

Hermeneutics for an anti-hermeneutic age: What the legacy of Jesús Martín-Barbero means today

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journals.sagepub.com/home/mcs**Nick Couldry** 

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Abstract

This article, after discussing the obstacles to the initial reception of Martín-Barbero's work on mediation in Europe, analyses its importance to contemporary media research in terms of three factors: mediation, inequality and complexity. Far from being less relevant today, those insights, and Martín-Barbero's overall insistence on a hermeneutic approach to understanding culture are of huge relevant today in an age when the automation of cultural production and data extraction is characterized by an anti-hermeneutic drive.

Keywords

anti-hermeneutic, complexity, hermeneutics, inequality, Jesús Martín-Barbero, media studies in Europe, media studies in Latin America, mediation

Jesús Martín-Barbero was the most important figure in the first 75 years of media and communications research. In this article, I want to defend and explore that claim, but I should note at the outset that even to make such a claim means turning the standard histories of communications research inside out. For those histories have been entirely dominated by North American (especially US) and European (especially UK) voices, as

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a result of which Jesús Martín-Barbero's work is still barely recognized in mainstream debates, let alone appreciated, at least outside Latin America.

It is therefore only in an indirect way that I'll be reflecting here on the importance of Jesús Martín-Barbero to European media and communications research. For it is exactly a Eurocentric approach that needs to be challenged if we are to see clearly the wider implications of Jesús Martín-Barbero's; for sure, such a narrow Eurocentric approach to the history of our field will not survive contact with the brilliance of his writings. I will of course, as an academic based on Europe, be writing this article from a European perspective, but a European perspective that reaches out for the sort of *global comparative* frame that Jesús Martín-Barbero championed, a frame in which it is possible to recognize many worlds without prioritizing any one over another (Couldry, 2019). Eurocentrism is more than just bad history: it represents a deeper fault in how knowledge has been produced globally. The very notion of Europe as a coherent project with somehow a privileged status in knowledge production is, as Enrique Dussel argued, the result, and not, as colonizers so often claimed, the cause, of European powers' colonization of other parts of the world, initially Latin America, five centuries ago. It is essential finally to decentre a European perspective for another more personal reason too: that Martín-Barbero himself, as a Spaniard with a European education in philosophy and hermeneutics, chose to leave Europe and settle in Colombia five decades ago.

My goal in developing these thoughts is to highlight one fundamental aspect of Jesús Martín-Barbero's work which was his commitment to hermeneutics. His doctorate at the University of Louvain was conducted under the great hermeneutic scholar Paul Ricoeur, but his whole work, especially the many editions of his masterpiece *De Los Medios a Las Mediaciones* (1987, translated into English as *Communication, Culture and Hegemony*, 1993), was an actualization, across the broadest canvas, of a hermeneutic approach to the complexity of media, culture and society.

There is a reason why emphasizing this hermeneutic approach is particularly important today in the early 21st century. That is because hermeneutic readings of the world today face a huge challenge: not so much from academic fashion, although fashion in the shape of the recent dominance of Actor Network Theory and its variants has been one factor, but more from fundamental shifts in the production of culture and social space through software and computer networks. In a world of algorithmic power, I want to argue, the *anti-hermeneutic* is a real force to be reckoned with, and this means that we need a hermeneutics *of* the anti-hermeneutic (Couldry, 2014) as a key tool for living and continued solidarity. That, paradoxically but excitingly, is where one key contribution of Jesús Martín-Barbero's work lies today.

Jesús Martín-Barbero and the challenge to US quantitative communications research

It would be hard to know it from mainstream histories of communications, at least until recently, but Latin America was one of the key places from which the dominant tradition of communications research represented in those histories was challenged and shown to be inadequate. Jesús Martín-Barbero was not the only Latin American scholar to do this, and others have recently been championed such as the Argentinian sociologist Eliseo

Verón who developed a theory of mediatization (Scolari et al., 2021) But Martín-Barbero is the Latin American writer who had broadest impact in media and communications debates in Latin America.

By dominant traditions in communication research, I mean the overwhelmingly quantitative tradition of researching communications, championed by US universities but also with strong participation from European and Asian universities, that has focussed primarily on the measurable effects of the *transmission* of communication contents. The challenge came from many places around the world, including Europe via the work of Ien Ang, Stuart Hall, David Morley and Roger Silverstone. There was some, if much more limited, support from the USA itself: first via the work of the great journalism scholar James Carey and, from a very different direction, via the work of another giant of the past 75 years of communications research, Elihu Katz. Katz is particularly interesting because, while he contributed to much of the mainstream communications work in the 1950s, his anthropology-influenced work on media events (with French scholar Daniel Dayan) called for a much broader reading of media's role in society.

All these writers focussed on various ways around what Carey called a 'ritual' view of communication, that is, a concern not with the crude transmission of media contents, but with the role that processes of communication have in sustaining societies and cultures in time and across space (Carey, 1983).

It was however Martín-Barbero who provided the clearest formulation of what was missing in US quantitative research's view of the world, and the richest demonstration of why such research *must* be inadequate to explaining why the processes we call 'media' matter. Martín-Barbero's (1993) core point was to challenge head-on such research's treatment of media as a discrete 'object' of study. As he put it, 'We had to lose sight of the "proper object" [of media research] in order to find the way to *the movement of the social in communication*, to communication in process' (p. 203, added emphasis). Or, as he formulated it more dramatically, generating the title of his book, it is a matter of 'placing the media *in the field of mediations*, that is, in a process of cultural transformation that does not start with or flow from the media but in which they play an important role' (p. 139, added emphasis). It is perhaps a mark of how little his research was initially understood in Europe that the English translation relegated the book's main title *De Los Medios a Las Mediaciones* to a subtitle.¹

Mediation, inequality and complexity

Let me break down Martín-Barbero's challenge to communication orthodoxy into three major points.

The first and most fundamental point is that communication always involves *mediation*. Communication is never a direct interface between people; it always passes through the medium of language, and of any number of technological media of communications, media that profoundly shape our possibilities for communicating and being. This point Martín-Barbero drew from his doctoral supervisor, the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, but it also reflected the work of Paulo Freire that, more broadly, has been so vital to the strong development of citizens' media in Latin America. This foundational interest of Martín-Barbero's not just in discrete things such as particular media messages or articles,

but in a broader process of communicating in and through society lies at the root of more recent moves towards ‘practice theory’ in communications research (Stephansen and Treré, 2021). But the concept of mediation itself, the vehicle for this reorientation of narrowly instrumental communications research, found a parallel in the British media sociologist Roger Silverstone’s interest in mediation, work that I can vouch from personal knowledge² was developed for a long time without any knowledge of Martín-Barbero’s work, inspired more by the work of Carey and other US and European anthropological approaches to media.

The second point of Martín-Barbero’s critique of mainstream communications research derived from his profound attention to *inequality*: economic inequality, as reflected for example in the forces that drove people to migrate across territory and borders (Peruvian migrants pay a significant role in his book, via his reflections on the work of Rosa María Alfaro), but also symbolic inequality, that is, inequality in the distribution of voice and the opportunity to speak and be heard. In fact, the crucial chapter 9 of *Communication Culture and Hegemony* (entitled ‘The Methods: From Media to Mediations’) starts with the question of inequality and a powerful quotation from Brazilian writer Roberto da Matta:

For me, it is basic to study the ‘&’ that ties the mansion to the slum dwelling, and the enormous, terrible, fearsome space that relates the dominant to the dominated. (Da Matta, 1985, quoted Martín-Barbero, 1993: 187)

This quote has always deeply impressed me.

But full recognition of social inequality, and a willingness to listen to the expanded field of experience to which it necessarily gives rise, generates a third key point in Martín-Barbero’s critique of mainstream media research: the question of *complexity*.

For Martín-Barbero, the world made up of mediations is irreducibly rich in its meanings and perspectives. To use language that was only just becoming fashionable when Martín-Barbero’s book was published, mediation is a non-linear process: when the researcher tries to cut into it, by entering the field, she *must* be ready to find more complexity than her earlier readings of the world’s traces suggest. In other words, choosing to research communications – decades of media-as-transmission research notwithstanding – means taking seriously the epistemological complexities inherent in the domain of communications.

Martín-Barbero (1993) himself wrote of needing ‘a night-time map to explore the new territory’ of mediations (p. 212). Such inherent complexity is obvious and unavoidable, when you start out from the actual processes of communication and mediation on the ground, that is, when you ask: ‘What do the people do with what they believe, with what they buy, with what they see?’ (p. 82). Far from being a naïve descriptivism, this practice-focussed approach attends to the actual complexity of lived experience. There is in fact a lot in common between Martín-Barbero’s work and Raymond Williams’ insistence on listening closely to ‘ordinary’ culture, even within an approach that was, overall, much more sympathetic to political economy and Marxism than Martín-Barbero’s.

Two further implications of Martín-Barbero’s insistence on complexity are also worth bringing out. One is that, if we recognize the inherent value and distinctiveness of how

meanings are generated and how social life is mediated *here* rather than there, we must be committed to an open-ended comparative approach. There *can* be no Archimedean point from which ‘the whole’ culture of our experiences with media is viewed and grasped: in fact, there is no ‘whole’ to grasp at all, because experience is irreducibly fractured. Yet this insistence on the *basic need* for comparative research is still only very partially addressed in communications research, in part because of the economic concentration of the global publishing industry.

Another implication of Martín-Barbero’s appreciation of complexity is the need to deconstruct universalizing cultural narratives from the perspective of actual lived experience. Martín-Barbero had in fact, as Rincón and Marroquín (2020) recently pointed out, been attentive to this issue from his 1972 doctoral thesis, that sought to challenge what he called ‘the interiorization of the cultural arbitrary’. Here Martín-Barbero’s work intersects again with that of Raymond Williams and David Morley, as well as the work of Stuart Hall. I’ll come back to the question of the popular later.

I could easily spend the rest of this essay unpacking the continued relevance of those three levels in Martín-Barbero’s insistence on a hermeneutic approach to media culture, as it is lived and as it develops in particular historical and social contexts. But I want instead to affirm this point in a different way, by considering a serious challenge to hermeneutic approaches today that has emerged in the past two decades out of the transformation of media and cultural production. I am referring here to the rise of big data and digital platforms.

Today’s hermeneutic challenge: the rise of the anti-hermeneutic

I have told the story of Martín-Barbero’s core perspective on media and communications without using one term that to Latin American scholars might seem essential: the popular, or *lo popular*. There is no question that the main way Martín-Barbero applied his underlying insights, described rather abstractly in the last section in terms of mediation, inequality and complexity, was through his reflections on the role of popular culture in modern ‘mass’ societies. For Martín-Barbero (1993), it was the failure of many armchair European critical theorists to stand on the *ground* of everyday experience that led to an unnecessary pessimism about culture which he suggested derived not from empirical analysis but from ‘a very particular personal situation and a particular experience of cultural degradation and political impasse’ (p. 59). Martín-Barbero (1993) was determined not to repeat that mistake, and that insistence marks the start of his book’s long main arc of argument:

When, at last, the critique of the crisis is beginning to declare a crisis in the critique, then it is the moment to redefine the field of debate itself. (p. 61)

Martín-Barbero’s insistence on the centrality of *lo popular* remains a massive source of inspiration among Latin American communications researchers (Pertierra and Salazar, 2020). The importance of this tradition of research in to popular culture is obvious in a world of ever-rising inequality, risk and insecurity which divides ever more sharply the experience of most people from that of elites.

It would certainly be possible to celebrate Martín-Barbero's great work by continuing to mine this insight. For the forms of *lo popular* do not stop growing. But I have chosen not to formulate Martín-Barbero's fundamental perspectives on media that way, and there is a reason. The reason is that I believe that his basically recuperative approach to popular culture faces today a deep challenge, a challenge on which I reflect in the rest of this article. That challenge comes from an astonishing recent development whose implications are still barely registered in cultural theory. I mean the possibility that emerged from the early 1990s onwards that commercial corporations could not only produce specific cultural contents (like films or TV shows or newspapers) for circulation in everyday life, but that they could do something much more radical: that is, to actually *build the very terrain on which* everyday life is lived, and where sociality plays out. And more, because those corporations control every parameter of that new software-based terrain, to control to a large degree the types of action and signal that are possible and incentivized in that new social terrain. I am referring here of course to the rise of digital platforms, especially social media, and to those platforms' reliance on a particular type of business model that is targeted to produce so-called 'engagement'.

What is engagement? It sounds as if it might be exactly the space of popular interpretation and creativity that Martín-Barbero sought to celebrate in *lo popular*. But it is not that at all. It is an instrumentalized version of everyday emotion and connection that is most likely to generate moments of attention, from which, if they can measure it, platform owners seek to generate advertising revenue or other forms of economic value.

This platformed transformation of the very space of *lo popular*, and indeed of 'the everyday', makes ever more urgent Lefebvre's (1991) insistence, made originally in the 1950s, on the need to foreground in everyday experience the contradictions, driven by political economy and large-scale institutional forces, that lie at its heart. Yes, this is the very opposite of how Martín-Barbero wanted us to think about the space of *lo popular* and indeed also Michel de Certeau whose famous distinction between external *strategies* of power (driven by large institutions that seek to govern everyday life) and the infinitely flexible and open space of popular *tactics* Martín-Barbero drew on closely (De Certeau, 1984, discussed Martín-Barbero, 1993: 81–82). More and more contemporary critics however are becoming concerned that the very architecture of digital platforms is enabling new types of behavioural influence: one legal scholar called this the 'hypernudge' (Yeung, 2017).

This vast transformation of the spaces and textures of everyday culture is primarily a product of US capitalism and information culture (Silicon Valley), but its direction is being reinforced and even extended by Chinese platforms such as TikTok. TikTok is significant not just because of its swiftly-acquired one billion global users, but because it has replaced a business model derived from exploiting the users' 'social graph' – a representation, even if a distorted reduced one, of the actual networks of its users – with a different business model, based on creating entire new foci of taste through the unfolding predictions of the TikTok algorithm.

In all of this, Martín-Barbero's reference-point is a basically liberal conception of cultural markets that, however driven by large-scale political economy, still must leave spaces for consumer reaction and interpretation becomes itself open to challenge. Perhaps indeed the intersections between this new hyper-competitive social space and authoritarian culture, at least at the margins, are not entirely surprising. What are

the implications of this for how Martín-Barbero (1993) framed his argument about *lo popular*? Arguably it requires a major reframing. For his formulation of the need to place ‘media in the field of mediations’ was developed explicitly as a comment on the transformative power of US popular culture when it began to be exported by US ‘free enterprise’ imperialism on a global scale, not least across Latin America (p. 140). For Martín-Barbero (1993), media markets generated commercially-produced texts that somehow depended on leaving open within them a space for popular interpretation that would generate not just enthusiasm but narrative innovation, as classically with the telenovela. The outcome was Martín-Barbero’s classic and profoundly positive reading of the open text: ‘the text is no longer the machine that unifies heterogeneity, no longer a finished product, but a competitive space crossed by different trajectories of meaning’ (p. 214). But does this basically positive reading of the spaces markets leave open for popular intervention work on the same terms today?

This new type of algorithmic social space is shaped by a very different type of popular production from that which prevailed in the age of unrivalled broadcast media. Without going into detail, let me just mention some of the disturbing properties of how algorithmic platforms shape the popular. They build their population through a series of operations that bypass earlier ideas of social interrelations. Their new form of ‘social knowledge’ splits up discourse populations: the groups that could once be talked about as populations for various purposes. It fractures the space of discourse, depicting its data subjects in ways that don’t connect any more with the space of action and thought in which actual individuals think they live; and it stretches the time of discourse, aggregating action-fragments from any moment in the stream of a person’s recorded acts into patterns that bear little relationship to how those people *themselves* understand the sequence and meaning of their actions.³

Combine all this and we risk unravelling the social itself, or at least (since the institutions that benefit from it will go on telling us that we remain through them in social relations) we risk unravelling a social world that *works for* hermeneutics. We can’t therefore avoid the question of how to make hermeneutic sense of a social world that is, in part, formed by machines, not humans. A world whose very spaces have characteristics – speeds, gradients, topographies – that are designed to optimize what counts as ‘engagement’ for commercial corporations. How do we make sense hermeneutically of social spaces which have been created precisely so that what goes on in them can be tracked, nudged and, in important respects, managed by the platforms that built those spaces? How, in a phrase, do we go on conducting a hermeneutic of the *anti-hermeneutic*?

Some theorists are already theorizing this new platformed social media world as one where capital works *directly* on the soul, on people’s nervous systems and psyches (Lazzaratto, 2014), so bypassing the possibility of any hermeneutics, bypassing indeed the very human capacities that hermeneutics was designed to interpret in action. This response to a world of algorithmic power is surely inadequate, because it merely mimics the deformations of social texture that it seeks to diagnose (Leys, 2011). In effect, this approach offers us an anti-hermeneutic *of* the anti-hermeneutic, an approach in which all hermeneutic interpretation is redundant. But at least such despairing responses throw into relief that what we actually need for critical thought today is something *prima facie* paradoxical: the hermeneutic of the anti-hermeneutic at which I hinted from the start of this article.

Conclusion

As yet, we don't know what such a hermeneutic would look like beyond the merest outline. But, for sure, it will need to take account of the explosion of political economy critiques of our anti-hermeneutic world (for example Couldry and Mejías, 2019; Zuboff, 2019).

In closing I want to emphasize that such political economy approaches – and indeed critical data studies approaches more broadly – remain still in dialectic with Martín-Barbero's work. For we must go on attempting to make interpretative sense of the potentials but also the closures of a world where we play out our social lives within spaces dynamically shaped by algorithmic power.

Interesting work is emerging, for example, around 'refracted publics' (Abidin, 2021) or around social movement cultures (Barassi, 2015) that reflects these tensions. Yes, much work is content to simply describe the operations of particular platforms without bridging the gap to a wider hermeneutic understanding of what our platform interactions *mean*.

This takes me to a final question about the enduring challenge posed by Martín-Barbero's remarkable work. Does algorithmic culture constitute the limit of his hermeneutics? Or is it exactly by *holding on* to Martín-Barbero's hermeneutic vision of how we research media culture and society under hostile conditions that we have the best chance of finding the path that will take us to a clearer view of what resistance would look like?

My wager is on the second possibility. For I believe that it is exactly in framing for us the challenge of building a new hermeneutics adequate to the complexities, contradictions and profound inequalities of a world of algorithmic power that Martín-Barbero's work continues to lay down challenges that we will need to confront for decades to come. Perhaps indeed it is exactly by still insisting on a hermeneutic approach to an anti-hermeneutic age that his work can help us grasp what, recalling Roberto da Matta, we might call 'the enormous, terrible, fearsome space' that ties today's social life to the algorithmically-driven power of giant 'social media' platforms like Facebook, WeChat and TikTok.

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1. That said, huge credit must go to scholars like the USA's Robert White and the UK's Philip Schlesinger who respectively edited the book series and wrote the introduction to the Translation, when it came out.
2. Around about 2002 or 2003, I introduced Roger Silverstone to Martín-Barbero's book and he was delighted to find the many overlaps.
3. I draw here on the argument of Couldry (2014).

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