tripleC 23 (1): 70-73, 2025
http://www.triple-c.at

Review of Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre's book *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*

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Abstract: Written in elevated language and drawing on philosophers from Arendt to Wittgenstein, Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre's book *The Making of Public Spaces* sets out a theory of current affairs and politicisation. But does it add to our understanding of politics in the age of the internet? This article reviews the two French authors' book.

Keywords: Luc Boltanski, Arnaud Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, *Le Monde,* online comments

Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre. 2025. *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Polity Press. 294 pages.

This book is about the shaping of news events in France and about how readers respond in online comments to news stories. It includes a study of 120,000 comments by online subscribers to the daily newspaper *Le Monde* and a smaller number of comments on television news stories that have been archived on YouTube in France. The book argues that facts have an independent existence while at the same time acknowledging that the making of "current affairs" involves a selection of facts and the embedding of facts in narrative and interpretation.

In the opening chapters the authors stress issues of temporality. News or "current affairs" implies a short time span. A daily newspaper renews the news every 24 hours. News provides people with facts and stories which are mostly not available from their direct experience. The emphasis on time is taken up again towards the end of the book in an argument that one of the main sources of politicisation is generational conflict. The authors see online comments to *Le Monde* and to news videos posted to YouTube as evidence of an over-politicisation of the lifeworld. The book ends with a plea for a return to a pluralist democracy that smooths out the rough edges of political causes (p. 217).

Subscribers to *Le Monde* erode journalistic narratives and interpretations in comments they post to online news stories. Although these comments are moderated, educated readers of *Le Monde* understand the rules and are able to use irony to challenge journalists' interpretative frames for current events. The book describes how comments on YouTube (perhaps by a younger cohort) may even include denials of widely accepted facts. The central part of the book is a detailed study of comments posted to the online edition of *Le Monde.* Posts are moderated by a subcontractor that specialises in this work. About 20% of the comments are rejected. Boltanski and Esquerre do not provide a detailed content analysis of posted comments, but word clouds show that rejected comments frequently include the word "Muslim". Posts tend to take an ironic position in relation to *Le Monde*. Thomas Piketty, a regular columnist for *Le Monde,* is ridiculed as a bourgeois bohemian.

Date of Acceptance: 24 February 2025
Date of Publication: 25 February 2025

Who comments? Subscribers to *Le Monde* online edition are 69% men; 52% belong to higher socio-professional occupations; 70% are over fifty years old (p. 143). Only a small proportion of readers write comments. The average number of posts per contributor is 20 a month, but some readers post much more frequently. One person contributed over 300 comments. People who use their real name are probably seeking to add to their professional profile. Those who use a pseudonym seek to express feelings of indignation or violence.

Boltanski and Esquerre give a summary of political comments on *Le Monde* for two months in 2019 and also provide a word cloud of frequent words (pp. 162-3). These seem to be far-right talking points and perhaps this is why they describe comments on news as "politicisation". Comments often complain of a decline in France. Many call for a return to order.

The authors provide three brief case studies. The first is about medical assistance in reproduction, often an issue for lesbian and gay couples. The second is news about Islam. The third is about environmentalism. Comments accuse *Le Monde* of being unduly supportive of Muslim immigrants. Environmentalists are said to be too extreme. Some comments argue that the extreme right benefits from liberal policies because people feel that things have gone too far. However, we are never told what percentage of online readers actually read comments on news stories or how long they spend reading comments. I read the online edition of the *New York Times* and I never look at comments on news stories.

Pierre Bourdieu (1984, xi-xiv) comments on the "translation effect" by which books published in France, which are interventions in the French intellectual field, are dislocated by publication into English. A book that is part of debates in France about the relevance of theories of social class and revolutionary politics becomes "theory" in the United States (for these debates see Atkinson 2020). A good introduction to this book might have helped the English reader. In a blurb on the back cover Michele Lamont describes the book as a "path-breaking analysis". But is this actually the case?

It is unclear why Boltanski and Esquerre insist that their book is not a sociology of media or a sociology of journalism. The model they propose seems similar to the well-known research programme set out by Stuart Hall in his paper "Encoding/Decoding in Television Discourse" (Hall 2006). Philo and Berry (2011) in *More Bad News From Israel* provide a detailed study of "current affairs" in the Israel-Palestine struggle and also conduct a study of audiences using a survey and focus groups. What they find is not an over-politicisation of the lifeworld but many television viewers who do not understand the television reports and actually get interested when the issues are explained to them. There are many studies of journalistic practices. Pedelty's (1985) *War Stories* uses an ethnographic approach that seems quite similar to the methods of pragmatic sociology. Finally, the research method of studying online comments is not especially new. It is used in research such as Reagle's (2015) *Reading the Comments*.

In keeping with their method of pragmatic sociology, Boltanski and Esquerre do not provide a description of *Le Monde* as an institution until chapter 5, where they offer a five-page summary. There is no attempt to situate the paper in the journalistic field in France. Bourdieu is reduced to a footnote. Rodney Benson points out that Bourdieu's argument in *On Television* is that commercial television is distorting the field of journalism and pushing *Le Monde* towards a more trivialised and sensationalist approach to news (Benson 2004). In the diagram of the cultural field in *Distinction*, the newspaper *Le Monde* is located right beside higher-ed teachers (Bourdieu 1984, 128-129). *Le Monde* is a somewhat left-of-centre newspaper read by highly educated and

more well-to-do individuals in France. The front news pages cater for university-educated readers and the more conservative business pages for the managerial class (for research on journalistic fields that uses Bourdieu's approach, see Lindell 2018).

Towards the end of their book, making an argument that "the Internet" is responsible for the over-politicisation of the lifeworld, Boltanski and Esquerre make a comparison with the work of Yochai Benkler in the United States:

> "The use of the internet has been suspected of having played an important role in the transformation of political struggle in the United States, with, in particular, the radicalization of a violently anti-liberal opposition and the formation of a new configuration of information, separated into two groups that are not content to develop different interpretations of what happens in a bipartisan way; rather one group, often with the tacit agreement of one of the two main parties, the Republican Party, evokes the existence of imaginary conspiracies as if they were factual truths" (p. 225).

Anyone who has read Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018) will know that this summary is exactly the opposite of what *Network Propaganda* argues. The whole point of the book is to show that the polarisation in the United States and the rise of Donald Trump is not caused by "the Internet". Neither technology nor social media algorithms are the explanation. Instead, *Network Propaganda* documents the rise of political polarisation in the USA over several decades, the deregulation of the media industry from the 1980s, and the networked effects of traditional media (Fox News, conservative talk radio) with digital media (Breitbart and similar websites). Network propaganda is a response to the deeply-felt alienation of about 30 percent of the American population, core Trump supporters, who have respond to memes developed by right-wing websites and picked up as talking points by Breitbart and Fox News. Their alienation is not caused by digital technology. It is the marginalisation of a core group of older, non-college educated, white men who feel (quite rightly) that they have been abandoned by market-based economic policies. This group projects its anger onto much the same targets as those listed in *The Making of Public Space*: immigrants, Muslims, feminists, and all the causes supported by the professional middle class which is politically represented in the USA by the Democratic Party.

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Alan O'Connor teaches Media Studies at Trent University in Canada. His most recent book is *Sailing and Social Class* (2024, London: Routledge).