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Resisting the News

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Resisting the News: Engaged audiences, alternative media, and popular critique of journalism, by Jennifer Rauch, London: Routledge, 2020, 258 pp., \$45/£35 (pbk.), ISBN: 9780367430177

Jennifer Rauch's *Resisting the News* is a book about contrasts. "Other. Alternate. Another. Different" (p. 2). Contrasts are central to the challenge of navigating media, now, in the past, and particularly for audiences who bring their own politics, scepticism, and experience to the table. *Resisting the News* signals from the start this is a challenge rooted as much in terminological choices as it is in historical legacies that have brought us to our current news experiences. It is that nature of contrast that grounds Rauch's contribution to a body of work trying to also make sense of the contrasts also cutting through our societies.

By upfronting the nature of alternativeness as at once nebulous and meaningful, *Resisting the News* establishes a clear agenda for Rauch's audience-focused research. Set in the United States, carried out across a 15-year span beginning in the early 2000s, this book captures a time when US news media and their audiences were navigating the post-September 11 and early-Iraq War years and coverage thereof. This is the centrepiece of the earliest chapters where viewing and discussing news with audiences informs analysis. Later the book shifts towards survey work and an unpacking of alternative alternatives; the conservative alternative media space. In doing so, *Resisting the News* reflects how publics divide themselves in part according to perceptions of news, divisions being shaped in the early 2000s and prevalent today.

From its terminological table setting, the polysemic nature of media and of alternativeness across its many interpretations is utilised effectively to unpack audiences' negotiations with news content. Polysemy is addressed in chapter 2 in particular, but returns throughout within a dialogue between the research traditions and literature drawn upon, and the way *Resisting the News* engages with these texts. While at times the discussions want for links to a wider body of scholarship, there is a welcome bit of breathing space that Rauch's style of writing allows for. Her engagement with foundational audience research offers a wide window into her thinking, and the book is written in a way that allows the reader to easily think along.

That said, *Resisting the News* doesn't shy away from complexities. Highlighting a challenge that alternative media researchers regularly encounter, Rauch writes: "The power of alternative news sources to sway mainstream political communication has long remained hidden, subtle, and underestimated" (p. 1). This exposes a tension within this field of scholarship; research on alternative media, new actors, and activist audiences naturally focuses on a smaller subset of the field, including media with lesser economic status and audiences that run counter to the rest. But the recurring theme in this body of research is that there is an outsized weight that 'alternativeness' heaves in setting the outer edges of our debates about politics and media.

This is apparent when seeing how the participants Rauch engages understand mainstream news. And here we begin to see 'alternativeness' gain some purchase. There is something concrete about *not* liking news from the (perceived) corporate-captured, profit-driven, manipulating and manipulated, mainstream television news that allows participants to position themselves within the world they are living in. With this, however, comes a pronounced

normativity from those audiences. Composed of participants recruited from university settings and from protests, participants often cast their own patterns of news use as somehow 'better'. They are highly critical of framing and perceived corporate influence. Some only admit to watching mainstream news to be able to relate to their older relatives, expressing sympathy for unwitting others who are taken in by sensationalist, commercialized mainstream narratives.

Through these accounts, readers might be transported back to the early 2000s when similar conversations were being held in university classrooms across the United States. Discussing 'Lay Theories' of the audience in Chapter 4, participants' reactions could well have been taken from the classrooms, cafes, and common rooms in Amherst, Massachusetts and Anchorage, Alaska where this reviewer spent those years. In particular, Rauch's analysis of participants using 'us' and 'them' pronouns resonates with how younger people in particular spoke about news at that time, drawing distinctions between their and others' news habits. These distinctions were reinforced by the emergence of a more accessible set of 'alternative news' for audiences to consume, content that undergirded a more critical (sometimes ironic) viewing of mainstream news. As Rauch notes, participants draw easily on the then-popular critical political economy work of Herman, Chomsky, and McChesney in forming their assessments of news (p. 70).

This highlights the link between viewing news and identity formation, and also how we can see these reactions as more than individuation processes. Rauch ties this to the formation of interpretive communities. But such reactions also seem to signal the creation of polarized publics and counterpublics, fractured along lines of knowledge that individuals see themselves as having and ignorance they assume of others. As an account of viewers consolidating their politics by circulating views on news, Michael Warner's and Nancy Fraser's treatments of discrete publics and counterpublics come to mind. Through that lens, audiences' polysemic interpretations of news are not only ways of establishing identity, but are core to constructing belonging, as audiences navigate their ways into now-politicized publics (or, counterpublics).

Through either lens, these processes help us break from seeing alternative media now as descendants of progressive exemplars, including feminist, gay, and socialist media, among other alternative media. Assuming contemporary examples are torch carriers of these historical alternative media misses a different alignment, Rauch argues, one not based on ideology. In Chapter 8, Rauch argues that rather than rendering "so called" (p. 138) mainstream/alternative distinctions moot, as the *Nation's* Micah Sifry did, these binaries are now more complex, "compounded by drastic changes in the way people produce and consume news" (ibid.).

What hasn't changed, as time has advanced, is the challenging nature of alternativeness and how we see our news and ourselves through encounters mainstream and the alternative news. *Resisting the News* offers a productive way of thinking through these challenges, through the eyes of and reactions to the audiences engaging with them.

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