
It is undeniable that how we communicate and how we consume news and information has been rapidly changing, affecting many aspects of society. The book Digital Mosaic: Media, Power, and Identity in Canada, written by Mount Royal University Communication Studies professor David Taras, explores issues related to identity and democracy in Canada through a discussion of the changing mediascape. In Digital Mosaic, Taras makes the argument that the Canadian media system is dealing with several simultaneous crises, including: “a crisis in the traditional media, a crisis in public broadcasting, a crisis in news and journalism, and a crisis in citizen engagement” (p. 7). He asserts that these crises both provide opportunities for reform and dangers for democracy. Taras discusses media change from a specifically Canadian context, pointing out that it “may have greater consequences for Canadians than it does for those in other countries because other societies are not as dependent on the media to be a vital connecting link” (p. 26). As such, another common theme throughout the book is the link between the media and Canadian nationhood.

Digital Mosaic is broken down into nine chapters that provide a comprehensive look at many of the issues facing Canadian citizens, corporations, and governments in the digital age. These include those related to big data and privacy, citizen engagement, and cultural imperialism. It also explores topics related to the current media environment in Canada, including ownership, technology, and public service broadcasting. The book is well written, organized, and researched. Taras's argument is compelling and well supported by a mixture of data, academic studies, and a variety of examples of Canadian and American programming, news events, and publications, which are used to illustrate his points.

Key to the overall discussion of the Canadian mediascape that Digital Mosaic puts forward is the concept of media shock, which is used throughout the book to frame the discussion of changes happening in the wider Canadian context. While Taras refers to media shock as a whole throughout the book, he breaks it down in the first chapter into ten characteristics, including rapid media change, the high presence of media in “virtually every aspect of daily life,” (pp. 3–4) the customizable nature of the media, convergence, and the vast amount of personal data that is now accessible on citizens.

Another important point that Digital Mosaic makes is that there are rising levels of disengagement in the country with both news and politics. Taras points out that: “Pushing the news away has created a downward spiral; the less exposure to news, the less interest people have in public affairs, and the less likely they are to vote” (p. 10). This is a problem that Taras notes is particularly prevalent among younger Canadians, who he describes as being digital natives who “have largely become peek-a-boo citizens, at once technologically savvy, progressive, connected, and global and at the same time in-
creasingly rootless, distrustful, disconnected, and arguably unhappy” (p. 41). Tara’s elaborates on this point, stating that, while digital natives are engaged in some ways, demonstrating interest and passion in “climate change, human rights, and social inequality”, they are not voting or participating in “conventional political campaigns” (p. 57).

While Taras covers a lot of ground in Digital Mosaic, the book is lacking a strong discussion of the positive role that alternative news organizations play or at least, have the potential to play in the Canadian mediascape. In his book Citizen Witnessing, Stuart Allan (2013) argues that there is potential for young people to embrace roles as citizen witnesses, which can encourage more active participation in democratic culture. Allan sees new technology as opening up a space for citizens to play a role in the news process, thereby encouraging them to actively engage in democracy. Axel Bruns (2005), has also argued that new technology has opened up greater opportunities for people to act as gatewatchers, which is a term he uses to describe people who watch the output of news organizations and comment on what these organizations are covering and not covering, and how they are covering what they are covering. While it can be argued that both Allan (2013) and Bruns’ (2005) accounts of the benefits of new technology are a bit idealistic, Digital Mosaic would have benefited from further exploration of how some of these ideas are providing possibilities for a future of journalism that is more inclusive and helping to create a more informed and engaged citizenry.

Furthermore, in the final chapter of the book, Taras notes that, “[w]hile there is great hope that online media will eventually provide the connecting links that we need, the immediate question of who pays for news and culture and indeed for the ingredients that fuel a vibrant democracy remains unanswered” (p. 300). This may very well be the case, but there are people who are working on solving these issues and who are looking to create sustainable models of funding for journalism. There are projects that allow the public to pitch the stories that matter to them most, Kickstarter operations that allow people to support specific investigative stories that they want to see, and other forms of experimentation with making journalism work in this new media environment. Kickstarter has been popular and successful enough for funding journalism that the website has a page dedicated to journalism projects (Hare, 2014). There are also boutique and foundation-backed organizations (Watson, 2016). In short, there is a real effort by some of those involved in the industry to address some of the issues that Taras brings up, which go unacknowledged in the book.

Overall, Taras provides a very insightful look into issues related to Canadian identity, media, and democracy in Digital Mosaic. The book is well researched and does an excellent job of outlining the issues that Canadians are facing in the digital age in an interesting and informative way.

References

Amanda Oye, York University