

## Book Review

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**The Hybrid Media System: Politics and power** by Andrew Chadwick (2013), Oxford: Oxford University Press

The lesson from Andrew Chadwick's *The Hybrid Media System* is both simple and profound: *we are all hybrids now*. The book offers a clarion call for studying the various hybrid 'logics' that help define the current media system. 21<sup>st</sup> century Political communication, Chadwick argues, cannot be neatly divided into a competition between new and old media effects. Instead, Chadwick directs our attention towards the messy in-betweens – the panoply of interlocking actors and 'actants' [5] that construct power in the media system through their interactions. This is an important and timely book.

The book provides a welcome jolt of new theory in a literature that has tendency to remain fixated on older debates. Chadwick's book was published in 2013, two decades after the Mosaic web browser rendered the World Wide Web accessible. For scholars of digital media and politics, those two decades have been filled with static comparisons, predictions, observations and refutations regarding 'new' (read: online) and 'old' (read: offline) media and political activity. *The Hybrid Media System* argues for a different ontological perspective, one that emphasizes the diverse ways that newer and older 'logics' (defined as 'technologies, genres, norms, behaviors, and organizational forms) are assembled into a changing field of practice. 'Older and newer,' Chadwick writes, 'are relative terms. We need to understand how *newer* media practices in the interpenetrated field of media and politics adapt and integrate the logics of older media practices in those fields. We also need to understand how *older* media practices in the interpenetrated fields of media and politics adapt and integrate the logics of newer media practices' (p. 4). The book is part of a broader qualitative turn within political communication, one that seeks to treat 'technology as context' [1] and understand how people, organizations, and technology combine to form the present-day media system. It reorients our field of vision, highlighting the mix strategic actors that animate contentious political communication.

*The Hybrid Media System* offers a nice mix of high theory and grounded empirics. It stands as the culmination of a multi-year research endeavor, knitting together concepts from influential articles that Chadwick has published from 2007 through 2011 and offering a broad and accessible theoretical framework. While there is much to recommend in the book, the two most important and lasting contributions are likely to be Chadwick's anchoring discussion of the many faces of hybridity (chapters 1–3), and his definition of the 'political information cycle' (chapter 4). Chapters 5 through 9 offer engaging applications of these concepts, through teachable cases that range from Wikileaks and the changing newsroom to the Obama presidential campaign and the British activist organization 38 Degrees. For those seeking grounded cases of hybrid media and organizational logics, these well-developed cases provide strong examples. But the lasting value of this book lies in the analytic path it charts for future scholarship.

Arguably the greatest contribution of this book is its rich treatment of the concept of hybridity. Andrew Chadwick first introduced this term in a 2007 article, 'Digital Network Repertoires and Organizational Hybridity.' Therein, he discussed MoveOn.org as a 'hybrid mobilization movement' – a political organization that draws from the tactical repertoires and organizational logics of traditional interest groups, social movement organizations, and political parties. The article has proven quite influential, attracting nearly 200 citations and helping to establish a burgeoning scholarly community interested in the Internet's impact at the organizational level of media and politics. The one key limitation of that 2007 article,

however, was that it demonstrated the need for a clearer, overarching discussion of what hybridity entails. This proves to be a non-trivial challenge: various scholars have applied the term in different (and sometimes conflicting) manners. Hybridity is easiest to identify when operating in an arena with strictly predefined categories. A hybrid car, for instance, refers to a specific type of vehicle – one that combines a gasoline and electric engine. Hybrid corn, likewise, mixes two distinct and identifiable genetic strains of corn. These are distinct objects, placed into new combinations. But in the realms of media and politics, hybridity becomes more complicated because the predefined archetypes themselves include significant variation. Political parties and interest groups behave differently from one electoral system to another. Social movement organizations engage in organizational innovation and counter-innovation [6], adopting new forms over time. Research on hybridity in political communication has been limited by the lack of an overarching theoretical perspective.

In the first three chapters of *The Hybrid Media System*, Chadwick offers the rich elaboration on this concept for which many of us have been waiting. In chapter 1, Chadwick describes ‘an ontology of hybridity.’ He identifies two basic models of hybridity: ‘diluted’ hybrids, which combine features of two antecedent classes, and ‘particulate’ hybrids, which treat ‘antecedents’ characteristics as always in the process of being selectively recombined in new ways’ (p. 14). Particulate hybridity is the more interesting of the two types, as it emphasizes an ongoing process of experimentation and recombination. Hybridity does not describe a single class of organizations; it is a form of media logic, a force that helps determine power in the broader media/political system. Chapter 2 further elaborates this point, demonstrating the long history of hybridity in the media system. Casting the rise of print, radio, and television in the context of hybridizing forces and a broader system of power helps to concretize the term, while demonstrating that it is not a distinctly digital phenomenon. Media systems are *always* in the process of incorporating new technologies, work processes, and other media logics. Rather than treating the digital era as a period of abrupt transformation, Chadwick instead demonstrates how the ontology of hybridity can help us to place the current moment in a broader historical context. Chapter 3 brings us up to date with the current technological moment, discussing the various actors and information technologies that have quickly come to occupy important niches in the US and UK media systems. These first three chapters are high theory, of a sort we rarely find in modern political communication scholarship.

Chapter four introduces readers to ‘the political information cycle,’ a five-stage process of media creation and contention which, Chadwick argues, has replaced the older media cycle of the broadcast era. Close readers will note that this work is derived from a pair of previous articles [3,4]. The political information cycle is a five-stage process: (1) integration and preemption, (2) real-time orchestration, (3) real-time mobilization, (4) augmentation and (5) contestation. Stage 1 occurs well in advance of a traditional media event, setting the stage for alternate narratives within the hybrid media environment. Stages 2 and 3 occur over the course of a media event, as the traditional journalistic ‘pack’ engages with a range of media objects (snap polls, sentiment dials, twitter trending topics, etc.) and those new objects become a space for political contestation. Stages 4 and 5 occur after the media event, as the new, hybrid media objects alter the content of traditional media coverage. The hybrid media system captures the growing array of institutional and quasi-institutional actors that participate in these events. The political information cycle helps us move beyond simple platitudes about digital self-publishing and the power of the online masses. Traditional media and political organizations are still key actors in the hybrid media system. But they are contending with a changing set of actors and technologies, which in turn leads to changes in how media events are constructed.

*The Hybrid Media System* pushes readers to look inside the black boxes of media and political processes. Hybridity is most visible in the process of assembling contentious media events. When Chadwick

talks about ‘media logics,’ he does not mean the cold, calculating logic employed by rational choice scholars of old. Logic, instead, is a form of sense-making. Technologies, habits, and organizational processes all exert a type of force, helping to determine what actions *work* in the pursuit of desired ends (increased readership, mass political education, electoral victory, etc.). Chadwick brings these forces of hybridization into our scholarly purview. He highlights new objects of study. The success of his book will likely one day be measured by the weight of future scholarship that it inspires.

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