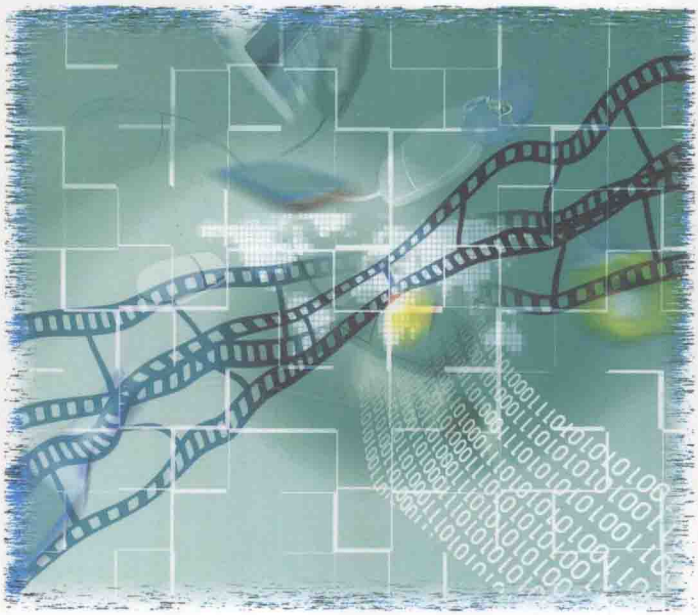
培文书系·社会科学系列

Studying Media
Problems of Theory and Method

媒介研究
理论与方法的问题

[英] 科纳 (Corner J.) 著



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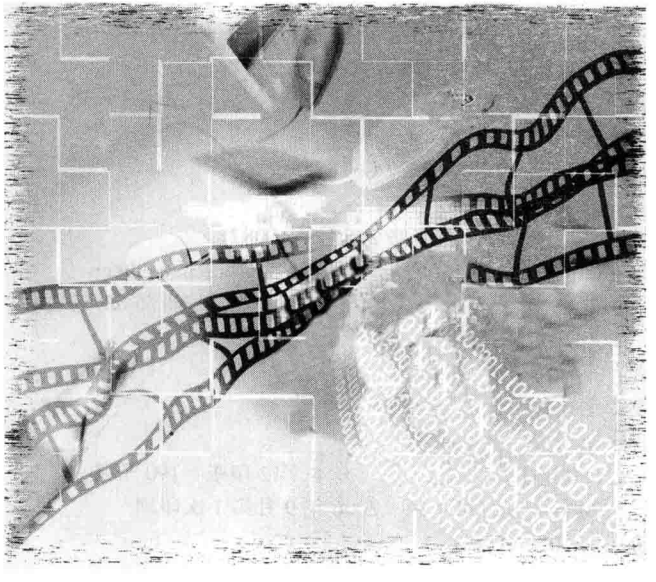

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北京市版权局著作权合同登记图字:01-2005-6570 号

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

媒介研究:理论与方法的问题/(英)科纳(Corner, J.)著. —影印本.
—北京:北京大学出版社, 2006.9
(培文书系·社会科学系列)

ISBN 7-301-10727-7

Ⅰ.媒… Ⅱ.科… Ⅲ.传播媒介—研究—英文 Ⅳ.G206.2

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2006)第 049634 号

Studying Media: Problems of Theory and Method
John Corner
ISBN: 0-7486-1067-7
© John Corner , 1998
English Reprint Edition Copyright © 2006 by Peking University Press
Published by arrangement with the original publisher, Edinburgh University Press
www.eup.ed.ac.uk
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书　　名:媒介研究:理论与方法的问题
著作责任者:[英] 科纳(Corner J.) 著
责任编辑:曾　理
标准书号:ISBN 7-301-10727-7/G·1875
出 版 者:北京大学出版社
地　　址:北京市海淀区成府路 205 号　100871
网　　址:http://www.pup.cn　**电子邮箱**:pw@pup.pku.edu.cn
电　　话:邮购部 62752015　发行部 62750672　编辑部 62750112
出版部 62754962
印 刷 者:三河市欣欣印刷有限公司
发 行 者:北京大学出版社
经 销 者:新华书店
650 毫米×980 毫米　16 开本　12 印张　190 千字
2006 年 9 月第 1 版　2006 年 9 月第 1 次印刷
定　　价:25.00 元

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北京大学出版社

2006 年 9 月

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge publishers' permission to reprint material as follows: Edward Arnold/Hodder and Stoughton Educational for 'Criticism as Sociology' from J. Hawthorn (ed.) *Criticism and Critical Theory*, 1984, 29–41 and for 'Meaning, Genre and Context' from J. Curran and M. Gurevitch (eds) *Mass Media and Society*, 1991, 267–84; Sage Publications Ltd for 'Codes and Cultural Analysis' from *Media, Culture and Society* 2.1. 1980, 73–86, 'Debating Culture' from *Media, Culture and Society* 16.1. 1994, 141–8 and 'Television in Theory' from *Media, Culture and Society* 19.2. 1997, 247–62; Addison Wesley Longman for 'Why Study Media Form' from A. Briggs and P. Cobley (eds) *The Media: An Introduction*, 1997, 238–49; Oxford University Press for 'Mass in Communication Research' from *Journal of Communication* 19.1. 1979, 26–32, 'Presumption as Theory' from *Screen* 33.1. 1992, 97–102 and 'Media Studies and the Knowledge Problem' from *Screen* 36.2. 1995, 145–55. In each case I am the sole author.

In bringing together material from two decades of work in the field I incur a range of debts too extensive for specific acknowledgement. I would particularly like to thank my Liverpool colleagues, past and present, for the benefits of their conversation and the joint teaching and research which I have undertaken with them.

Finally, I would like to thank Jackie Jones of Edinburgh University Press for encouraging me to put together this collection and reflect further on the general development of the field since the 1970s.

John Corner

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION
The Formation of a Field

What perspectives can we best use to understand the media? In what measures and combinations might we mix the established ideas of Arts and Social Science Scholarship? Should we seek an interdisciplinary integration or a multidisciplinary approach which acknowledges the conventional discipline boundaries? What theories and concepts seem most useful for development and what most open to question? How can we relate theory to analysis and what different kinds of methodological problem does analysis of the various dimensions of media and mediation pose? Perhaps most importantly of all, what are the aims of media study, what kinds of knowledge do we hope to produce and for what purpose?

This collection contains nine essays which I have written on such questions. The questions concern problems of a type broadly familiar in many other areas of inquiry but they also concern problems quite distinctive to the character of media study and its institutionalisation as a field for research and teaching. The essays cover a twenty-year span, the first being published in 1979. They were all stimulated by my experience of working within the project of British 'Communication Studies', and specifically within the media focus of this project, from the mid-1970s. As a result, there is often a strong national character to my argument and ideas, although they are also informed by the international development of the field, relating back to earlier phases of study in the United States but also across to concurrent work both in North America, continental Europe and Scandinavia. Like many others, I have found study of the media to connect intellectual imagination and exploratory scholarship to a sense of deep changes in

the organisation of society and culture in a very exciting way. It is not surprising that the academic response to such a profound and relatively swift pattern of change – pushing and pulling at conventional ways of understanding art and society, public and private, the relation of individual to group and the co-ordinates of place and time – has produced its fair crop of problems.

In this introduction, I want to outline some of the history of 'Media Studies' as a focus for higher education teaching and academic research in Britain. This history is both an intellectual history – the development of particular concerns, interests and ideas across disciplines – and an institutional history – the development of certain kinds of course, with their distinctive curricula, reading lists and staff teams as well as the emergence of academic communities at the level of the conference, the national association and the journal readership. Having provided a historical sketch, I shall then move on to a second stage of the chapter and identify some principal strands and issues contributing to the identity of the field in the late 1990s. Finally, I shall briefly examine a number of points of challenge for Media Studies in the future and assess the extent to which it is currently responding to these. I hope all this will provide a grounded story about Media Studies and a map upon which to locate the more detailed appraisals and arguments of subsequent chapters.

INSTITUTION AND FIELD

In the 1960s, strands of work on aspects of public communication were to be found in many disciplines, including importantly a 'sociology of mass communication' to which British or British-based academics such as Jay Blumler, Phillip Elliott, James Halloran, Denis McQuail and Jeremy Tunstall were contributing. The Leicester University Centre for Mass Communication Research had opened in 1966 and as well as carrying out a number of funded studies it had attracted postgraduate students and research assistants, many of whose work would prove influential in the later expansion of the area as a focus for degree programmes. In 1963, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies had started at Birmingham, directed by Richard Hoggart with, quite soon afterwards, the assistance of Stuart Hall, and this quickly worked to consolidate some of the thinking about media and culture coming

from scholars of English Literature, notably Hoggart's own writings on class and culture and the influential, theoretical/historical commentaries of Raymond Williams. Behind both writers lay the distinctively British strand of largely pessimistic commentary, running through from such earlier literary critics as Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis, about art, value and social change. Leavis (1930) was particularly influential as a point of reference for development, or for rebuttal, in the early phases of Cultural Studies thinking. The Centre added to this literary base by engaging with a range of work in sociology and social psychology (for instance, that of Peter Berger and Erving Goffman) and, increasingly, by framing its inquiries within the terms of a structuralist Marxism derived largely, though not without criticism and modification, from the writings on ideology and the social formation of Louis Althusser. The structuralist anthropology of Lévi-Strauss and the structuralist writings on signs of Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco provided a source of more specific ideas about how the 'messages' of the mass media were active within the culture and of significance in the exercising of power and the maintenance of inequality. Later, the writings of Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault were major influences, as were many currents of feminist thinking.

The emphasis of the Birmingham Centre on questions of symbolic organisation and symbolic process (extending well beyond attention to the media although public mediation remained at the core of their published studies) often contrasted with the emphasis of the Leicester Centre on a more traditional sociological agenda of 'influence and effects', institutional organisation and production processes. When both Centres became notable for their Marxist or Marxian work, the contrast was between the 'critical cultural theory and analysis' of Birmingham, strongly inclined towards textual analysis as far as media research was concerned, and the 'political economy' perspectives of Leicester, on the whole not so much interested in language, image and symbolic organisation as in what were seen to be their economic, institutional and processual determinants.

It is possible to overstate the intellectual division between the two Centres and thereby to attribute degrees of naivety or ignorance to each in a distorting and insulting way. Nevertheless, there is a real sense in which Birmingham and Leicester acted as twin 'nodes', sometimes complementary but more often conflicting, in the development and

institutionalisation of communication studies and then media studies which began in the early 1970s. What both reflected though, was the way in which British political and public life and British popular culture had now become impossible to address without a better and more systematic understanding of media systems, practices and processes. The prompt for investigation was in both cases a sense of anxiety, a concern about the consequences of the media within the political and cultural contexts of a changing Britain. And in both cases the nature of the response led away from the 'mainstream' of, respectively, Arts or Social Science inquiry towards a more interdisciplinary and politically radical approach.

If the developing, post-war interest in mass communication systems and their influence and in the changing character of popular culture was the primary factor in the intellectual formation of 'Communication Studies', there is also a level of institutional formation which needs to be considered too. In the early 1970s, British Higher Education was undergoing a major expansion as institutions, often former Technical Colleges, came together with the old Teacher Training Colleges and Colleges of Art to form the 'Polytechnics'. The mergings and amalgamations involved in the development of Polytechnics were sometimes rapidly achieved and sometimes took several years of growth. However, whatever the route taken, a need for extensive degree-level course development to redeploy a new, large and various staffing base and to attract a new kind of student was widely felt.

It was a financial imperative that attractive courses be offered as quickly as possible. Interdisciplinarity, Multidisciplinarity and 'Combined' programmes (rather than the traditional University 'single honours' model) were desirable because of the way they drew effectively on mixed teaching expertise and could absorb some of the oddities of balance between specialisms which the formative mergers and voluntary redundancies had created. Programmes which were also able to project themselves as in some way 'applied' rather than 'pure' studies had the added advantage of appearing to fulfil the Polytechnic mission as it was formulated at this stage of their development; a policy of providing an education 'equal to but different from' that of the University sector. 'Communication Studies' was an attractive route for development on both counts. A three-year programme of work around 'communication' could be delivered by a disparate group

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of Arts and Social Science staff, only a small core group of whom required specialist media interests or knowledge of that specific intellectual context surrounding analysis of the media within British culture which I noted above. Such programmes were 'applied' in the sense that they could be seen as a response to the increasing scale and diversity of the media industries and the growing number of jobs broadly in the 'communications' field, including those in public relations and personnel management. They were not 'vocational' courses in the direct sense of training students in specific professional tasks for, in most cases, there was no staff expertise to make this a significant part of a degree programme.

From the early 1970s onwards, the CNAA (Council for National Academic Awards) established a panel for 'Communication Studies' which had the task of reviewing course proposals and visiting institutions in order to validate (or not) particular programmes of study. In general, it operated with a very generous perspective on what the label might mean in any given institutional setting. The fact that Schools of Communication, Communications Associations and a journals literature using the designation 'Communication' had been established in United States academia for some time offset any sense of an entirely new venture. Professor Jay Blumler, the first chairman of the CNAA's panel, was fully familiar with the US tradition and a major figure within it, although there was no attempt to impose the distinctive features of the American development (Departments of Journalism, Departments of Speech, a strong behavioural science interest in interpersonal communication) upon a situation which clearly had its own quite distinctive origins and aspirations. The CNAA's criteria were based less on a sense of the 'ideal' combination of parts than on the competence of staff to teach the individual elements, the intellectual quality of these elements and the general soundness of provision for resources, teaching and assessment.

For instance, the course which I had close experience of at this time was the one developed at Sunderland University (then Sunderland Polytechnic) from 1976. As in many institutions, this 'specialist' programme was only put forward after a broader degree programme (Combined Studies, Arts and Social Sciences, in our case) had already been validated and the institution was therefore seen as able to operate at degree level in contributory disciplines. The Sunderland scheme

placed its core media courses in the second and third years, following a first year which drew substantially on work in Sociology, Psychology, Linguistics and Literary and Art criticism to provide a broad foundational level. This was 'multidisciplinary' rather than 'interdisciplinary' in that it recognised the specific conceptual and methodological identity of contributing disciplines. In the second and third years, many of the course units, particularly the options, were defined by substantive topic (e.g. audience research, the British press, society and culture in the 1930s, popular culture) and adopted an interdisciplinary approach in which an eclectic mix of ideas and methods was used with less concern for the marking of different disciplinary inputs. Given the scattered, various literature on British media, this approach was virtually a necessity in offering any kind of comprehensive attention to institutions, practices, forms and audiences.

The Sunderland course also allowed for options outside of the media area however (for instance, in Art history, Literature and even Philosophy). It was able to offer a 'rationale' for itself (a necessary element of the course proposal document) at the very broad and *academic* level of the importance of the study of meaning, information and representation across a number of disciplines pursuing broadly convergent lines of inquiry. This was a self-consciously loose identity (in essence, such courses were a kind of 'combined honours' programme, although with a tighter degree of route coherence than would normally be imposed on students following such a course). As I have observed, their 'applied' character was often worn lightly, however much mention of the growth of the communications industry figured in course documents and publicity. In the first year of recruitment at Sunderland, the brochure designed for applicants was careful to stress the academic character of the programme and the lack of any kind of career promise directly consequent upon the final qualification.

Jay Blumler, writing in 1977, noted the degree of 'curricular solipsism' which prevailed as a result of different institutional staffing resources as well as different ideas about what was most interesting and where the most significant interdisciplinary connections lay. It is relevant for my further discussion of vocationalism that he also remarked how at this stage 'the courses that have been developed are ambitious, exciting and more theoretically than practically or vocationally oriented' (Blumler, 1977: 38).

At the time of the development of the Sunderland course, the programme at Sheffield Polytechnic (now Sheffield Hallam University) was the one to which we most often referred. Although there can be dispute about which undergraduate course was the first one in the area (some college courses were validated by a parent university rather than the CNAA, and there were many courses in which work on Communications was only a component, if sometimes the major one), the course at Sheffield has some claim to this status nationally. From the Sunderland perspective, the Sheffield programme was a little heavy on the literary side, with a strong representation of English staff. The Sunderland programme attempted to develop a stronger complementary emphasis on visual communication through work on art, photography and film. Such variations were seen as a matter of choice and, to some extent, as I have suggested, a matter of necessity in relation to staffing and resources.

However, even as the Sunderland course was in its early stages of refinement, two other models of degree work in the area had achieved validation. At the Polytechnic of Central London (now the University of Westminster) a BA course in 'Media Studies' was offered, drawing extensively on media professional skills and having half of its programme given over to varieties of practical training. Such a semi-vocational programme consequently drew a much tighter focus around the media than the Communication courses, although one could argue that it thereby provided students with a narrower academic experience. Meanwhile, at Portsmouth Polytechnic (now the University of Portsmouth) a BA course in 'Cultural Studies' had been devised. Here, the development was from an imaginative mixing of history and literary studies, producing a course which considered the media but situated them only as one object of study among a number of cultural forms and cultural settings. The Portsmouth model was, unsurprisingly, greatly influenced by the work of the Birmingham Centre.

Neither the 'Media Studies' nor the 'Cultural Studies' model lent themselves to easy reproduction elsewhere at this stage, given the technical resources and/or levels of staff specialism they required (the Polytechnic of Central London benefited from its proximity to major media production). There was also a widespread feeling that the 'Cultural Studies' perspective, although intellectually fertile, was too demandingly abstract and critique-driven to act satisfactorily as the

designator of undergraduate studies. It signalled not so much a substantive field of inquiry as a very specific intellectual problematic about meaning, values and power under circumstances of social change, marking a route from the conservativism of Leavisian literary criticism to the radical critiques of Marxist cultural theory (the ambivalent, quasi-celebratory tones of the postmodern approach were not then apparent).

Subsequent developments nevertheless saw these two models gradually become the preferred way of offering undergraduate studies in the area, as against the initial, broad Communication Studies approach. This shift was in part aided by a softening and expansion of Cultural Studies as a category – the politicised theoretical concerns of the Birmingham Centre giving way to a more descriptive and inclusive usage, drawing in a number of areas of inquiry and, indeed, of arts performance, where questions of social relationships and cultural value had become more directly raised. Increasingly, Cultural Studies became a *post-facto* term of institutional convenience to describe an Arts-based mix of studies in which issues of contemporary social change, including those surrounding the media, figured prominently.

Media Studies, meanwhile, emerged from the more comprehensive intellectual framework of Cultural Studies and the more comprehensive pedagogic precedent of Communication Studies to establish itself as what, by the early 1990s, was the primary designator – a process which, as I shall suggest below, was very much to do with the strengthening of its vocational promise.

These various strands of development, running throughout the 1970s, led to a situation in which, by the end of the decade, a new subject group around study of media had been formed among Higher Education teachers, chiefly those in the Polytechnics. Some of these teachers were redeployed from earlier duties in Sociology, Psychology and Literature, while some continued to work in traditional discipline fields as well as within the interdisciplinary media programmes of the new courses. An influential few were appointed directly from the research centres themselves (Birmingham and Leicester particularly, but also other University departments) to form a specialist core on the new degrees. Few of the new programmes could be launched without at least a modest investment in such appointments.

The formation of this subject group produced changes in the

academic subculture. There was a growth in conferences on media, in publications specialising in media research and commentary, and in associations and networks committed to discussing problems in teaching and research. Established journals like the British Film Institute's *Screen* and *Screen Education*, which were initially focused on film, started to reflect the broader terms of media interest (particularly the latter title), whilst *Media, Culture and Society* was launched in 1979 from a base in what was then a School of Communications (at the Polytechnic of Central London) offering a Media Studies course.

It is useful to note two further points about these institutional developments. Firstly, a tension between broadly Arts and broadly Social Scientific approaches was evident in most programmes in one form or other. In the more eclectic 'Communications' models, it was quite decisive from which primary perspective the core media units were taught. This tension was overlaid and perhaps compounded by the way in which Marxist critical theory, with its emphasis on the critique of ideology, had become central both to a strong strand of Literary Criticism and to much work in Cultural Studies. Questions about the aims, guiding concepts and methodological protocols of study were often answered very differently across the various parts of a programme, although the best courses managed to incorporate a good level of thoughtful pluralism and perspectival debate into their schemes.

Secondly, what I have termed the 'vocational promise' of work in this area remained a difficulty in the emergence of course identity. It was not easily neglectable, if only because it was clear that a primary reason for many school-leavers applying for these new courses was an interest in getting jobs in the media industry. However much the idea that the courses were somehow direct pathways to such jobs was denied by responsible course teams, in a situation where many institutions were only just beginning to establish themselves as having degree-level opportunities it would have been dangerous to have denied completely the vocational allure. Those few Cultural Studies programmes which had developed suffered from it least, since their structure and approach was so clearly intellectualist. 'Film Studies' also remained relatively untroubled by it, usually combining with English or Drama to produce courses legitimated within the established terms of Arts scholarship, terms much more extendable to film (with its marked authorialism and traditions of European 'seriousness') than to television. Media Studies

programmes variously embraced it, depending on their resources and staff skills. I noted above that to offer an entire BA course on 'Media' seemed to demand a good measure of practical work and professional-level training (certainly the view taken by the CNAA, which had then to liaise with the different professional bodies concerned with accreditation and standards). This was true even if 'media' included an element of Film Studies and perhaps study of popular music, which it sometimes did but frequently did not. Meanwhile, Communication Studies programmes continued to work with a 'soft vocational' idea, indicating indirect benefits in the nature of course content and in the inclusion of a number of more practical activities, serving to introduce media skills at 'workshop' levels rather than at a level appropriate to pre-professional training.

On many courses, however, questions of just *how much* practical work and of *what kind* became pressing, with a slow drift towards including more non-academic options if only as a result of student expectations and enthusiasms. By the mid-1980s, it was Media Studies, involving an element of training, rather than Communication Studies, with perhaps only basic practical exercises, which was dominant. A certain vocationalisation of the field had occurred, making things awkward for courses which were unwilling, or whose staff felt unable, to respond. Yet the continuing attitude of the media industries towards undergraduate work in this area was lukewarm at best. Both in television production and in print and broadcast journalism, the industry preferred to make its own arrangements for training. In such a competitive field, it was clearly not going to privilege 'Media' or 'Communication' students over the full range of graduate talent when it came to recruitment. Indeed, there was an acute problem of professional and intellectual credibility to be overcome here rather than an advantage to be secured. As I shall suggest later, there still is – and this may turn out to be the most pressing problem for British Media Studies, as a field of teaching, in the future.

It is rather curious that at about the same time as the more vocationalist version of Media Studies was becoming established, undergraduate courses in the area started to be offered in the older University (as distinct from the Polytechnic) sector. Some of these courses (as at Glasgow, Warwick and Kent, for example) developed from an earlier teaching base in Film Studies, others grew from older research centres

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