H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas Birkner. *Das Selbstgespräch der Zeit: Die Geschichte des Journalismus in Deutschland 1605–1914.* Köln: Herbert von Halem Verlag, 2011. 429 S. ISBN 978-3-86962-045-9.

Reviewed by Marcel Broersma

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (April, 2014)

Thomas Birkner has set himself an ambitious task in *Das Selbstgespräch der Zeit*. The book, based on his dissertation defended in Hamburg, embarks to analyze the genesis of "modern journalism" in Germany between 1605 and 1914. Following Robert Prutz (1845) and his advisor Siegfried Weischenberg, Birkner argues that the primary function of journalism is to facilitate and organize how a society communicates with itself. Journalism only enters modernity when it fulfills this function and has established itself as a key sense-making practice. Consequently, Birkner does not treat journalism in isolation, as happens so often in journalism history, but rightfully argues that it should be studied as history of society (*Gesellschaftsgeschichte*). This approach results in a very rich book that is focused and encompassing at the same time.

To discuss the development of journalism in the broader context of German history over more than three hundred years, Birkner combines Weischenberg's model for studying journalism with Hans-Ulrich Wehler's approach to the history of society. This translates into a grid in which the realms of politics and law, social structures and culture, economy and technology are related to journalism institutions, agents and texts. In each chapter, these various topics are discussed which gives the book a clear but also slightly rigid format. It does allow Birkner, however, to partly overcome the classic dichotomy between structure and agency that is still present in many histories of journalism that discuss either one or the other. Both the *avant-garde* of innovative journalists and the long term establishment of production routines and textual conventions that structure the news industry are dealt with effectively. The research clearly shows that this is a fruitful approach although it would probably pay off even more in a case-study that is more limited in time and scope. This would allow for a more detailed analysis of the interplay between journalistic agents and the structures they work in and with. Birkner suggests that Pierre Bourdieu's field theory might be a good theoretical framework to study this in historical perspective – which I second –, but he does not fully take up the challenge. That

being said, he is right to propose this as an excellent idea for further research.

Birkner's most important contribution to scholarship is that he synthesizes existing studies in a compelling argument on the longitudinal development of German journalism. He builds upon a vast body of earlier studies on German press history and smoothly weaves an impressive amount of these in-depth studies on individual newspapers, journalists and topics into his broader argument about the rise to modern journalism. To frame the German case in a transnational perspective, he engages with international debates on notions such as objectivity. In addition, some empirical research has been done on the evolution of textual conventions and genres, and on trade literature.

Birkner distinguishes between four periods of various lengths. He argues that journalism came into being between 1605 and 1848, took shape between 1848 and 1873, was further developed until 1900, and became fully "modern" between the turn of the twentieth century and the First World War. Two assumptions underlie this history. The first one is that "modern journalism" is "professional" journalism. For this to be true, it necessitates journalism developing a set of norms and practices that sets it apart from other fields in society like business and politics. These features should institutionally feed into professional organizations like unions, associations and journalism programs and have to be embodied by those who consider themselves part of the profession. The second assumption, following from the first, is that modern journalism is always practiced in the context of a newsroom. Birkner argues that it presupposes the differentiation of specific roles in the news industry and a distinct group of people in a news company who can focus solely on distinctive editorial tasks. Until the second half of the nineteenth century the large majority of newspapers were produced by one person, usually the publisher himself, who could be considered a "proto-journalist" at the most.

The focus on modernization and professionalization as guiding concepts can easily lead to a normative, anachronistic and teleological, or "Whig", interpretation of history in which journalism develops quite linearly towards a preferred and predestined outcome. James Curran, Narratives of media history revisited, in: Michael Bailey (ed.), Narrating Media History, London 2009, pp. 1–21. Its past is then interpreted as a long and self-evident road from a partisan press to press freedom. This presupposes the rise of an autonomous profession that liberates itself from political and economic constraints and has embraced active reporting, the objectivity regime, and the routines and formal conventions resulting from it. Although Birkner demonstrates that he is conscious about this critique, he cannot completely escape the persuasiveness of this "transnational grand narrative of journalism history" Marcel Broersma, From Press History to the History of Journalism. National and Transnational Features of Dutch Scholarship, in: Medien & Zeit 26 (2011), No 3, pp. 17–28. when he, for example, writes: "Die aus der politischen Umklammerung resultierende Parteilichkeit im Journalismus sollte sich dabei als massives Hindernis bei der Modernisierung und Professionalisierung erweisen, denn sie trennte die Journalisten voneinander und verhinderte so auch die Entstehung eines gemeinsamen Selbstverständnisses." (p. 151)

In addition, although every periodization of history is to a certain extent debatable, the first period in Birkner's account, covering almost 250 years, is quite long. It not only raises the question if it can be considered a coherent entity, but the dynamics of journalism might be more complicated to disregard it as "unvollkommen" (imperfect). The press was indeed in all respects very much hedged in by politics, but I would argue that it still made a valuable contribution to political and social consciousness. Similarly, it is questionable if

1914 really marked the start of the "Century of (modern) Journalism". One can first wonder if it had not set in already and second if the professionalization project had really been finished in 1914. Birkner cites Jürgen Osterhammel and Jane Chapman who argue that journalism did not change fundamentally during the twentieth century. Although it is right that many of the political, technological, economical and socio-cultural impediments that hampered the free flow of information had disappeared and journalism had to a certain extent developed distinctive norms, practices and textual conventions, I would argue that it was by no means finalized. In this sense, it is a bit of a shame that this study stops in 1914. Especially the interwar years seem to have been constitutive for many features that we now consider inextricably linked to "modern" journalism.

Nevertheless, Birkner has produced a thoroughly impressive work that makes a compelling argument to interpret the history of journalism. He clearly shows that he not just masters this broad topic but also demonstrates how and why journalism history should pay attention to the institutional, sociological and textual levels to successfully study the transformation of journalism in its broader societal contexts. It would be very welcome if this book would be translated into English and made available for an international audience.

Citation: Marcel Broersma. Review of Birkner, Thomas. *Das Selbstgespräch der Zeit: Die Geschichte des Journalismus in Deutschland 1605–1914*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. April, 2014.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=41600