

Book review

Thompson, J. B. (1995). *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media*. Polity Press.

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Notwithstanding more than a century of research, academic debates, and evidence of employability among those who study it (Weale, 2024), the media continue to grapple with their stigma of being a “Mickey Mouse” field of study. Only a few years ago, for instance, a BBC presenter famously stated that “five minutes” were enough to understand everything about the media (Price, 2019). Perhaps for this reason, when I told colleagues that I was asked to review *The Media and Modernity*, some immediately praised this book for taking its subject of inquiry “seriously.” It is noteworthy that these—and other, more critical—opinions were pronounced three decades after John B. Thompson’s work was published, evidencing its enduring relevance and capacity to inspire discussions among media and communication scholars.

The Media and Modernity had social theorists as its primary audience. According to Thompson, these had largely dismissed the media as a subject worthy of examination, focusing instead on the legacy of Marx, Weber, and others who stressed processes of secularisation and rationalisation but overlooked the role of communication media. Addressing this gap, Thompson argued in an authoritative, robust, and refined fashion that the emergence of institutions and technologies known as the media—which range from printing presses to digital platforms—is among the key factors explaining the formation, development, and features of modern societies. Far from looking at them as a trivial matter, the book held that the media created novel forms of action and interaction that dramatically altered the experience of space and time, with consequences for the pursuit and exercise of political power, the shape of civic life, the significance of tradition, as well as the nature of personal and collective identities. In dialogue with the ideas of not only Marx and Weber but also Habermas, Bourdieu, Foucault, Goffman, and many others, Thompson took the study of the media to a more sophisticated level, away from discussions about effects or technologies, situating it instead within broader patterns of social transformation and action.

Other than references to Innis, McLuhan, Dayan, and Katz, and a few selected others, Thompson engaged comparatively little with the work of media scholars. However, it is among the latter, rather than social theorists, that the impact and limitations of *The Media and Modernity* have been more clearly felt. Thompson's ideas regarding the transformation of visibility in contemporary societies—expanded in subsequent works (see 2005)—have been particularly influential, feeding discussions on topics such as promotional cultures, representation, and algorithmic power (e.g., Bucher, 2018; Jiménez-Martínez and Edwards, 2023; Orgad, 2012). Likewise, although his concept of “mediatization of culture” (p. 46) did not take off, his observation that the media introduced new patterns of social interaction and communication was useful in subsequent debates on “mediation” and “mediatization” (e.g., Couldry, 2008). Media scholars have also highlighted some of the shortcomings of his arguments, such as the lack of a deeper engagement with how audiences respond, counteract, and rebel against the processes of ideology and hegemony that have concerned a substantial part of Thompson's work (Livingstone, 1997).

Thirty years after its publication, *The Media and Modernity* still has plenty to offer to the field of media and communications. In addition to the above points, reflections on the mediation of political scandal remain both relevant and a suitable framework to examine events such as the Partygate episode that wrecked the premiership of Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom. Warnings about how the fragile media visibility of authorities may lead to the rise of demagogues claiming to act from outside traditional politics have become worryingly prescient. Yet the passage of time also sheds light on the work's limitations. Although there is a whole chapter devoted to the globalisation of communication, there is relatively less focus on how the media contributes to naturalising the nation—perhaps the most successful modern source of identity and collective organisation (Billig, 1995). Moreover, the book was published at the outset of the global spread of the internet. While Thompson revisited his ideas on social interaction in view of developments in digital technologies (see 2020), these shifts have arguably challenged some of his assumptions about mediated visibility. In the early stages of the web, mediated visibility was characterised by an anarchic cascade of information that destabilised those in power. In recent years, however, mediated visibility has been structured in increasingly restricted ways, with social media platforms favoring public *performances* of dissent that only superficially defy dominant social arrangements (Jiménez-Martínez and Edwards, 2023).

Although Thompson never makes claims of universalism, his is an undoubtedly Western European, or at most Anglo-American, account. He only briefly touches upon the inequalities resting at the core of modernity, such as colonialism and its legacies, and largely overlooks how the processes he describes are applicable to societies portrayed as pre-modern, or as failed or alternative modernities, such

as those in Latin America (Larraín, 2011). This inevitably raises questions around the usefulness and value of his arguments beyond the West. To what extent do the alterations of time and space facilitated by the media align with, or challenge, conceptions of social life distinct from those in Europe? What impact does mediated interaction have in settings that have followed different historical and social trajectories? How to account that mediated visibility is not constituted by a single global gaze but by multiple and highly uneven ones?

Spanish-Colombian media scholar Jesús Martín-Barbero (2002) once compared his work to the role of a cartographer, drawing maps to facilitate an understanding of how processes of mediation are produced and received. This is perhaps the main, ongoing contribution of *The Media and Modernity*. Although current and future researchers will continue to refine or even elaborate new maps, Thompson's work continues to provide its readers with an extensive chart with which to navigate an uneven, perpetually changing terrain.

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