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Book section

Original citation:

Originally published in Curran, James and Morley, David, (eds.) Media and cultural theory. Routledge, Abingdon, 2005, pp. 177-194. ISBN 9780415317047

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Available in LSE Research Online: Oct 2013

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TRANSVALUING MEDIA STUDIES: OR, BEYOND THE MYTH OF THE MEDIATED CENTRE

NICK COULDRY

Media studies has become too close to, and too distant from, media, its object of analysis: too close, in that media studies readily reproduces one picture of what media are, that only makes sense if you stand close up to the highly centralised media forms we have until recently taken for granted; too distant, in that this myopia prevents media studies from grasping the broader landscape of how media do, and do not, figure in people's lives.

In this chapter, I will, first, diagnose several forms of this problem which each contribute to a phenomenon stretching well beyond media studies: the social construction I call 'the myth of the mediated centre' (cf Couldry, 2003). I will then describe how the landscape of media studies might look, if it were free of that myth, offering, if not a new paradigm for media studies, at least a new map of its possibilities for those tired of the old one.

Some Background

Until recently, the history of modern media has been the history of the emergence of centralised mass systems of mediation, sometimes, although not always, from more scattered beginnings. That history belongs to a wider story of the expansion of the nation-state and modern systems of government. Media studies, and equally the area of US communication studies focussed on media rather than on communication in the broader sense, emerged as disciplines whose primary object was mass media and their social consequences. Although in various ways, media studies has complicated earlier mass media models (most importantly through studying the diversity of audience interpretations), it is its original relation to centralised mass media that continues to shape its dominant interpretative frameworks and research priorities: textual analysis of media produced by large-scale media institutions, audience negotiations of those same media, the production cultures that lie behind those same media. While those areas of research are noble enough in themselves, they become an empirical problem when they block from view other regions of media production; this becomes a theoretical problem when it justifies that narrow focus by mythical claims about what is 'really' 'central' in contemporary societies; which, in turn, becomes a political problem when such theoretical bias blinds us to media's contributions to social life (and politics) beyond, or indeed within, the centralising pressures of the nation-state.

A research agenda focussed almost exclusively on the production, circulation and reception of mainstream media risks forfeiting media studies' critical edge. Its underlying assumptions miss crucial dimensions of media change. It remains uncertain (and will be for a long time) whether expanding opportunities to make and circulate media beyond large-scale institutions (especially via the Internet), the steady globalization of media flows of all types (institutional and non-institutional), and the erosion of authority affecting the institutional clusters comprising the late modern nation-state, will, taken together, produce in time an experience of media that is radically less centralised than the one we take for granted; there are, after all, significant commercial forces attempting to close down precisely that possibility. But

there are sufficient centrifugal pressures in motion to require a vantage-point at some distance from what I call 'the mediated centre', if we want to grasp the wider landscape.

By the mediated centre, I mean the social construction of centralised media ('the media' in common parlance) as our central access-point to the 'central realities' of the social world, whatever they are. Built into this construction, I will argue, are outmoded, indeed conservative, theoretical biases which no longer explain what we need to explain, and which we must move beyond.

Removing the Roadblocks

Elsewhere, I have analysed the myth of the mediated centre and its role in underpinning the media-oriented practices I call 'media rituals' (Couldry, 2003: 45-48). This chapter considers the forms that myth takes when built into the theoretical frameworks of mainstream media studies. There are three such mythical forms: functionalism, centrism and spectacularism.

*Functionalism*¹

Functionalism, at least in any explicitly developed form, has long since died out in sociology and anthropology. Its heyday was in the 1940s and 1950s in the work of the US sociologist Talcott Parsons (1951) and the British anthropologist A. Radcliffe-Brown (1952); true, it has had a revival in Germany in the work of the sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1982), but neither Luhmann's general theory of 'autopoietic systems' nor his late work on media (1999) has yet been influential in media studies, so it is safe to consider functionalism in its traditional guise without a detailed consideration of Luhmann's more recent work. All the more striking then that, while the functionalist model is out-of-date, it lives on in media institutions' discourses about themselves (where it fulfils a direct institutional purpose: self-justification) and in academic analyses of media.

Functionalism is the idea (contentious, when stated directly) that large regions of human activity ('societies', 'cultures', and so on) can best be understood as if they were self-sufficient, complex, functioning systems. Depending on taste, the metaphor of functioning can be biological (the natural organism, such as the human body) or technological (the artificial system, such as the machine). Societies, or cultures, are conceived in functionalist accounts as complex 'wholes' formed of a series of 'parts', each of which 'functions' by contributing to the successful working of the 'whole'. Action at the level of society's or culture's 'parts' has no unanticipated effects, and even if it does, it is quickly absorbed back into the 'whole's' wider functioning through positive feedback loops.

There are many problems with functionalist attempts to model the multi-dimensionality of social and cultural practice. Looking back from the beginning of the 21st century, one obvious problem is the difficulty of conceiving any 'society' or 'culture' as a self-sufficient system, given the huge range of forces operating across societal and cultural borders (see Urry, 2000, on 'society'). This might suggest that the problems of functionalism are recent, derived from the globalizing pressures of late modernity; could functionalist models then still work, if applied cautiously and

locally? It is certainly true that national media remain an important reference-point in many, if not most, people's media universes, whatever globalisation theorists say; why not then treat functionalism as a local truth? That would be a mistake, because the problems with functionalism are more fundamental and long-standing. The main problem lies with functionalism's underlying claim that there are such totalities as 'societies' and 'culture's which 'function' as working systems. This, perhaps, seems too abstract to contest outright (but for a powerful attack on the notion of 'culture', see Hannerz (1992)); the problems become clearer when this claim is applied in detail. We need go no further than Steven Lukes' (1975) classic deconstruction of functionalist accounts of political ritual, which analyse political rituals in terms of how they contribute to society's political 'stability' by affirming certain central beliefs and values. But even if there are such centrally held beliefs and values, which Lukes questions, this account begs deeper questions about 'whether, to what extent, and in what ways society does hold together' (Lukes, 1975: 297). Is there, in other words, a functioning social 'whole' of which political rituals could be a 'part'?

A superficial attraction of functionalist arguments is that they tie up all the loose ends – until you realise the price paid in the assumptions that drive functionalism in the first place. Elsewhere I have analysed Dayan and Katz's influential (1992) account of 'media events' as a functionalist model that revives the least convincing aspects of Emile Durkheim's model of how societies hold together through collective representations (Couldry, 2003: chapter 4).² Rather than repeat that argument, let us trace functionalist symptoms elsewhere in media studies. A clear attempt at revivalism is Jeffrey Alexander and Ronald Jacobs' essay 'Mass communication, ritual and civil society' (Alexander and Jacobs, 1998). As they realise, the idea that media perform a positive social function can no longer simply mean arguing that media reproduce certain shared sets of beliefs or ideologies: how could such a simple model account for the enormous diversification of mediated publics? Instead, Alexander and Jacobs build, first, on Dayan and Katz's claim for the central explanatory importance of 'media events': 'the narrative elaboration of events and crises – understood as social dramas – is crucial for providing a sense of historical continuity in the crisis-bound, episodic constructions of universalistic solidarity that continually form and reform civil society' (Alexander and Jacobs, 1998: 23). Note that the 'whole' here is 'civil society', which Alexander and Jacobs claim is continually 'formed and reformed' by media events, and so can contribute to the wider 'whole' of society (1998: 25). Media events 'provide the cultural grounds for attachment to the social imaginary of society, and . . . plot points for updating the ongoing public narratives of civil society and nation' (1998: 28). But on what is this huge feedback loop involving media, civil society and nation based?

It is based on seeing media as providing society's principal interpretative closures:

'[Media operate] as a cultural space where actors and events become typified into more general codes (eg sacred/ profane, pure/ impure/ democratic/ antidemocratic, citizen/ enemy) and more generic story forms which resonate with the society's culture. Expressive media – such as novels or movies – are fictional symbolic forms that weave the binary codes of civil society into broad narratives and popular genres. . . . [as a result] the mass media . . . provides the cultural environment from which common identities and solidarities can be constructed.' (Alexander and Jacobs 1998: 29-30)

This is a highly problematic account of media's social role, but we must be clear about where exactly the problem lies. It does not lie in the claim that there are pressures towards 'order' and 'closure' in the contemporary social world to which media are major contributors; the whole point of analysing 'media rituals', for example, is to register such pressures. The problem lies in the assumption, first, that such pressures, when combined with everything else, produce a clear, unambiguous causal outcome and, second, that this outcome is a relatively stable social 'order'. Put less abstractly, why believe (a) that civil society is based on certain 'binary' codes at all or (b) that those binary codes' stability causes something we might call 'social stability'? Why not social instability? Stability of what exactly? And, even if we could answer that, what could serve as evidence, for or against, Alexander and Jacobs's thesis? All this remains unclear.

There is, then, plenty of indeterminacy in functionalist accounts of the media. It is this, perhaps, that allows Michael Schudson, having convincingly argued against overplaying the ideological impacts of news (1995: 17), to endorse a socially integrationist role for media institutions, while simultaneously undercutting it: '[the media's] capacity to publicly include is perhaps their most important feature. [The fact that we each read the same paper as elites] is empowering . . . the impression it promotes of equality and commonality, illusion though it is, sustains a hope of democratic life' (1995: 25, added emphasis). This is a disarmingly honest, if inevitably therefore contradictory, statement of one of liberal democracy's working assumptions. We find traces of it in later versions of Habermas' public sphere thesis (Habermas, 1996) which conceives media as a complex network of spaces for public discussion and identification; the saving grace in Habermas' case is that he intends his analysis normatively, not necessarily as the truth about how media work. It would be useful, however, to develop more complex ways for thinking about the media's social consequences: for example, Liebes and Peri's (1998) account of how in Israel there is both the multiplication of mass media melodramas and new public 'sphericules' of localised community media. The totalising tendency of functionalist explanations may miss the point entirely.

Yet functionalist explanations continue to crop up in surprising places. The standard positions in debates about stardom and celebrity culture assume, at root, that the industrial production of celebrity discourse 'must' contribute to some wider social 'function', whether we call it identity-formation or social integration or both. The classic functionalist account of stars is Alberoni (1972), but there are clear traces of such thinking in more recent accounts: Dyer (1986: 17), Reeves (1988), Lumby (1999), Turner et al (2000).³ Such approaches can also live with functionalism's indeterminacy, if in postmodern guise: 'contradictory and tainted with inauthenticity as they may be, it seems clear that celebrities perform a significant social function for media consumers' (Turner et al. 2000: 13). McKenzie Wark is even bolder: 'we may not like the same celebrities, we may not like any of them at all, but it is the existence of a population of celebrities, about whom to disagree, that makes it possible to constitute a sense of belonging' (Wark, 1999: 33, my emphasis, quoted Turner et al., 2000: 14).

The problem with such functionalism, whatever its 'postmodern' guise, is that it closes down massively our options for explaining what is actually going on, and in a

way that fits far too neatly with the social ‘functions’ relevant media institutions (film distributors, celebrity magazines, PR firms) might like to ascribe to themselves. Where is the evidence that people ‘identify’ with celebrities in any simple way, or even that they regard ‘celebrity culture’ as important, rather than a temporary distraction? The absence of empirical work in this area illustrates how functionalism can block off the routes to open-minded research.

There are still more places where we might find functionalism lurking in media studies,⁴ but instead I want to turn to two other frameworks that shore up an automatic sense of the media as social centre.

Centrism

If functionalism, at least in its original form, is quite a distinct framework for interpreting the media, ‘centrism’ is more diffuse. I mean by this term the tendency in media studies (whether in accounts of media production, distribution or consumption) to assume that it is the largest media institutions and our relationships to them, that are the overwhelming research priority, so that any media outside that institutional space are of marginal importance. Centrism closes down the field of media we analyse and (in so doing) reinforces its own validity in an endless self-fulfilling prophecy. Centrism is distinct from functionalism, since it need involve no assumption that society (as opposed to media) has a ‘centre’. It is worth also distinguishing ‘centrism’ from another problematic idea, usually called mediacentrism: the automatic assumption that media are central to explaining the dynamics of contemporary societies. The latter is a difficulty inherent to all media analysis, that needs separate discussion (see below).

Centrism is so entrenched in the media studies landscape that it may seem impolite to name it as such. It takes many forms. First, it underlies a bias towards nationally distributed media and against locally distributed media. As an example, consider that, even in a country as large as the USA, it took until 1991 for an authoritative study of local media (that is non-national media, including media focussed on catchment areas as large as Chicago) to be written (Kaniss, 1991). Local media remains a little studied area, even though for many people it is local versions of media (especially of the press) that they consume. Second, we can detect centrism at work, among other things, in media studies’ concentration on media assumed to have the largest (that is, the most centrally focussed) audiences: television and film, as opposed to the press and radio. There are off-setting factors here, of course, such as the greater ease of creating and accessing archives of press versus television and radio. But the underlying presumption, when deciding research priorities, in favour of audience size remains significant, even though it cuts across a factor that should be equally, if not more, important: the significance which particular media outputs actually play in people’s everyday practice (which may be greater, after all, for local media or highly specialised ‘cult’ media than for mass distributed media).

This leads to a third point: the relative inattention to media made and received outside the dominant systems of circulation despite the important work already done on ‘alternative media’ (Downing, 1984, 2001; Rodriguez, 2001; Atton, 2001, but note there is a large, if scattered, research tradition beyond these prominent books). A resurgence of interest in ‘alternative media’ may now be under way in the context of

new, increasingly globalised, social activism. This only sharpens the paradox of why alternative media are not given greater prominence in media research agendas (Couldry, 2002).

Inattention to alternative media is properly called centrist, rather than functionalist. An influential example is Nicholas Garnham's work. Garnham (2000: 68) has mocked the 'productivist romanticism' of visions of a less centralised system of media production such as Brecht's (1972) famous vision of an open space of radio producer/consumers; this position is rooted in a long-standing conviction that alternative media is of minimal political relevance (Garnham, 1990). This marginalisation is inadequate to a world where alternative media production, such as the Independent Media Centre movement, is integral to activism (the protests against the Seattle World Trade Organisation meetings in 1999) that has influenced mainstream policy debates, and where the anti-centrist media strategy of organisations such as the Zapatistas has influenced mainstream news agendas. The global momentum of research into alternative media can no longer be ignored, if we are interested in a comparative understanding of media's potential contribution to social change (Couldry and Curran, 2003).

Spectacularism

It is worth noting briefly a recent variant on functionalism and centrism, that also blocks our view of the contemporary media landscape: spectacularism. By this I mean the tendency, whether celebratory or critical, to treat the spectacular aspects of recent mainstream media as if they were permanent features of how mediated societies will from now on be organised.

Spectacularism too has a postmodernist version of which is anti-functionalist, since it is highly sceptical of any social 'centre' or 'essence' waiting to be 'expressed' through media spectacle. Yet such work offers a surprisingly romantic (not to say, implicitly centrist) account of the social solidarity apparently produced by media spectacle. Here is Nestor Garcia Canclini in a generally insightful argument identifying as one aspect of 'the new sociocultural scene':

'... [t]he shift from the citizen as a representative of public opinion to the consumer interested in enjoying quality of life. One indication of this change is that argumentative and critical forms of participation cede their place to the pleasure taken in electronic media spectacles where narration or the simple accumulation of anecdotes prevails over reasoned solutions to problems.' (Garcia Canclini, 2001: 24)

Or here, less cautiously (and much closer to functionalism) is Michel Maffesoli: 'television permits participants to "vibrate" together. One cries, laughs, or stamps one's feet in unison, and this, without actually being in the presence of each other, a kind of communion is created whose social effects are still to be measured' (Maffesoli, 1996: 57). As Maffesoli disarmingly notes, such effects are still to be measured! There is no unproblematic evidence for the changes Garcia Canclini and Maffesoli detect, and yet their intuition of a fundamental shift in media practice and consumption is here already reified into an upbeat rereading of Baudrillard's earlier pessimism about the age of 'simulation'.

There is no such romanticism in Douglas Kellner's important recent deconstruction of 'media spectacle' (Kellner 2003). There is a danger, even in Kellner's laudably critical account, of reproducing precisely the assumptions about the centralising power of media spectacle from which he wants to get critical distance. Thus Kellner writes that 'the celebrities of media culture are the icons of the present age, the deities of an entertainment society, in which money, looks, fame and success are the ideals and goals of the dreaming billions who inhabit Planet Earth' (2003: viii) and, later on, that 'media spectacles are those phenomena of media culture that embody contemporary society's basic values' (2003: 2) as media play 'an ever-escalating role in everyday life' (2003: 2) with 'media culture . . . the stage on which social conflicts unfold and social reality is constructed' (2003: 89, added emphasis). Clearly Kellner does not endorse centrism or spectacularism as values – quite the opposite. My point, however, is that entangled with the apparently innocent notion of 'spectacle' is a theoretical framework that is basically structural-functionalist (cf Shils, 1975). If we use terms such as 'spectacle' in media sociology, it must be with caution, and with the empirical safety valve of asking: what in fact do people think about media spectacle? Is there as much disbelief as belief? If so, in what sense are they reproductions of 'shared values'? How 'central', and for whom, is the mediated 'centre' that contemporary media spectacle tries to project? It is just such questions that functionalism, centrism, and approaches derived from them, close off.

The View is Clearing . . .

Fortunately there are theoretical developments under way, which encourage a move in this direction. 1960s and 1970s attacks on functionalism have been reinforced by post-structuralist arguments: for example, Foucault's (1980) attack on the idea that power operates through its concentration, like a substance, at particular central sites, rather than through the structured flow of practices across the whole of social space; Laclau's (1990) attack on 'society' as an impossible totality. More recently, the concept of 'society' as a container of social action has been dismantled within sociology, particular in work on globalisation. Crucial here has been Ulrich Beck's argument for a 'methodological cosmopolitanism' that analyses the social world from beyond the confines of the nation-state, without however reducing the local and national to insignificance (Beck, 2000; cf Urry, 2000). These theoretical shifts do not resolve all the issues; there is, perhaps, an implicit media-centrism in Urry's account of a 'sociology beyond societies' which ascribes automatic and drastic effects to global media flows, without enough evidence of how they take effect, on whom, and under what conditions. These difficulties aside, a crucial step is made when Beck challenges the social sciences' 'secret Hegelianism' (2000: 80) 'which sees society as derived from the state's claim to embody the principle of order'. We need an equivalent distance from media studies' 'Hegelianism' that installs national media concentrations as the only reference-point for explaining the media's social consequences. It is in this spirit that I want, shortly, to turn to a wider space of possibilities – theoretical, empirical and political – for understanding media.

Transvaluation?

First, however, I must justify this chapter's title. You might still balk at its claim of transvaluing media studies. What exactly is involved in 'transvaluation'?

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche claimed to have ‘transvalued’ conventional morality by reducing it to prejudices that were anything but moral: morality, he argued, is based not in the grand ‘values’ of fairness or justice, but in ‘rancour’ (Nietzsche, 1956 [1847]: 170). Nietzsche extended his attack to science and truth, arguing that beneath the ‘will to truth’ lay an ‘impetuous demand for certainty’, indeed the ‘physiological demands for the preservation of a certain species of life’ (Nietzsche, 1974 [1887]: 288; 1973 [1886]: 35). For Nietzsche ‘transvaluation’ means reducing a framework of thought to forces directly at odds with its self-image and professed ‘values’; through transvaluation, we can stand outside that framework and grasp a wider field of possibility (1974 [1887]: 280). We don’t have to agree with each one of Nietzsche’s transvaluations to see the general value of this approach. It has had a lasting influence through Michel Foucault’s adoption of Nietzsche’s genealogical method (Foucault, 1977): Foucault’s analysis of discourse not ‘as groups of signs . . . but as practices which systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (1972: 49) is an extended application of the principle of transvaluation.

I am not claiming, of course, to have offered anything so grand as a ‘genealogy’ of media studies: that would require a much longer historical argument. But, in offering a perspective beyond media studies’ excessive focus on the centralised systems of media production that were originally its object, I want to signal the more open field of research that results when we distance ourselves from that love of the ‘mediated centre’. ‘Transvaluation’ is a useful metaphor for this shift.⁵

Wittgenstein offers an alternative metaphor. In the course of unpicking the illusions into which language traps philosophy, Wittgenstein argues that it is the ‘preconceived idea of the crystalline purity’ of language that philosophy must transcend. What matters here is not (fortunately!) that enormous issue, but the way Wittgenstein argues we should proceed. The problem with the idea of language’s transparency, he argues, is that it is merely the effect of how we use language when trying to explain its workings, not the explanation of those workings: ‘we predicate of the thing what lies in the method of representing it. Impressed by the possibility of a comparison, we think we are perceiving a state of affairs of the highest generality’ (Wittgenstein, 1978 [1953]: 46). The situation is similar with the conventional framework of media studies. Because, having been formed within a highly centralised system of media production, we can make sense of media as necessarily centralised, we do make sense of media that way, ignoring everything beyond our usual focus. Instead we need, as Wittgenstein says, to ‘turn[] our whole examination around’ and to see the hidden connections between those old assumptions and the form of social organisation that gave rise to them - in the past, but not necessarily in the future.

This makes clear that, as well as avoiding functionalism, centrism and their recent variant, spectacularism, we must also avoid media-centrism, that is, giving undue prominence to media rather than other causal factors in explaining social phenomena (cf Martin-Barbero, 1993). If we want to understand what media do in the world, we must look beyond the standard lines of explanation that media discourses (above all, the myth of the mediated centre) encourage us to adopt.

A New Map of Media Studies

How might the landscape of media studies (both its recent past and its future research priorities) look if we jettisoned the myth of the mediated centre and explored more openly how media are produced, circulated, received and (quite possibly) ignored in the contemporary social world?

To orientate ourselves, let's be clear where we start from. First, empirical research must start out from a question, not an assumption, regarding the existence of anything like a mediated centre. We need to know much more about the relative importance in people's lives of (1) mainstream media institutions, (2) other media productions, and (3) non-media influences, and to understand better the range of variation here among individuals and sociological types. Second, as the range of media themselves increases, and the complexity of their potential interactions increases exponentially, our research can take for granted a mediated environment (in certain parts of the world at least: I come back to issues of comparative research later) that is super-saturated. While important factors close down individuals' choice of media (so generating 'ideal types' of media consumer remains possible), the range of paths that individuals might choose across the media environment is huge, including a path along which media have minimal direct significance. Third, while it is beyond doubt that the flow of media has increased absolutely, this may not be an even distribution and the task is to understand how media density differs between my living space and yours, this work environment, or leisure context, and that one.

Along these three axes – engagement, selection, spatial distribution – we need to know more, much more, about the variation between individuals' and groups' orientations to media. If we trace out a map of the resulting landscape of media research (present and future), it has two crucial landmarks (knowledge, agency) which, assuming media still wants a critical edge, imply a third (ethics).

Knowledge

By knowledge, I mean, not our knowledge of media as researchers, but the relationship between media and the social distribution of knowledge about the world. The primary question, then, is not the analysis of this or that media form, but the role, if any (and there could be huge variation here), of different media in people's acquisition and use of knowledge, including knowledge of the social world.

This is an area where much important empirical work has been done in recent years: for example, the Glasgow Media Group's work on media influence on audience understandings of public issues (see Kitzinger, 1999 for useful summary), work on media and the economy (Gavin, 1999), and on media's relation to public opinion generally (Lewis, 2001).⁶ My point here is not to condense a literature review into a few lines, but to emphasise that public knowledge is surely the issue by which media research should orient itself (cf Corner, 1995); if we cannot say anything about media's possible contribution to the distribution of knowledge of the world in which we act, then something fundamental is missing (cf Kitzinger, 1999: 17).

Yet it is clear there are a number of issues on which further research is needed: first, about the uses towards which media-sourced knowledge is put (or indeed not put) by individuals and groups across a range of real-life contexts; second, about the status of media relative to other potential sources of knowledge or authoritative information,

both when information is originally acquired and when it is later put back into circulation (in argument, in self-presentation, and so on). Third, developing from the second, we need to know much more about the less explicit, more embedded and naturalised, use of mediated 'knowledge' in everyday interaction and thought, again across of a range of contexts (including those of media production, which is where the causal loop turns back onto itself). There is value here, I suggest, in rethinking Durkheim's notion of the social 'category' to grasp the more systematic dimensions of the media's contribution to how the social world is constructed (cf Couldry, forthcoming, b). Whether Durkheim or perhaps other models help us most is of course a matter for debate, a debate needed within media studies and with sociology more generally. For if most media sociologists' gut instincts are right – and media play a significant role in influencing the circulation of knowledge – then media studies has much to contribute to a renewed sociology of knowledge. This, however, requires media studies to be more open to the social sciences in general (cf Tulloch, 2000: 19-32).

Agency

If one key focus of media research is knowledge (what do media contribute to the knowledge agents have of the world in which they act?), another is agency itself. Nicholas Garnham has expressed this perhaps better than anyone, in his critical discussion of audience research: 'the point is not whether the audience is active or passive, but rather the fields of action which are opened up or closed down' (1999: 118).⁷ Accumulating evidence about how people read or engage with this or that text is not, by itself, enough unless it contributes to our understanding of how they act in the social and personal world, with or without reference to media.

Having said this, agency must be researched at many levels, which I can only begin to sketch here. We need more research on how (under what conditions and with what result) do people exercise their agency in relation to media flows. There is the basic, but vital, question of how people select from what is potentially on offer or (more drastically) screen out media that are imposed upon them (in public or working spaces, or within the constraints of their home). There is the question also of how people allocate their attention and emotional investments among the media they happen to consume; there is a great difference between media that merely passes before us and media with which we sense a strong connection (whether public or private). Fan studies has done much to explore this difference,⁸ but the difference arises in contexts other than fandom. Such questions only become more difficult as the media environment itself becomes more complex and multilayered (see Everett, 2003 on the meanings of online 'interactivity'). We need also to understand better how media contribute to people's agency across various institutional spheres outside media. Every sphere of life requires separate study (for example, consumption, personal relations, health, education, work, politics). While some work exists on the connections between media and these non-media spheres, it is around people's orientations, specifically, to media institutions that a significant literature has grown in the 1990s, as researchers have become curious about how people think, or in some cases find it difficult to think, about their own media consumption (Press, 1991; Lembo, 2000; Seiter, 1999; Schroder, 2000; Hoover, 2003; BFI/OU 2003).

Related to agency is the more general question of how media connect to belief: people's belief about, or trust in, the authority of institutions (state, school, religious institutions). Indeed, once we drop the centralist framework criticised earlier in the chapter, the question of people's beliefs about, or even orientation towards, media institutions becomes particularly interesting (Couldry, 2000); what, for example, of those who have only a minimal orientation to media? This, in turn, raises the question of how far different media territories, operating under specific historical trajectories, are characterised by different patterns of media belief (see, for example, Rajagopal's interesting (2001) account of the new significance of centralised media in nationalist Hindu politics in India).

Finally, there is the difficult question of how media might diminish people's sense of agency. The assumption has usually been that media are at worst neutral in this regard and at best add to people's possibilities for agency (for example, Scannell, 96). This, however, ignores another possibility, which is that the structured asymmetry of media communication works to limit at least some people's sense of agency, just as happens in the structured asymmetry of work and class relations (Couldry, 2000: 22, cf Sennett and Cobb, 1972). This is one reason (but strong arguments can also be made in relation to knowledge and ethics) why alternative media must be studied: because their less asymmetrical patterns of production may generate alternative forms of agency and civic practice (Rodriguez, 2001).

In these, and no doubt many other, ways, the study of media should aim to contribute to our broader understanding of agency in the contemporary world and, in so doing, connect with important debates in the social sciences (Touraine, 1988; Dubet, 1994).

Ethics

Knowledge and agency each raise ethical and political implications, but if media studies is to remain a critical, not purely administrative, tradition of research, it must consider what explicit ethical stance it should adopt to media.

Such discussion has normally been limited to the importance of media studies taking a stance on questions of power. Much less debated and much more contentious are explicit questions of media ethics. These come into view, once we abandon the assumption that today's centralised system of media production and distribution is the only possibility; what are the ethical implications of the media we currently have? Aspects of such a debate have, of course, been under way for some time, for example in relation to Habermas' concept of the public sphere, but that debate is largely about media's contribution to political deliberation. This is not the only, or even the most, important dimension of media ethics.

The subject of ethics is the type of life it is good to lead, so an ethics of media, at its simplest, would concern the contribution of media production/ consumption, under prevailing conditions, to the good life of each person. Difficult ethical questions arise about the extent to which in societies saturated by media a good life should be a public, that is, to some degree mediated, one; difficult moral questions arise about the grounds on which it is right to impose media publicity on another without their full consent (cf O'Neill, 1990). Even more difficult ethical and moral questions arise about the long-term consequences of how media tend to cover public matters, such as war or

human disasters (Robins, 1995; Boltanski, 1999). What has been lacking so far, however, is any theoretical framework for debating such issues. From philosophy, Derrida and Stiegler (1996) have pointed in the direction of an ethics of audiovisual literacy, while Hubert Dreyfus (2001) has started debate on the ethical consequences of the Internet as a form of social interaction; from the direction of media studies, three recent books have begun to explore the implications of philosophical debates, past and present, for thinking about media and power (Garnham, 1999; Peters, 1999; Silverstone, 1999). But, as yet, there has been no systematic engagement between the relevant branches of philosophy (ethics, political theory) and media sociology. This debate is much needed, and requires a cosmopolitan perspective that takes seriously the role of media discourses in constructing the (often merely national) contexts for particular types of politics and their hidden exclusions (Isin, 2002).

It can only happen, I suggest, by building, from the side of media studies, on the questions of knowledge and agency discussed already. Here, in debates around narrative, agency and ethics (Ricoeur, 1992), textual analysis of media has much to contribute: not for its own sake, but as part of an examination of how media narratives do, and should, help us imagine our place in the world.

Concluding Note

It might seem strange to mention textual analysis only at the end of tracing a new map of media research; even stranger not to have mentioned political economy at all. But this is deliberate.

When media studies stood too close to a particular, centralised system of media production, distribution, and consumption, the primary questions were, quite plausibly: what economics drive that system, how can we analyse its outputs and people's specific interpretations of them? But without that assumed central focus, the research questions for social science inquiry into media (literary-style analysis is another matter) are necessarily decentered, and more complex: how and on what terms do certain media, rather than others, contribute to the knowledge and agency of individuals and groups in a particular social environment? And (from an explicitly ethical perspective) how, if at all, should and could things be otherwise? Political economy and textual analysis, those two dominant traditions of earlier media studies, still play a vital role, of course, in helping us answer those larger questions, but they are not our required starting-points.

Admittedly, the map I have sketched invites media studies researchers to travel much more widely than in the past across the terrain of historical and social science inquiry. The opportunity, however, for media studies by so doing to establish itself more securely within that wider terrain will, I hope, make the journey worthwhile.

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¹ For a more detailed discussion of functionalist accounts of 'ritual' in media studies, see Couldry (forthcoming, a).

² As I make clear in Couldry (2003), there are other non-functionalist ways of applying Durkheim.

³ A theoretically more complex approach is Marshall (1999), but even here note the unguarded comment at the beginning of the book: ‘Celebrity status operates at the very center of the culture as it resonates with conceptions of individuality that are the ideological growth of Western culture’ (1999: x, added emphasis). What centre?

⁴ See for example my earlier discussion of Paddy Scannell’s work (Couldry 2000: 10-12).

⁵ Note however that I intend the term in a different sense from some recent interpreters of Nietzsche who argue that his transvaluation of values removes the possibility of, or need for, critical perspective on society’s myths (Vattimo, 1992: 24-25: chapters 1-3; cf Maffesoli, 1996: 19). On the contrary, such relativising accounts of contemporary mediascapes are part of what I want to move beyond (see ‘Spectacularism’ above). I cannot, however, avoid the ambiguities built into Nietzsche’s metaphors, indeed his whole philosophical style.

⁶ Cf the essays in Gripsrud (1999).

⁷ Larry Grossberg had, from a different perspective, already made a similar point: ‘we need . . . not a theory of audiences, but a theory of the organization and possibilities of agency at specific sites in everyday life’ (1997: 341).

⁸ See Barker and Brooks (1997), Harrington and Bielby (1995) for very open-minded empirical accounts.