

Book Review**Boltanski, L. and Esquerre, A. (2025). *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century* (A. Brown. Trans.)**Thomas Hove Department of Advertising
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Luc Boltanski — along with co-authors such as Pierre Bourdieu and Eve Chiapello — has produced some of the most interesting sociological studies of the last 40 years. A recurring focus in his work is the “critical competences” of ordinary people. These are the social and communicative skills that people need to use when they criticize and justify one another’s claims, decisions, and actions. For example, we express judgments about matters that affect the common good of a group, organization, or society. We articulate justifications of those judgments. We answer other people’s critiques of our justifications, and we test the validity of theirs. These competences were most extensively schematized in the brilliant *On Justification* (1991/2006), which Boltanski co-authored with Laurent Thévenot. *The Making of Public Space* is Boltanski’s second recent collaboration with Arnaud Esquerre, and it explores the critical competences that people exercise when they discuss the news.

At center stage in this book are the relations between two social processes — *turning into current affairs* and *politicization*. Turning into current affairs is the process through which journalists and others determine that certain events qualify as news. Politicization is the process through which people decide whether the issues featured in the news should be concerns for the general public and the government. In analyzing these two processes, Boltanski and Esquerre explore several related topics: the representation of time in news discourse; the characteristics of political discussion in online networks; the reasons why people care about the news; and the cross-generational dynamics of political value judgments.

In the early parts of the book, Boltanski and Esquerre provide an extensive literary-critical discussion of the basic characteristics of news

discourse as compared to historical discourse. Although this discussion would mainly be of interest to discourse analysts and historiographers, it should also interest communication and media researchers as an extension of scholarship on agenda setting and attention cycles. Instead of using the established concept of the news agenda, Boltanski and Esquerre coin their own concept of *planes of news*. Both concepts refer to the items which news organizations decide their audiences should know about, and which are featured according to their importance. While this terminological redundancy could probably have been avoided, the imagery of planes evokes a novel way of conceiving the temporal flow of different sets of news events. Empirical communication researchers might find this part of the book to be esoteric and irrelevant. But for readers who are interested in the ontology of news and the representation of time in news and historical discourse, it offers intriguing insights.

The main substance of the book is a multidimensional analysis of the nature of networked political discussion. The data for this analysis consists of two collections of Internet user comments on the news. The primary collection consists of about 120,000 subscriber comments on news articles that appeared on the website for the French newspaper *Le Monde* during September and October 2019. This time frame was chosen for its relative lack of exceptional news events in France. The secondary collection consists of about 8,000 user comments posted during January 2021 on two YouTube channels that archive French news videos from past years.

Boltanski and Esquerre claim that these collections of user comments provide an opportunity to understand the unique ways in which digital social networks — as opposed to crowds and masses — influence public opinion. They argue that the current “network moment” of public opinion formation is a new era that requires new methods of analysis. However, it also bears affinities with the “crowd moment” identified by

Gustave Le Bon and others between about 1870 and 1914, as well as the “mass moment” studied so extensively in the decades after the 1930s. One of those affinities is the widespread recognition of a new type of social formation that poses a threat to the existence of democracy: “In all three cases, a new actor is identified — crowd, mass, network — which, through its violent, blind and harmful action, threatens society and destroys the political structures that regulate it” (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2022/2025, p. 9). The authors hope that their analysis of this new form of networked public opinion can serve “the normative aim of defending democracy, which, in our eyes, is under constant threat — a threat really close to us, in fact, in the Europe of today” (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2022/2025, p. 12). The main scholarly reference points that they acknowledge are several classic studies of how people communicate about politics, especially those by Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld (1955/2005), William Gamson (1992), and Nina Eliasoph (1998). Although this study’s reference points are primarily Europe and North America, the potential threat that social networks pose to democratic movements and institutions is of course a major issue in Asia and the rest of the world.

User comments on the news are analyzed through two modes of reading, close and distant. Close reading is a well-established method of textual analysis that has traditionally been applied to poetry and fiction. In this study, close reading entails analyzing and interpreting news comments with the aim of articulating, clarifying, revealing, or explicating meanings that are vague, implied, or obscure. This approach enables Boltanski and Esquerre to illustrate and explore several topics. First, by dint of their access to both the posted comments for each *Le Monde* article and the ones that moderators rejected, they identify how commenters deal with censorship and moderation, for example by using irony or impersonal pronouns. Second, they articulate the ambivalent dynamics of the relationship

between commenters and journalists, which on the commenters' side consists of a combination of respect and contempt. Third, they make several interesting theoretical conjectures about the differences between, on one hand, the thoughts that commenters express and, on the other, the complex and imperfectly remembered amalgam of politically tinged thoughts and experiences that remain unexpressed. All of us have this mental amalgam, and Boltanski and Esquerre refer to it as our inner "mishmash" (*fatras* in French). This is yet another instance where they supply a creative new coinage, but their treatment of the topic it refers to would have benefited from comparisons to an already familiar concept. In this case, they could have explained the similarities and differences between the inner mishmash and something like the schema concept that has been so extensively studied in the fields of psychology, communication, and cultural anthropology. A notable and relevant study that shows how to do so is Claudia Strauss's *Making Sense of Public Opinion* (2012).

When Boltanski and Esquerre deploy methods of distant reading, their aim is to identify the characteristics of the comment collections in aggregate. Distant reading entails analyzing large samples of texts to find patterns in them and determine the frequencies of topics and meanings, usually with the aid of software. A distant reading method that would be familiar to media researchers is content analysis, which Boltanski and Esquerre rely on (but don't name) when they report findings such as frequencies of the nouns most used in news comments at key moments during the periods studied. Based on these findings, they carried out additional case study analyses on the politicization of three topics: medically assisted procreation, Islam, and environmentalism. Although their content analyses do not follow the same rigorous methods expected in most communication journals, they are adequate for illustrating patterns in the key topics that news commenters were thinking about

at various times. Also, by comparing patterns and frequencies of words in posts that moderators for *Le Monde* either accepted or rejected, Boltanski and Esquerre were able to infer several criteria that informed content moderation and censorship. One of their findings is that the posts most likely to be censored were not those which contained vulgarity but rather those which expressed either hostile threats and accusations against the journalists at *Le Monde* or hateful comments directed at Jews, Muslims, and immigrants.

Among the useful outcomes of these close and distant readings is the identification of several constraints of networked communication. These constraints, the authors argue, determine the content, structure, and tone of moderated news comments. One example is *the constraint of difference*, the implicit requirement to add new meanings that were not present in the original news items produced by journalists. Boltanski and Esquerre identify several ways in which commenters can add new meanings to news discourse. For example, commenters can treat a news item as a fragment that needs to be understood as part of a larger whole, such as a set of articles written by the same journalist. They can question the adequacy of journalists' interpretations of events. They can suggest unacknowledged hidden intentions behind a news item, usually by charging its author with conscious or unconscious bias. They can refer to causes or consequences of an event that the journalist did not acknowledge. While these commenter activities would be familiar to anyone who regularly reads online news and social media, Boltanski and Esquerre's achievement is to fit them into a detailed and insightful classification scheme.

One seemingly small issue that the authors link to more significant matters is commenters' decision whether to identify themselves with a pseudonym or with their real names. At stake in this decision is a trade-off between freedom versus social recognition. Commenters who use

pseudonyms have more freedom to express their inner mishmash of political views, and to maintain views that are ambivalent and not entirely coherent. However, the cost of this freedom is a reduced likelihood of achieving recognition and authority. Those social distinctions are more likely to be earned by commenters who express their political views under their real names. But the possible costs of doing that include the responsibility to justify and defend one's views from criticism, as well as the risk of straining relations with the significant others in one's life.

When Boltanski and Esquerre turn to the issue of how political discussion relates to actual events, they address the key questions that media researchers have explored since at least the 1920s, when they were famously raised by Walter Lippmann: Why do people take the time and effort to pay attention to political news? Why do people become interested in events that take place in distant centers of power that are mostly inaccessible to them? Why do people care about those events and try to influence one another's opinions about them?

The answers offered in this book center on the concept of politicization. To recall, politicization is the process through which people exercise their critical competence to determine whether an issue or event is something that affects the general public and needs to be addressed by the government. Participating in the communicative tests that determine which issues qualify as political is one of the main purposes of commenting on the news. Issues which do not qualify as political are instead viewed as matters of personal choice, private morality, or common sense. The "public space" referred to in the English version of the book's title echoes Habermas's concept of *Öffentlichkeit*, which is usually translated in English as *public sphere* and in French as *espace public*. (The original French title would be more accurately translated as *What is Political News?*) Boltanski and Esquerre note that the concept of the public varies across cultures,

and for that reason they use it more loosely than Habermas and others. Rather than strictly defining the boundaries between public and private, they are more interested in understanding politicization as the process through which people negotiate these boundaries.

When Boltanski and Esquerre explain how politicization relates to people's motivations to take interest in the news, they refer to another concept commonly used in Habermas's work, *the lifeworld*. While in Habermas's work the lifeworld refers to various parts of our lives that differ from macrosocial economic and bureaucratic systems, in Boltanski and Esquerre's usage it refers to the parts of our lives that we can access and experience directly. The events in our lifeworld, accordingly, differ from the events that are accessible to us only through the media. To explain why news commenters take such intense interest in events outside their lifeworld, Boltanski and Esquerre argue that they are motivated by a desire to "exist socially, i.e. to gain recognition for and to maintain an authority attached to their name" (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2022/2025, p. 152). This desire arises especially when people feel they have lost the power to influence the events and the other people in their lifeworld, for example in the areas of work, sexual relations, or family life. One way to have such an influence is to affect other people's judgments about the news.

This argument about why ordinary people become invested in political news is formulated in a unique way. However, it is mostly conjectural and inferential, growing as it does out of the authors' close readings. It would ultimately need more substantiation, for example from interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, and surveys. And yet again, it could have been more satisfyingly developed if the authors had been more familiar with communication scholarship, particularly James Carey's (1988) ideas about the ritual view of communication.

Two other research traditions that Boltanski and Esquerre could have usefully incorporated

into their discussion of politicization are those on agenda building and framing. Similar to agenda building theory (Cobb et al., 1976), politicization refers to the social processes through which problems become recognized as issues that affect the common good and are accordingly the responsibility of the government. Similar to the framing contests analyzed by Entman (2003) and others, politicization involves activities such as disputing which social problems deserve public attention, making accusations about the causes of those problems, and advocating the best solutions for them.

Most of Boltanski's books can be obscure on a first reading, and they have a steep learning curve. He and his French co-authors tend to write in a dense style, one aspect of which is coining idiosyncratic new concepts when similar concepts already exist. Nevertheless, their theories, commentaries, and empirical findings reliably offer new insights about the variety of critical competences that people need to exercise in different types of social situations. In Anglo-American scholarship on news and political communication, a classic that bears many affinities with *The Making of Public Space* is Murray Edelman's *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (1988). Admirers of that book would likely be interested in this one because they both offer penetrating, if not fully substantiated, accounts of agenda setting, the dynamics of news attention cycles, the sociology of news, and the formation of public opinion. Several of this book's findings could be further tested with more rigorous empirical methods. For example, what proportion of news comments focus on the facts that happened versus the meanings of those facts? What are the most frequent ways in which commenters try to supplement the meanings of news articles? Are comments written by users who use their actual names more likely to be sincere or ironic? Although such issues may seem small in scope, this book explains how they fit into a broader framework. In doing so, it contributes to

our understanding of larger issues such as the role of news in people's lives and the social processes that determine which events and problems should concern the general public.

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