

Elvestad, Eiri and Phillips, Angela (2018). *Misunderstanding News Audiences: Seven Myths of the Social Media Era*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge. 1st Edition. ISBN pbk 9781138215191; pbk, hbk and ebook; 180pp; \$65.99 pbd; \$242.00 hbk; \$28.67 ebook.

Reviewed by Sacha Molitorisz, Centre for Media Transition, UTS

In recent years, physicists have been testing whether anything can travel faster than the speed of light. These scientists would do well to consider the news media landscape, where today's changes are moving so fast they would stun Einstein. For media scholars, this presents both a boon and a challenge. On the one hand, it offers a wealth of material, as a succession of innovations yields new research and new findings. On the other hand, how to pronounce anything with certainty when so much is shifting, and when today's reality will soon be superseded?

Eiri Elvestad and Angela Phillips have responded to this challenge by identifying a series of myths that prevail in the social media era, exposing them under the light of scholarship. In doing so, they address key issues concerning media and journalism scholars, but also the broader public.

First, they tackle the myth that news personalisation will improve plurality, diversity and democracy. The chapter opens with Nicholas Negroponte's 1995 account of the Daily Me, a newspaper printed in a special edition of one. The Daily Me's utopian, democracy-enhancing promise has not been realised, Elvestad and Phillips argue, citing research showing a rise in the number of news avoiders, and further research dating back to the 1940s. This is no short-sighted overview. And finally we're left with a concerning conclusion: "It is the linking function of a shared news narrative that disappears when large numbers of people get their news via social media".

This approach sets the template. The second myth is that "we are all journalists now"; the third is that the internet benefits from the wisdom of crowds, and that "the many are smarter than the few"; the fourth is that the internet realises McLuhan's "global village"; the fifth is that online communities are replacing offline communities; the sixth, which revolves around the issue of trust, is that the internet and social media have replaced edited news; and the seventh is that a digital generation is emerging to revolutionise the connection between news and audience.

These explorations are impressively global. Eiri Elvestad is associate professor of sociology at the University College of Southeast Norway with an expertise in the changing media environment and news exposure; and Angela Phillips is a professor of journalism at Goldsmiths, University of London, with a history as a journalist and expertise in ethical working practices and news audiences. Predictably, Europe is well-covered. Sporadically, Elvestad and Phillips draw on their own studies, including mixed methods research into the news media habits of 12 Norwegian and 12 UK students. But the authors are also well-acquainted with international scholarship, including from Australia.

On occasion, the depth and detail impede the momentum and argument. Here and there, the authors spend a paragraph discussing a source that warrants a sentence. A related issue concerns the seven myths themselves. Each chapter contains both a heading and a subheading; these might have been distilled more clearly into straightforward statements. Chapter seven, for instance, is headed: "The end of trust in mainstream media. Myth: the Internet and social media have replaced edited news". This might have been condensed to: "Myth: the Internet and social media have finally delivered news we can trust".

Nonetheless, this is a substantial work that would constitute an extremely useful resource for scholars from a variety of disciplines. As a set reading, it would provide excellent fodder for discussion among undergraduates and postgraduates. It also offers rich insights for policy-makers

and regulators. It is accessibly written, but warrants close, attentive reading. And its contribution is twofold: first, it brings together a disparate, eclectic and extensive list of sources in a logical and well-structured fashion; and second, it weaves these into a coherent argument revealing that news audiences have been significantly misunderstood. Best of all, this argument - and its many sub-arguments - is not only well-substantiated, but highly convincing.

It's not all doom and gloom. Crucially, countries with a strong public service broadcaster are revealed to be less fragmented, more trusting, and less susceptible to fake news. Public service broadcasters are "a bulwark against totalitarianism". As media change approaches the speed of light, it's vital that such verities are articulated and substantiated.

Word count: 697 words