage to sell himself and warned Le Meur and other bloggers not to stoop to become professionals, as it were, by cozying up to official sources. One commenter, for example, wrote in English: “I think it would have been appropriate to handle him with gloves less soft. I hope in the blogger quest to show how amateur reporters can make it to the ‘big time’ they do not naively play into hands of very seasoned professionals” (Elizabeth, 2005). The podcast was immediately downloadable; moreover, it could easily be remixed as raw material (which it was, reportedly, by hip-hop musicians) and then circulated online.7

Alex Chan responded to what he saw as erroneous reporting by creating a short machinima film called *The French Democracy*. Chan’s film was meant to counter the depictions of the rioters as Muslim by the news media, particularly in the United States. *The French Democracy*, which he distributed as the riots were happening, dramatizes the lives of three young men (of no apparent religious affiliation) in France; the abuse they suffer based on race discrimination triggers their participation in the riots. Using a video game called “The Movies,” which allows players to create their own stories using the pre-made characters and sets of the game, Chan used English subtitles and the game’s New York City backdrop and American characters to “report” on institutionalized racism in France. Ironically, articles about Chan’s machinima in *The Washington Post* (Musgrove, 2005) and on MTV News (Totilo, 2005) missed the point and described the characters in the film as Muslim. After Chan complained, the Post printed a correction and MTV deleted all references to Islam. The film was hailed as a breakthrough in machinima. It contributed significantly to the debate about media coverage of the riots. It circulated widely on the web not just in the gaming or youth sphere but also among sites that deal with politics, immigration, and the news more generally.8

Meta-Coverage

The debate among journalists, bloggers, politicians, rioters, and others regarding how to define the unrest became a major component to the story and dominated the coverage of the coverage. Discussion of the story generally concerned: (1) the content of the coverage, including the frames9 and language used, exaggerations, inaccuracies, and omissions; and (2) the socio-cultural role of media in general and new communication technologies in particular. This latter topic drew the lion’s share of commentary. The meta-coverage included significant back-and-forth between audience-participants, bloggers, and mainstream journalists. Newspaper reporters
provided details about the story-writing process and defended their choices on their blogs, in the comments sections of other people’s blogs, at Wikipedia, and on television.

Both online and offline, for example, the debate about framing included debate about the terms used in reporting the stories. Anglophone and French media were criticized when they framed the story as an Arab issue (as a “French intifada” or “Arab uprising”) and when they downplayed any suggestion of connections between the unrest and a particular religious group. In fact, race and religion were the keyholes through which amateurs entered the professional realm of reality construction. The meta-coverage of the unrest amounted to a transnational attack on “bad practices” in France and elsewhere that were de-legitimatizing the “vision of the social world put forth by the media” as Bourdieu (1995/2005) put it, a vision made up of the “tacit presuppositions inherent to membership in the field” (p. 37). The amateurs weighed in at length, engaging the professionals over the presuppositions of the field.

Much discussion in the blogosphere and in the press concerned the decision of the French news media not to report on the specifics of how many cars were being burned, what other actions the rioters were undertaking, where the unrest was concentrated, how it was spreading, and so on. Dassier’s decision at LCI to limit coverage drew a great deal of commentary. His admission and similar admissions made by other journalists spurred the Associated Press (Ganley, 2005) to pose the headline question: “Self-Censorship? Or a Sense of Responsibility?” Many French journalists maintained, like Dassier, that calling the rioters “Arab” or “Islamist” would be racializing them and playing into the hands of the right. As mentioned above, others said they feared providing momentum to the rioters. Defenders claimed the French media response was in the interest of the public good. Critics either accused journalists of downplaying the troubles in order to preserve the status quo or of exhibiting leftist bias in failing to portray starkly the level of violence and the ethnic and religious makeup of the perpetrators. Such critics drew parallels between the coverage of the conflict in France and the coverage of the conflict in Iraq. When the self-described moderate forum and activist site for conservatives Freerepublic.com, for example, posted the above-mentioned AP story, comments ranged from sympathetic to racist. Posters often drew parallels between coverage of the riots and coverage of the war in Iraq. Winner3000 wrote:

The fact that the French media is not keeping count of burnt cars or showing the burning of cars is actually quite responsible. Too bad that worldwide media, especially the AP and Reuters, don’t have any such compunction regarding the war in Iraq.

Awgie responded:

In France, socialist journalists disguise and diminish acts of violence by muslim/islamists. In America socialist media hyperventilate over action taken in Iraq to defeat Muslim/ Islamic violence. [It is] very evident who the socialist media wants to succeed.
The issue of the ethnic and religious background of the rioters prompted similarly anti-Muslim comments on both English- and French-language blogs, as well as in the mainstream press, that seemed to reflect the climate that inspired the riots. A post on the Daily Standard weblog (Morrissey, 2005), the online edition of the conservative magazine The Weekly Standard owned by News Corporation, one of the world’s largest media conglomerates, criticized the French and the “world” media for denying an Islamist connection to the riots: “Will the French surrender to Islamist demands of sharia in the shadow of the City of Lights . . . or will they, the media, and the world finally wake to the threat of Islamist expansionism after years of denial?” Bertrand Pecquerie (2005), Director of the World Editors Forum, answered critiques posted on the organization’s blog, writing that the “sanitized” coverage of French broadcast networks was unethical:

On the short term, you can understand that shocking images can encourage rioters, but in the long term citizens need to trust their media: if not, the result will be that rumors will prevail on balanced coverage and truth. The worst scenario in democracy.

Pecquerie’s celebration of journalistic balance and truth as an essential element of democracy echoes arguments used to defend traditional journalism practices by amateurs throughout the discourse, highlighting the fact that amateur-participants often directly reference the established norms of the profession in their news critiques. After his interview with Sarkozy was podcast, for example, Le Meur came under attack from listeners for being too soft on “Sarko,” the politician who personified for the rioters the ruling-class mentality at the heart of suburban discontent. Le Meur responded in part by asserting that he was seeking to add balance, since “many French journalists have lost objectivity in their [negative] coverage [of Sarkozy]” (Matlack, 2005). Le Meur’s use of the term “objectivity,” a familiar response to attacks on journalistic authority, shows what Bourdieu (2005) describes as a criterion of membership to the field. The term “objective” is offered in opposition to “biased”; both terms are employed as part of the professionalization of journalism to make journalists’ presuppositions seem systematized and natural (pp. 36–38).

Readers of Le Monde, the “paper of record” in France, critiqued its coverage as biased, the product of double standards—a journalism of “two weights and two measures,” in the language of one reader, Nathalie Masset-Cauldron. Her November 13 post continues:

You were right to publish several articles on the death of the two teenagers from Cliché-Sous-Bois being chased by police . . . but why only a simple paragraph on the death—directly caused by the rioters—of the man from Epinay . . . .

Le Monde responded in a piece entitled “The Crisis of the Suburbs Challenges the Practice of Journalism.” This quoted the editor-in-chief of the French daily Parisien warning journalists not to interfere in the unfolding story by inserting themselves through their ideas: “The crisis is being completely ignored. This is why we must,
more than ever before, not go in with any false assumptions, and take on this difficult
test with great humility vis-a-vis the facts” (“La Crise,” 2005).

Sylvain Attal, a blogger and journalist for radio (Europe1 RMC) and television (LCI France2), responded to the same general criticisms in his blog. Attal (2005) lamented the pressures put on journalists to act outside the realm of good practice:

I don’t understand at all this wave of self-censorship. It is unfortunate for France. We are in a country where the elite do not want to see the tragedy, and they have dramatically internalized the guilt of the politically correct who make media responsible for saving the banlieu.

Critics also pointed to the common news organization tactic of employing “local guides” to help journalists reporting stories from the banlieues. A story in the Swiss newspaper 24 Heures (Van Berchem, 2005), popular throughout the new-media meta-coverage, reported on French TV journalists who were paying local “fixers” to brief their banlieue friends, collect information, and screen people to find “good” interviews. Le Monde ran a story defending its use of young “freelance journalists” and quoting freelancer Muustapha Kessous:

I don’t see myself as a fixer. I am there to write articles. When I do the job, I am a true journalist without bias. I am completely unattached with regard to my being Arab. It is lucky to have a double culture [Algerian and French]. I am not, however, a battering ram that makes it possible for [Le Monde] to enter the suburbs.

Bondy Blogger Alain Rebetez (2005) later weighed in to say that fixers weren’t the problem. The problem was the frame of the suburban news story in France, which requires journalists to neglect suburbs unless or until a crisis. “It is extraordinarily violent to only expose what is evil and problematic and never to report on what is good about a group of people or their successes.”

Meta-coverage, in fact, echoed and amplified the story—reported intermittently over the last few years in France—of the endemic invisibility of non-white French people in mainstream media. Meta-coverage on the matter traded largely in images and frames brought to French readers and viewers not through the national but through the local and international media. Indymedia Paris, CNN International, the BBC, and Al Jazeera, for example, all provided in-depth and up-to-the-minute reporting, which bloggers referenced in comparing coverage (Linchfield, 2005).

Perhaps the predominant feature of the meta-coverage was that it suggested a particular and widespread understanding of media’s representational power—a belief in the power of journalists to construct rather than simply reflect reality. This consciousness and the meta-discourse that it inspires is not unprecedented; it is a recurring phenomenon in the history of professional journalism, arising particularly at times of political crisis or polarization (Gitlin, 1980, p. 273). The extent to which critiques of news practices and products have been taken up by both mainstream and DIY media, and the pervasiveness of this “meta” point of view, however, signal a significant shift in journalism. At issue is the most effective and ethical way to represent individuals and events in the news. This theme, frequently reflected in much of the meta-coverage, was even repeatedly echoed by professional
Journalists—at their blogs and/or at their mainstream publications. This signals a shift. The notion that journalists construct rather than reflect reality directly contradicts the central tenants of the U.S. professional model of journalism (Glasser & Ettema, 1998; Schudson, 1978; Soloski, 1989). Indeed, the norms and practices of journalism were created in part to maintain the notion that, by following practices meant to achieve balance, distance, and objectivity, journalists become uniquely qualified to uncover the truth. Conversely, one result of the shift is a growing demand for more information from journalists on how they go about writing their stories, for example, on what set of oppositions they may be following.

Discussion

Much of the literature on the new-media news environment has tended to divide the landscape into two spheres, in effect pitting them against each other. However, the meta-coverage of the riots demonstrates ways in which the landscape grows more fully integrated every day. The 2005 unrest in France saw sophisticated use of new media by people involved in the story. The lines that may once have separated the participants, reporters, and audiences grew dim, elastic, and porous. Digital DIY news products and practices influenced and were influenced by mainstream media; new- and old-media journalists adopted one another’s norms, practices, and language in attempts to gain or maintain legitimacy. Bourdieu’s field competition was broadened to include a diversity of journalists with varying degrees of training and from a diversity of social and cultural backgrounds. As a result, Le Monde was called to task by readers and bloggers as regards objectivity and balance, and major mainstream outlets were scooped by kids on the streets with cell phones.

Given the significant overlap and interplay between the work of amateurs and of professionals, or more broadly between news producers and consumers, it seems clear that Bourdieu’s (1996/1998) field theory as applied to journalism rests on an outdated stark division between journalists and their audiences. We are witnessing an historic Bourdieu-ian shift in the field—the increasing numbers of people who can now create published “mass” or, better, “networked” news and analysis constitute a significant number and variety of what Bourdieu calls new agents, who can pose challenges to the field and ultimately alter its presuppositions and purposes.

In the case of the unrest in France, many news media user-producers broadened coverage by adding distinctly non-professional perspectives. New forms such as cell-phone reporting, hacking, blogging, remixing, and real time animated filmmaking point to news product that requires less intervention between consumers and the material, and less journalistic training on the part of producers. This is transformative on some level; it remakes norms by reducing acknowledged and unacknowledged journalistic filters of production and packaging. At the same time, these forms also cater to people’s interest in the mechanics of framing, including, in particular, their interest in unfiltered deliberation such as that conducted at some mainstream media websites and at the open-invitation non-moderated discussion at Wikipedia. The widespread consciousness of reality construction as an aspect of news production
seems a significant shift. As the proliferation of meta-news or coverage of the media suggests, news is no longer naturalized. The “underlying arbitrariness” of the news, as Couldry puts it (2003), is no longer obscured by the symbolic power of its representations, thus opening it up to increased scrutiny and criticism. New agents also can introduce an expanded unanticipated set of journalistic symbols. In the case of the French riots, the many traditional journalistic symbols of the story—government officials speaking at podiums, youth rioters in the street, reporters with microphones in front of the Elysee Palace, for example—were augmented by a new set, which included “fixer”-bloggers, hacker-“corrected” government websites, a downloadable informal interview with interior minister Sarkozy, and machinima New York-style French youth who served as transnational news-media avatars of French urban inequality and racism.

The blurring lines between consumers and producers in the new news environment challenge researchers to reconsider traditional research categories of production and reception studies. As it is, the terms of debate lag significantly behind the experience of news information as it is being created and received. Bourdieu’s writings on the forces of change, especially those forces that act from within the field, emphasize the demographic qualities of new agents. We need to know much more about the people who comprise the “amateur variable” if we are to know more about their potential influence—even the degree to which they as a group can be considered amateurs.

Immediate areas of inquiry include the extent to which they might be weakening, for example, existing forms of editorial and market influence, given their status as largely (if still theoretically) unpaid members of the profession, not in the sway of the traditional direct power sources including editors, publishers, and corporate attorneys. General questions about background, training, and product should be answered. Are the consumer-participants, for example, acting on their own in a “managerial” capacity; that is, are they motivated to make their mark through bold moves in form and tone and content, the kind of moves Bourdieu suggests can transform existing structures? What are the prized qualities of new content-delivery outlets? How are amateurs rewarded? How do they measure success? To what extent do new agents act less like Bourdieu’s managers and more like the profession’s worker-bees, stressing their adherence to the established conventions in order to demonstrate their fitness for official (paid) membership in the field?

There is also the matter of whether or not the reporting opportunities presented by new media represent a genuine perceived expansion, in socio-economic terms, of job opportunities. The ratio of the number of positions to applicants is one of Bourdieu’s key variables, with a scarcity of positions engendering conformism and a boom giving rise to risk-taking innovation. Is journalism as a field responding to new-media news as presenting a boom in job opportunities? Are journalists and their bosses taking more risks? Are they more amenable to change? Or do new media represent an external shock to the field, a de facto form of the outside political-economic-cultural pressures Bourdieu underlines as highly influential? Do new media represent, for example, a great transnational form of unofficial deregulation, blowing the field open and distorting it through the pressures exerted by the vast numbers of news
audience-participants? Are these participants responding more directly to pressures outside the field, to pressures exerted more coercively from the other fields of their realities? Or is new-media audience-participant journalism responding more directly, say, to the neighboring field of entertainment, shifting the gravity of the field of journalism further into the orbit of cinema-like storytelling techniques? Is this new journalism part of a new-media cultural movement, a product of a new mentality about mediated information, including new attitudes toward information value, authority, and authorship?

The mainstream news industry is poaching DIY products, practices, and, at times, values in order to remain relevant—hiring and training bloggers, using information and sources culled from the web to inform their stories, eliciting the perspectives of their readers, and so on. However, this is in effect cheating. Mainstream outlets are grabbing at the increasing popularity and caché of new media but remain reluctant to embrace the possibilities they offer. Despite millions of dollars spent on high-profile online editions, most traditional news organizations offer only the illusion of online interactivity, participation, and collaboration. They use the Internet as a new distribution channel without reconfiguring their stance toward journalistic authority or authoring conventions. This raises serious questions about the sustainability of the current economic model, which holds journalistic professionalism as one of its most viable commodities (Deuze, 2003; Meikle, 2002). The changes in journalism products over the last five years, to whatever extent they reflect user-producer or new-media amateur news products, are not in any case due to the demands of the audience. They are, in Bourdieu’s configuration, more certainly evidence of the rise of the audience as participants, the only certain way to effect transformation. In the pre-interactive-digital era, the direct producer–client relationship was largely shaped by the relationship between the producers. Bourdieu (1995/2005) suggests:

If you want to understand a product like L’Express and Le Nouvel Observateur there is little point in studying the target readership. The essential part of what is presented in L’Express and Le Nouvel Observateur is determined by the relationship between L’Express and Le Nouvel Observateur. (p. 45)

In fact, the most basic qualitative research still needs to be undertaken. To what extent are amateur bloggers and other new-form journalists directly influencing debates about journalism and journalism product? How can we measure the influence? To what extent do comment threads on a story, for example, bleed into or directly influence coverage? How do journalists write about their mainstream-published stories on their blogs, and in what ways might that process influence their journalism? Bourdieu’s writings should be revisited in light of all of these questions.

Notes

[1] In October and November of 2005 the largest riots in France since May 1968 erupted after the accidental death of two teenagers during a police chase in Clichy-sous-Bois, a working-class suburb of Paris. Groups of mostly second-generation French youth burned cars and public buildings throughout France. The riots also spurred unrest in several other European
countries, including Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands, Spain, and Greece. Analysts viewed the unrest as a response to long smoldering perceptions of racist inequality and exclusion. For in-depth information and analysis see the Social Science Research Council’s collection of web essays on the riots at http://riotsfrance.ssrc.org/

[2] Machinima refers to machine cinema or machine animation—computer game imagery is used to create low cost, easily distributable films.

[3] All translations of blog posts, comments, and articles quoted here that originally appeared in French were translated into English by the author.

[4] For a list of blogs included, see the Appendix. All blogs were accessible as of April 2007.

[5] Kuhn (1994) provides one of the most convincing attempts to address the issue of the difference in style between the French and U.S. models of journalism. He argues that the “journalism of ideas” in France often exhibits an overt political point of view whereas the “journalism of information” in the U.S. is characterized by at least the appearance of separation between facts and values (see also Glasser & Ettema, 1998; Hallin & Giles, 2004).

[6] Wikipedia, the online reference site, is one of the most popular sites in cyberspace, hosting per month roughly 154 million users worldwide, who cite, co-author, edit, contest, and plagiarize its entries. The number of Wikipedia entries is in the millions and constantly expanding. There are no official author qualifications required. It has no traditional editors or publishers. The site’s traffic statistics are available at Wikipedia.com with analysis provided by the Alexa Web Information Service (http://www.amazon.com/gp/browse.html?node=12782661).


[9] Gitlin (1980) asserts that frames “enable journalists to process large amounts of information quickly and routinely [and to] package the information for the efficient relay to their audiences” (p. 7).

References


**Appendix**

A Fistful of Euros
http://fistfulofeuros.net

Alternet
http://www.alternet.org

Association Collectif Liberté Egalité Fraternité
http://aclefeu.blogspot.com/

Blogue Notes
http://gwenaelle.blogspirit.com/tag/europe

Clive Davis Politics and Culture from Both Sides of the Atlantic
http://www.clivedavis-online.com/

Daniel Pipes
http://www.danielpipes.org/

Francofile
http://francofileblogs.com

Free Republic
http://www.freerepublic.com