

Theorising Media as Practice

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This article explores the possibility of a new paradigm of media research that understands media, not as texts or structures of production, but as practice. Drawing on recent moves towards a theory of practice in sociology, this paradigm aims to move beyond old debates about media effects and the relative importance of political economy and audience interpretation, at the same time as moving beyond a narrow concentration on audience practices, to study the whole range of practices that are oriented towards media and the role of media in ordering other practices in the social world. After setting this new paradigm in the context of the history of media research, the article reviews the key advantages of this paradigm in mapping the complexity of media-saturated cultures where the discreteness of audience practices can no longer be assumed.

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Media research has been a thing of fits and starts. As we look back over more than a century of reflection on media, can we say the subject has now broken into a steady rhythm running in a clear direction? Not yet, because media research remains marked by its episodic history. The time is nonetheless ripe to attempt to formulate a new paradigm of media research that can draw together some of the more interesting recent work, but at the same time achieve a decisive break with the unprofitable disputes of the past. This new paradigm sees media not as text or production economy, but first and foremost as *practice*. Some of the stimulus for this comes from the recent growth of "practice theory" in sociology; indeed, this new paradigm insists on a much closer relationship with central debates in the social sciences than previously in media studies, with the advantage that the major contribution of media research to those wider social science debates becomes clearer.

This is no place for a history of media research. To set the scene, however, it is worth recalling that theoretical discussion about the social consequences of media goes back well into the nineteenth century (Kierkegaard 1962

[1846/1847]; Tocqueville 1994 [1835–1840]), although it remained completely marginal in mainstream sociology until after World War II with only rare exceptions (Tarde 1969 [1922]). The contemporary landscape of “media studies” is the residue of at least five distinct currents of work: first, US mass communications research (Merton, Lazarsfeld, Katz), which were set firmly in the tradition of the experimental social sciences, but took its cue from wider intellectual debates on mass media and their consequences for democracy and social order; second, critical Marxist commentary (Benjamin, Adorno), which also took its cue from mass culture debates, but within an agenda based on the critique of capitalism (this in turn developed into the political economy tradition); third, semiotic analysis, which in its dominant form developed in the context of European structuralism and post-structuralism and applied the most radical theoretical innovations of post-World-War-II literary theory to media texts; fourth, the critical research, particularly on media audiences (Hall, Morley, Ang), that emerged in Britain in close association with semiotics and Marxism, but quickly developed into a broader empirical tradition that has continued through the 1990s; and fifth, and most recently, the line of anthropological research into media that has emerged out of postmodern versions of symbolic anthropology (Ginsburg 1994; Ginsburg et al. 2002). Needless to say, there is not always common ground between these traditions: for example, the third has developed largely independently of the others with its own extensive theoretical framework drawing particularly on psychoanalysis, while the fourth is sharply critical of the first and second and has only a limited interest in the third; the fifth meanwhile has some difficulty acknowledging how much it has in common with the fourth (Abu-Lughod 1999).

These traditions disagree of course as to their primary theoretical focus: for the first, it is problems of large-scale social effects; for the second, processes of commodification; for the third, the polysemy of the text; for the fourth, the process of interpretation; and for the fifth, open-ended practices of media production, circulation, and consumption. At the same time, there are of course cross-currents: so the problems of the US mass communications field with effects have serious implications for critical theory and audience research, even if they are blissfully ignored by semiotic analysis; while the processual complexities uncovered by audience research are irrelevant for anthropological narratives of media practice. With such profusion, why call for a further paradigm? One aim is to put behind us some of the internecine disputes of the past—between audience research and Screen Theory over the determining status of the text (Morley 1980); and between audience research and political economy, over the importance of audience practices of meaning-making (Garnham 1995; Grossberg 1995). Another aim is to help clarify where might lie the epicentre of new research questions, if (as I would argue) this no longer lies directly above the media text or the media’s production economy.

The proposed new paradigm is disarmingly simple: it treats media as the open set of practices relating to, or oriented around, media.¹ The potential of this reformulation only becomes clear when we look more closely at recent debates over “practice” in the social sciences. The aim, however, can be stated directly: to decentre media research from the study of media texts or production structures (important though these are) and to redirect it onto the study of the open-ended range of practices focused directly or indirectly on media. This places media studies firmly within a broader sociology of action and knowledge (or, if you prefer, cultural anthropology or cognitive anthropology), and sets it apart from versions of media studies formulated within the paradigm of literary criticism.

Why Practice?

This proposal needs some unpacking; first, in terms of questions of media analysis and, second, in terms of questions of social theory.

Practice as an Emerging Theme in Media Research

The new paradigm decentres the media text for a reason: to sidestep the insoluble problems over how to prove “media effects” (i.e. a convincing causal chain from the circulation of a media text, or a pattern of media consumption, to changes in the behaviour of audiences). The classic version of this debate concerned cultivation analysis: cultivation analysis has been unfairly vilified for at least being explicit and methodical in its attempt to prove a causal chain between heavy television viewing and cognitive and moral shifts in those viewers, which was extremely difficult to establish at a statistically significant level (Signorielli and Morgan 1990). But hidden assumptions about “media effects” abound in media analysis and everyday talk about media. Indeed, they are hard to avoid if you start from the text itself: outside literary approaches, why else study the detailed structure of a media text as your primary research focus unless you can plausibly claim that those details *make a difference* to wider social processes? But it is exactly this that is difficult to show. As Justin Lewis put it:

The question that should be put to textual analysis that purports to tell us how a cultural product ‘works’ in contemporary culture is almost embarrassingly simple: where’s the evidence? Without evidence, everything else is pure speculation. (Lewis 1991, 49)

It is better, surely, to focus our research paradigm somewhere else.

1. A few years ago, I expressed this in terms of the study of “the culture of media belief” but this now seems to me too limited in its selection from the wide field of media-oriented practices (Couldry 2000a, 2000b).

A popular alternative has been to start from the institutional structures that produce media, as in the political economy and (more recently) the cultural economy traditions (Garnham 1990; Du Gay 1997; Hesmondhalgh 2002). Clearly, the analysis of industrial and market structures in the media and cultural sectors is valid in its own right, as a contribution to policy debates and to the analysis of the wider economy, as well as being vital to our understanding of the pressures that limit participation in those sectors on various scales and also limit the range of outputs they produce. Here, there is no question of speculation (quite the contrary) and on any view such work is important. But in considering what should be the *general* paradigm for media research and media theory, there is a difficulty in situating it in media production, obvious though that might be in one respect (this is where media products start their life). The difficulty is that the structures of media production, and particularly the dynamics of concentration and conglomeration, do not, of themselves, tell us anything about the uses to which media products are put in social life generally. Even from a Marxist perspective, which insists on the causal primacy of economic relations, it is difficult to make the leap from arguing (1) that economic factors determine the nature of media production to arguing (2) that the (economically determined) nature of media production determines the *social* consequences of media texts. Unlike in the primary case of labour conditions, there is a crucial uncertainty about *how* media texts (or any texts produced in an economy) causally mediate between the world they represent and the world where they are consumed. This was precisely the force of the challenge to the dominant ideology thesis (Abercrombie et al. 1981): where is the evidence that the holding of beliefs associated with a dominant ideology adds anything to the structuring of social relations by what Marx called the full compulsion of economic life? The point applies *a fortiori* if we consider the consequences of media texts, since the relationship between consumption of a media text (however it may *be read as* reproducing an ideology) and transmission of belief in that ideology is also uncertain (cf. Lewis 1991, quoted earlier). Unless therefore you reduce media texts to being a conduit for economic signals (absurd in all but the crudest case), we are forced once again, even within a political economy model, to consider what people do with media.

This, after all, was the point of audience research—to emphasise that consumption is a “determinate moment” in the production of meaning through media texts (Hall 1980). The only problem was that audience research developed in an intellectual landscape in Britain decisively influenced by semiotics, so requiring that all questions about media to start from the supposed structuring properties of the text itself. Although the connection of audience research (from fan practices to video use) to the moment of textual consumption was increasingly loosened until the audience become undecidable—undecidable, that is, in relation to the originary

moment of textual consumption (Ang 1996, 70)—audience research remained constrained by its primary emphasis on people's relationships to texts.

It is to escape that constraint that my proposed paradigm starts not with media texts or media institutions, but with practice—not necessarily the practice of audiences (I shall come back to this), but media-oriented practice, in all its looseness and openness. What, quite simply, are people *doing* in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts?

Like any new paradigm that seeks to resolve a crisis or contradiction in how a field of research is constructed, this paradigm was "at least partially anticipated" (Kuhn 1970, 75) in the 1990s. First, there was important research into the whole range of domestic practices in which television viewing was inserted (Silverstone and Hirsch 1992; Silverstone 1994); this work developed a rich theoretical framework drawing on recent developments in sociology of science and technology and encompassing the latest developments in the sociology of the family and social anthropology. The focus remained the home, as the primary site of media consumption, although there was a less noticed line of research on public viewing of television (Lemish 1982; Krotz and Tyler Eastman 1999; McCarthy 2002).

The new paradigm was anticipated, secondly, by researchers who sought to move beyond the specific contexts of media consumption. Having concluded that "television's meanings for audiences ... cannot be decided upon outside of the multidimensional intersubjective networks in which the object is inserted and made to mean in concrete contextual settings" (Ang 1996, 70), Ien Ang posed the different question of "what it means, or what it is like, to live in a media-saturated world" (1996, 72). My own research inflected this general question from the perspective of power, asking "what it means to live in a society dominated by large-scale media institutions" (Couldry 2000, 6). The shift to a more widely focused research question was anticipated also by the emergence of the term "mediation" (cf. Silverstone, forthcoming) to refer to the broad expanse of social processes focused around media, even if the first prominent use of that term (Martin-Barbero 1993) was concerned, still, with extending our understanding of media *consumption* to encompass a broader range of cultural participation. It is here that recent anthropological research into media processes, free as it is from any primary attachment to studying texts and their interpretation, has become a promising ally, while at the same time acquiring a higher profile in anthropology itself (Ginsburg et al. 2002).

Important also were two explicit attempts to shift the paradigm of media research in the late 1990s. Coming from outside media studies, Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) challenged what they saw as a paradigm of media research dominated by ideological questions (the "incorporation/ resistance" paradigm) and proposed to replace it by a "spectacle/performance" paradigm that foregrounded the *various* levels of engagement people have to different aspects of media culture; while this proposal was valuable for

drawing on a wider frame of historical cultural and sociological reference than usual in media research, a problem (cf. Couldry 2000a, 21) was its downgrading of questions of power, which itself made some contestable assumptions about how power works in media-saturated spaces. There was also the proposal that we were now entering the “third generation” of audience research (Alasuutaari 1999) whose priority was to “get a grasp on our contemporary ‘media culture’” (Alasuutaari 1999, 6), for example through an interest in the open-ended processes of identity construction linked to media (Hermes 1999); but this “generational” formulation risked disguising the radical nature of the shift under way by holding onto the notion of “audiences” as its central focus.

Perhaps, however, the definitive formulation of the paradigm shift under way comes with the media anthropologist Liz Bird’s (2003) recent book, whose first chapter announces a new approach “beyond the audience”, which aims to address “the amorphous nature of media experience”, arguing that:

We cannot really isolate the role of media in culture, because the media are firmly anchored into the web of culture, although articulated by individuals in different ways ... The ‘audience’ is everywhere and nowhere ... (Bird 2003, 2–3)

It is worth noting, however, that Bird makes a crucial qualification: “our culture may be ‘media-saturated’, but *as individuals* we are not, or at least not in any predictable, uniform way” (2003, 3; added emphasis). There is the beginning of a separation here between our concern with a media-saturated “culture” and our interest in the specificity of local experience. The term “culture” has its own problems if implying a holistic notion of a distinct cultural system (Hannerz 1992). This suggests that, in formulating a new paradigm of media research, we should open our lens even wider to take in the whole range of practices in which media consumption and media-related talk is embedded, including practices of avoiding or selecting out, media inputs (cf. Hoover et al. 2003); such practices may not be part of what normally we refer to by “media culture”, but as practices *oriented* to media they are hardly trivial. This, it might seem, loosens the tie to media texts too much and plunges us into chaos. Fortunately, however, the recent emergence of a “practice”-based research paradigm in sociology ensures that we need not be left floating without theoretical moorings.

The Sociology of Practice

The recent shift towards practice in some social science has long philosophical roots (e.g. Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty) and is the latest in a series of attempts to overcome the old theoretical division between structure and agency (see, for example, Bourdieu 1977; for authoritative overviews of the

term “practice” as a whole, see Schatzki 1999; Reckwitz 2002). There is no space to go into this background here. The key question instead is what the notion of “practice” offers to media sociology. There are three important points to be made.

First, as Ann Swidler (2001) explains, the aim of practice theory is to replace an older notion of “culture” as internal “ideas” or “meanings” with a different analysis of culture in terms of two types of publicly observable processes: first, *practices* themselves, particularly “routine activities (rather than consciously chosen actions) notable for their unconscious, automatic, un-thought character” (Swidler 2001, 74) and, second, *discourse* which “is not what anyone says, but the system of meanings that allows them to say anything at all” (2001, 75). While we might query Swidler’s exclusive emphasis on routine activities (surely a concern with discourse would lead us to be interested in practices that are associated with discourse; that is, are self-reflexive) and, while we might also query the term “system” in the characterisation of discourse, it would be better, perhaps, to refer to *principles* or *ordering*, without assuming that order or system is necessarily achieved in discourse), nonetheless this represents a useful, pragmatic shift in the analysis of culture, including “media culture”. If recent media research has foregrounded “media culture”, practice theory translates this into two concrete and related questions: what types of things do people do in relation to media? And what types of things do people say in relation to media?²

Second, practice research aims to be as open as possible in analysing what practices are out there, which in turn depends on how people *understand* what actions constitute a distinct practice—a complex question because actions are linked into a practice not just by explicit understandings, but also by being governed by common rules and by sharing the common reference-point of certain ends, projects and beliefs (Schatzki 1999, 89). There undoubtedly are a whole mass of media-oriented practices in contemporary societies, but how they are divided up into specific practices, and how those practices are coordinated with each other, remains an open question.

We cannot resolve such questions here. What matters is taking this question as our starting-point, since it distances us from the normal media studies assumption that what audiences do (“audiencing”) is a distinctive set of practices rather than an artificially chosen “slice” through daily life that *cuts across* how they actually understand the practices in which they are engaged. If we live in a “media-saturated” world, then it is reasonable to expect that how that world is carved up into recognisable practices may no longer correspond to categorisations formed in a “pre-saturation” world (when audiencing could be assumed to be a discrete activity). But—and this is the point that practice theory makes clear—in order to establish what *are* the new principles by which practices orientated to media are demarcated,

2. Implied here also is studying what people believe and think, as evidenced by what they say and do.

we cannot operate simply by our instinct as media researchers. We must look closely at the categorisations of practice that people make themselves.

Third, the space of practices is not as chaotic as might appear for the crucial reason that practices are organised among themselves. How this works is the fundamental question that Swidler addresses: “how [do] some practices anchor, control, or organise others” (2001, 79)? Put in these stark terms, this is a surprisingly difficult question. Swidler approaches it first from the point of view of definitional hierarchy (some practices are defined as part of a larger practice that provides their key reference points; so, for example, political marketing, lobbying and campaigning are part of the wider practice of politics) but, second, as a question of dynamic change (some practices “anchor” others, because changes in the former automatically cause reformulation of the latter’s aims). For the second case, Swidler makes an interesting suggestion that “public ritual” has a crucial role to play in “the visible, public enactment of new patterns so that ‘everyone can see’ that everyone else has seen that things have been changed” (2001, 87). Some practices, in other words (although this is my gloss, not Swidler’s), work to *enact* new forms of categorisation and distinction replied upon in other practices.

One of Swidler’s examples is how the public performance of identity based on sexuality in the San Francisco’s Lesbian/Gay Freedom Day Parade (from 1971 onwards) changed the conditions in which sexual identity in San Francisco could be claimed and performed more generally. Swidler argues that anchoring practices are associated particularly with the management of conflict and difference, but that, once established, the principles enacted by those practices become part of the social “structure” itself.

As Swidler herself makes clear, these suggestions are tentative and much more work in this area is needed, but this practice-based approach is suggestive for how we might understand the relation of media-oriented practices to social practice as a whole. What if one of the main things media do is anchor other practices through the “authoritative” representations and enactments of key terms and categories that they provide. A question, then, if we theorise media as practice, is; how, where and for whom this anchoring role works and with what consequences for the organisation of social action as a whole?

Media as Practice: The Theoretical Challenges

Having now set the scene, I want to explore (inevitably schematically) what a theory of media as practice might be like, and what its key questions might be. As we have seen, this new paradigm is not fundamentally new, but it is distinctive in being formulated without any reliance on textual or political economy models and with enough generality to be open to wider developments in sociology and anthropology. As John Tulloch (2000, 19–32) has argued, media research and theory needs to be more closely integrated with

the wider social sciences (although this requires some rapprochement on their part as well!)—his is much more productive, I would add, than relying on the abstractions of philosophy or philosophically generated theories about media—whether in Scannell’s (1996) use of Heidegger’s philosophy of Being or the extensive use across media studies of Baudrillard’s polemics or Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptual explorations. Media theory has no independent value as theory; it is valuable only when it helps us formulate better questions for empirical research.

To flesh out how a theory of media as practice affects the priorities of media research, I want to discuss three consequences of an emphasis on practice: anti-functionalism, openness to the variable and complex organisation of practice, and a concern to understand the principles whereby, and the mechanisms through which, practices are ordered. At this general level, media theory is no different from any other area of social theory, although media’s role in *representing* the social world from which they are generated adds to the complexity of how their workings can be understood on a large scale. Media represent other practices and so have direct consequences for how those practices are defined and ordered.

Beyond functionalism

I do not want to dwell long on this point, since I have covered it extensively elsewhere (Couldry, forthcoming). Functionalism is so long dead in sociology and anthropology that it is embarrassing to find it alive and well in areas of media research. Functionalism is the idea that large regions of human activity (“societies”, “cultures”, etc.) 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 (artificial systems, 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 multidimensionality of social and cultural practice, including media. Looking back from the beginning of the twenty-first 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”). The main problem, however, lies with functionalism’s underlying claim that there are such totalities as “societies” and “cultures” that “function” as working systems. The problem becomes 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, Lukes asks, a functioning social "whole" of which political rituals could be a "part"?

Yet functionalist explanations continue to crop up in media research in some 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. Here, for example, is McKenzie Wark:

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; emphasis added [quoted in Turner et al. 2000, 14])

Where is the evidence that people "identify" with celebrities in any simple way, or even that they regard "celebrity culture" as important rather than as a temporary distraction, let alone that celebrities "make possible" everyone's sense of belonging? The absence of *empirical* work here illustrates how functionalism blocks off routes to open-minded research.

An advantage of starting with practice—what types of things do people do/say/think that are oriented to media?—is that there is no intrinsic plausibility in the idea that what people do (across range of practices and locations) should add up to a functioning "whole". Why should it? In the past, an apparent reason was that, without the ordering presence of "society" as a functioning whole, the meanings and mutual relationships of practices could not themselves be understood, agency being incomprehensible without structure. Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, whatever detailed problems it raises, was a convincing move beyond that problem, since it showed how principles of order could both produce and be reproduced at the level of practice itself (social order, in other words, is "recursively" present in practice and in the organisation of practice; cf. Swidler 2001, 78). Practice theory, indeed, seeks to develop this insight by insisting that "there is no reason to think that social life can exhibit [ordered] features only if it is a totality" (Schatzki 1999, 10) and exploring other ways of thinking about social order.

One good reason, however, why functionalist ideas might still *appear* plausible at least in the area of media research is that media institutions, like governments, work hard to create the impression that they are at the "centre" of the functioning whole of "society", in the sense of a value centre

(cf. Shils 1975), not just as an administrative centre for practical purposes. Media studies (and incidentally also political science) must work hard to avoid, indeed to undermine, the pressures towards functionalism inherent in its topic. For the same reason, media studies (and political science) should resist the temptation to see the *actual* institutional centres of media (and political) culture as “all there is”: they must avoid the “centrism” (cf. Couldry, forthcoming) that distorts the breadth of the actual field of media (and political) practice beyond these claimed “centres”. (The social “centre” to which media implicitly claim connection is therefore doubly mythical: it is not a centre of value and it is not as much of a practical centre as media would like us to think [cf. Couldry 2003a, chapter 3]). The simple starting-point of practice (what is going on and where?) provides a useful counterweight to functionalist tendencies in media research.

The Varieties of Media Practice

The value of practice theory, as we have seen, is to ask open questions about what people are doing and how they categorise what they are doing, avoiding the disciplinary or other preconceptions that would automatically read their actions as, say, “consumption” or “being-an-audience”, whether or not that is how the actors see their actions. One possibility we need to be ready for—anticipated in the earlier quotation from Ien Ang (1996, 70)—is that, in many cases, “media consumption” or “audiencing” can only be understood as part of a practice that is not itself “about” media: what practice this is depends on who we are describing and when.

Watching a football game on television might for one person be best analysed as part of their intensely emotional practice as a football fan, or fan of a particular football team; for another, perhaps that person’s partner or child, it may be an obligation or pleasure of their relationship together to share the first person’s passion; for someone watching in a public space, it may be part of a practice of group solidarity; for a fourth, it may be something done to fill in time, instantly “putdownable” (cf. Hermes 1995) as soon as a friend rings the doorbell or the person gets the energy to go back to some work. Pointing this out is hardly new of course (cf. Bausinger 1984; Morley 1992). What it demonstrates, however, is that the main priorities for media research cannot be the varieties of how people read the text of this televised game (since “watching football on television” is not the practice we are interested in analysing) nor can it be the structure of the televised game’s text considered in itself. It is more interesting to consider, first, the range of practices in which the act of watching this football game occurs and, second, the consequences of that common feature for the relationships between those practices. As to the first question, it will only be in the case of the football fan that the *way* he/she reads the game’s text is likely to be of research interest, since it is only here that the watching of the game forms

a central, non-substitutable part of a wider practice. Political economy approaches are important background in all these cases, but again probably only important background in the case of the football fan, where economic pressures have had a major effect on the places where televised games can be watched and even the structure of the game itself. As to the second question, the fact that people performing a huge range of practices (from fandom to family interaction to group solidarity at a community centre or pub to just waiting for something else to do) should *all* be doing the same thing at the same time is, however, significant for our understanding of the time-space coordination of practices through media. Similar questions could be asked of watching a prime-time news bulletin, and here there might be more commonality around the practice of "watching the news" (an inherently general activity that is, perhaps, a distinct practice for many people); by contrast, if we took reading a celebrity magazine, this is much more ambiguous (is it just passing time, a deliberate search for humour, or information seeking?). The answer can only be given for particular individuals and groups in the contexts of their everyday practice, which must take into account the contexts, if any, where the contents of that celebrity magazine are later put to use.

Clearly this only begins to track the variety of media-oriented practices, and media-oriented actions that form part of other practices. Large areas of this terrain have, of course, already been explored in media research, but there remain large areas that are still little known. To name a few: practices of using media sources in education; individuals' uses of media references in telling stories about themselves, their family or historical events; the uses of media in the legal system and indeed in work practices across the public world (so far, most research has focused on politics, but there are many other areas worth investigating). There is also the larger question of how media products and references to media are, over time, affecting practice in all production fields, which I have begun to explore elsewhere, drawing on Bourdieu's field theory (Couldry 2003b). Focusing on practice is a more radical adjustment to our research agendas than might at first appear. It is commonplace to study talk shows, for example, as texts, but much less common to study them as a social practice whereby particular groups of people are brought together to perform before each other in a studio (but for examples of a practice-based approach, see Gamson 1998; Grindstaff 2002). The resulting text is only a facet of the overall practice.

At this descriptive level, media consumption at least (media production is different, since it is generally a rationalised work practice) may seem frustratingly heterogeneous, rather than an ordered field. Its principles of order only derive, at least initially, from the order to be found in the various practices in which media consumption (and its uses) are inserted. But, as already suggested, media consumption (and production) may quite independently be important to understanding the commonalities between *other* practices. It is to questions of patterning and ordering that I now wish to turn.

The Ordering of Media Practice/Media's Ordering of Other Practices

We return here to the difficult question posed by Ann Swidler: how do some practices anchor other practices, producing a hierarchy of practices and also contributing to the "structure" within which those other practices occur and take their meaning? The case of media-oriented practices, however, raises a specific question: do media practices have a *privileged* role in anchoring other types of practice because of the privileged circulation of media representations and images of the social world? This is quite apart from questions about the internal hierarchies among media practices that, at least in forms such as the privileging of "live" media coverage over other types of media coverage, are relatively familiar. Instead, I am interested here in the more difficult question of the potential hierarchies between media practices and *other* sorts of practice. How can we investigate such a relationship and what concepts do we need to clarify it?

Here we need to draw on another area of (this time, classical) social theory: Durkheim's (1953) concept of social categories. A social category for Durkheim is a concept that is involved in articulating a society's order: such a category is put to work in formulating certain core understandings of how the social world works and the values on which it is based. A fundamental difference between Durkheim's theoretical framework and practice theory is that Durkheim assumes "society" as the fundamental entity underlying any sociological explanation, whereas practice theory does not. However, as I have shown elsewhere, it is possible to draw on Durkheim's insights, without subscribing to his functionalist assumptions (Couldry 2003a) in order to understand the categorial force of certain terms as they are mobilised in the *rhetorics* that media use to represent social "reality" and their privileged role as communicators of it. A non-functionalist approach may be able to explain the binding authority of certain media practices in relation to other practices via the notion of "*ritual*" (which, as we saw, Swidler herself introduces to explain how some practices anchor others, but does not explain). In ritual practices, wider patterns of meaning are recognised as being enacted, although not necessarily intended or articulated, by the performers (Rappaport 1999, 24). Indeed, ritual is one important way in which the legitimacy of assumed wider values can be confirmed or communicated. Ritual practices are able to "frame" those wider values and thereby reproduce them as follows:

1. The actions comprising rituals are structured around certain categories (often expressed through boundaries).
2. Those categories suggest, or stand in for, an underlying value.
3. This value captures our sense that "the social" is "at stake" in the ritual.

As a result (linking to Swidler), ritual practices may "anchor" all sorts of other practices that deal in the same categories and values.

On what does the particular power of media-oriented rituals depend? There is no space to explain this in detail here, but it is based on the fundamental categorical distinction between what is “in” the media and what is not “in” the media, which enables media representations to be seen as standing in for, or speaking authoritatively about, the non-media practices they represent. The “as seen on television” label still seen on some supermarket goods is just the simplest version of this distinction in use, but it illustrates the anchoring role of media practices at work. The pervasiveness of “celebrity culture” (discourse about celebrity inside and outside media) is another example of such anchoring: even if, as already noted, it is uncertain how important celebrity discourse is in individuals’ articulations of their identities, the idea that celebrity actions demand special attention is continuously reproduced. In that sense, celebrity actions can be said to “anchor” other practices by comprising a constant point of reference within them. These are just two examples of how the ritualised dimensions of media practice may have an ordering role in relation to other practices. The difficult question is how far this anchoring role extends across social practice in general.

Clearly, we are here just at the start of a large area of research. The point is that these research questions only open up once we redefine the aim of media research as the analysis of media’s consequences for social practice as a whole, studying the full range of practices oriented towards media (not just direct media consumption). It is important, however, to emphasise that, in researching the role of media practices and the products of media practices (images, representations, patterns of discourse) in ordering other practices across the social world, we are *not* giving up on the important concerns of historical media research with questions of representation; for the study of how particular media texts embody claims about the social world in regular ways will remain important for our understanding of media’s consequences for social practice generally. Similarly with the question of media “effects” and media power: reorientating the media research paradigm as I am proposing does not mean abandoning such larger questions, but on the contrary attempting to answer them in more precise ways that are based in the details of everyday practice and its organisation. The aim, then, is not to abandon the interests of previous media research, but to displace and broaden its focus from questions based in the consideration of texts (and how texts are interpreted) to questions based in media practices’ role in the ordering of social life more generally.

This, of course, is to put considerable weight on the term “ordering” (or, in Swidler’s language, “anchoring”). I have already glossed this one way in terms of categories and rituals that are structured through categories. There are other ways too in which we might understand how certain practices order or “anchor” others. First, we might look at the coordinated networks between agents and things that Actor Network Theory analysed. Think of the practices that together make up the “media profile” received by a major

business corporation. They have an “anchoring” role in relation to the business strategies of that corporation, because of the “network” that links the actions of its executives, press office, key media contacts, major investors, and so on, when an announcement of new strategy is made and the executives wait to see what media coverage it receives. Bad media coverage, because it is read by investors as negatively affecting the corporation’s value as an investment, will constrain the corporation’s future actions. Such actor networks involving media practices with an anchoring role have been little studied, but they are an important part of how many fields of practice are ordered. This is just one example of how the detailed study of practice (including actor networks) might illuminate our understanding of media’s role in the ordering of social life more generally.

Other conceptual links might be made here, for example, to Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, which seeks to explain the underlying determinants of the practices that are available to different agents (Bourdieu 1977; McNay 1999). There are no doubt still other concepts that might be useful for specifying how “anchoring” might work, which draw on alternative theoretical perspectives, for instance Foucauldian perspectives, but there is no space to pursue this here.

The point, rather, is that we need the perspective of practice to help us address how media are embedded in the interlocking fabric of social and cultural life. This question, as I have suggested, cuts deeper than our sense of how it *feels* to live in a media-saturated world, since it covers both cognitive and emotional dimensions to how practices are ordered; and in turn, through the link with cognitive questions (ways of thinking and categorising the world), it links to the question of how practices (possibilities of action) are differentially ordered for those with ready access to media resources (whether as media producers or as privileged media sources) and for those without. Through this, we can perhaps hope to develop a different approach towards understanding media’s consequences for the distribution of social power.

Conclusion

I have tried to open out a direction for media theory, rather than map anything definitively. I have been interested throughout in theory not for its own sake, but because it clarifies what questions are interesting for media research, because of the structuring processes it can disclose. Much of my argument has involved contextualising a new research paradigm that theorises media as practice, rather than as text or production process: what range of practices are oriented to media and what is the role of media-oriented practices in ordering other practices? This is, I believe, a more open and inclusive paradigm for media research than previous ones.

It draws for its theoretical tools much more on general social science than on media research—unsurprisingly, since it addresses questions that are no longer questions about media as such, or even about the direct consumption of media, but rather questions about the contributions media practices make to social practice more generally. No “new” paradigm can, as I noted, be wholly new. Indeed, we return here to the spirit of Lazarsfeld and Merton’s (1969 [1948]) exploratory remarks about mass media, made entirely within a social science perspective. For them the first, if the most difficult, question of media effects was: what are “the effects of *the existence* of media in our society” (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1969, 495; emphasis added)? This is the (admittedly vast) question to which we need to return with all our theoretical energies. Practice is perhaps the only concept broad enough to help us prise it open.

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