



**the media  
and social theory**

Edited by David Hesmondhalgh and Jason Toynbee

# The Media and Social Theory

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Jason Toynebee

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Most of the chapters here represent developed and updated versions of papers presented at the conference. We heard many excellent papers, and wish that we could have published more. In the end we made a selection based on what we heard, aiming for balance across the book. We would like to thank everyone who contributed to the conference.

D.H.  
J.T.



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# 1 Why media studies needs better social theory

*David Hesmondhalgh and Jason Toynbee*

This book derives from the conviction that we need to enrich the intellectual resources being brought to bear on the media and that one valuable way to do this would be for media analysts to engage much more seriously with social theory. There are two broad problems with existing media studies in terms of its theory. The first appears when we consider the major historical questions currently being raised in the field. Should we understand contemporary developments in media (globalisation, the internet, proliferation of media platforms and so on) as marking our entry into a new period characterised by unprecedented forms of mediated social relations? Or rather do these same developments simply make for continuity in the order of social life? There is a growing body of empirical work which presents one or other of these interpretations. Yet our sense is that many attempts in media studies to historicise the present lack a metatheoretical dimension – that is, they do not establish basic premises about the nature of the media in modern society. Except in a rather oblique fashion, they fail to confront issues of *causation*, from, within and to the media; or of *norms*, that is to say how far putative changes in the character of communication bear on social justice, or prospects for a good life for all. Without addressing these questions in a systematic way it becomes difficult to make an assessment of the quality and extent of change in the media and its consequences.

The second challenge has to do with the narrowness of the sources of existing media theory. Now of course media theory has been informed by social theory. Media studies journals are full of names such as Habermas, Bourdieu, Foucault, Castells, Hall, Butler, Žižek, Laclau, Bauman, Beck, Deleuze, Williams and Giddens, all of whom can legitimately be called social theorists.<sup>1</sup> The problem is the way that such theories tend to be mobilised in media theory and media studies. Typically, a single aspect of their work is taken up, rather than the broader social-theoretical agenda that the best of these theorists utilise. So Habermas's notion of the public sphere is either employed or dismissed – one small part of his work, written in the late 1950s, with some later comments. The same is true of very different theorists. It is more usual, for example, to read invocations of

## 2 *David Hesmondhalgh and Jason Toynbee*

Judith Butler's concept of 'performativity' than to see her concepts analysed in relation to the fundamental principles underlying her work.<sup>2</sup> This has led to a peculiar narrowness, even as media studies has drawn upon a wide range of theorists. It has meant that looking further afield, to reflect on how general problems raised by social theory might be illuminated through consideration of contemporary communications, is rarely attempted.

Two challenges, then. To meet them, we have brought together sixteen authors in order to consider key processes of media change, using a wide array of social-theoretical perspectives. We discuss the chapters and the book structure later on. But to begin, this introductory chapter focuses on a series of intertwined issues which emerge from the challenges we have identified: what we mean by social theory; the state of existing theory in media and communication studies; and how re-engaging with social theory might enrich the broad subject area.

### **Social theory: principles and dominant positions**

The corpus of social theory is large and with a long historical tail, stretching back to the Enlightenment at least. It can clearly be cut up in a variety of ways – by school, in terms of the genealogy of ideas, and according to political stance. (See Benton and Craib 2001 and Delanty and Strydom 2003 for alternative ways of presenting the field.) We have no room to provide our own account here. So, instead, we move straight to establishing a few principles about what social theory is and what it does. Then we set up an opposition between what we take to be the two leading theoretical positions today – constructionism and empiricism – examining some intellectual and political consequences of their dominance.

Social theory is concerned with explaining the experience of social life. Ian Craib (1992: 7) defines theory in general as 'an attempt to explain our everyday experience of the world, our "closest" experience in terms of something which is not so close'. When we undertake social theory, we are attempting to be much more systematic about experience and ideas concerning the social world than in everyday discourse. Indeed, as Craib emphasises, good theory may well involve making propositions that are counter to our direct experience. This is obviously so in the case of explanations of society such as Marxism according to which how life is lived is determined largely by a deep structure which cannot be directly apprehended, and may even be hidden through the operation of ideology. But it is also true of interpretive approaches, those influenced by anthropology for example, where the key goal is to present an account of a particular society according to 'insiders'. Here too a gap opens up between the experience and the account, as James Clifford (1986) forcefully reminds us in his argument about the inevitable partiality of ethnographic work. Clifford raises a social theoretical question then, but significantly he refuses to follow it through. Rather than trying to negotiate the gap

between writing about a society and how that society is experienced from within, he moves straight to the conclusion that its invariable consequence is the production of fictional accounts by ethnographers. To attempt to understand a society is actually to write a story about it which is shot through with your own subjectivity and cultural values. Needless to say, perhaps, we reject this radical subjectivism. For us the problem of distance between social experience and social explanation prompts rather than pre-empts social-theoretical enquiry.

If explanation lies at the heart of social theory, a problem arises, namely that such usefulness of theory is not always apparent to people doing the empirical work which it is supposed to inform. As Derek Layder (1993) points out, one of the reasons that theory has a bad reputation is that, to active researchers, it can seem 'speculative and too far removed from the down-to-earth issues of empirical research' (p. 6). This sceptical attitude 'hinders the general development of social understanding by preventing the harnessing of general theory to the requirements and procedures of social research' (ibid.). Layder (1993: 15) suggests a number of ways in which theories can be linked with empirical research: by taking seriously the fact that 'theoretical ideas act as background assumptions to empirical research and that where these are implicit they should be made explicit'; by using theory to contextualise research and to influence outcomes; and by philosophically examining the bases of knowledge and causation that underlie the research process. We need, says Layder (1993: 7), to see theory as partly, but never fully, autonomous of empirical evidence. Such an attitude underpins this book. In some of the contributions to this volume there is an emphasis on social theory itself and on clarifying and making explicit concepts that act as background assumptions in the work of others. In other chapters there is, rather, an emphasis on the authors' own media research, where the focus is instead on how theory might best underpin the particular research questions being asked. In other words, and as our contributors show, theory can be developed by examining the adequacy of already existing ideas, or it can emerge from a 'bottom up' process of abducting general theory from particular empirical cases.

Theory, then, we see as useful abstraction, never too far removed from concretising evidence and experience, yet nevertheless always removed to some degree – it is separation from the domains of the empirical and experiential which provides the conditions of possibility of theory. But what do we mean specifically by *social* theory; what social things is it about? Beyond defining it comparatively via its obvious concerns with society (as opposed to nature, or political institutions) and its attempt to distinguish between, and make generalisations about, different kinds of society (Callinicos 2007), it is perhaps most useful to think of social theory in terms of the defining problems it has generally sought to address. Delanty (2005: 22) for example, identifies three such defining problems in modern social theory: social subjectivity or socialisation, the rationality

of knowledge, and the legitimisation of power. John Scott (2006) prefers culture, system and socialisation; action, conflict and nature; and modernity and rationalisation. Some emphasise the great theoretical binaries of structure/agency, micro/macro and universalism/particularism, while others have paid close attention to critiquing these binaries and suggesting their redundancy (wrongly, in our view, but at least the debate is worth having). Much depends upon the particular disciplinary area of social enquiry from which the classifier approaches the social: sociologists will tend to see these things very differently from geographers, for example (as Harvey 2005 discusses). Now it probably goes without saying that we think that there are more and less valid treatments of these questions, more and less useful ways of privileging certain of the themes over others. Our claim here though is quite limited, namely that just to address such metatheoretical problems is a necessary first step for social – and therefore also media – enquiry.

Many influenced by post-structuralism and postmodernism will already be troubled by the way we have put things. Out of a desire to avoid essentialism and reduction they would reject this emphasis on central, defining problems of society. For them, such an approach would be just too fixed and fail to be sensitive to the ever changing nature of the social whereby process, or becoming, is all. Alternatively, influenced by Foucault, some might argue that there is simply no position beyond discourse and the social practices in which it is imbricated. With no outside, and therefore no distance from society, there can be no theorising of it; only the identification and enumeration of social practices.<sup>3</sup> Significantly, a great deal of media studies, and its sibling area of enquiry, cultural studies, has been influenced by such perspectives. Indeed, some of our contributors would share this post-structuralist distrust of ‘totalising’ theory. It is probably worth saying at this point that our own perspective is influenced by our own encounters with post-structuralism and postmodernism. We believe that there are elements of post-structuralist thought that have enhanced social theory, specifically: an emphasis on the importance of identity and its social-psychological formation; the crucial role of language and, more generally, of representation in social life; and a focus on the issue of standpoint in relation to research or knowledge more broadly conceived. Such developments have been absolutely vital to advances in our understanding of the social since the 1970s.

This is not only a matter of our own evaluation. Most significantly, the broadly constructionist approach has grown exponentially since the 1980s and has now begun to challenge the long-standing orthodoxy in social science, namely empiricism. Empiricism is a problematic term, it has to be admitted. Pejorative in tone, it is never used by exponents of the views which are said by its opponents to constitute it. More, many of those who criticise it in the constructionist camp deny that empiricism is a theory at all. Rather, they suggest that what marks out empiricists is their *lack* of theory and reflection on what one does as a researcher. Nonetheless we

would suggest empiricism is a useful attribution which does indeed point to a substantive theoretical position. In the first place, empiricism elevates the significance of experience to the extent that society is reducible to it. No knowledge-claims about the social world can be made unless they have been founded on observation or tested through experiment. Second, social scientific laws, like scientific laws in general, describe recurring patterns of events, and as such they have a predictive facility. Third, empiricism poses the complete separation of 'merely' subjective values from objective, factual statements about the social world that are testable (Benton and Craib 2001: 14–22).

Clearly there are serious differences between empiricism and constructionism. Yet we would propose that there is also considerable convergence. We can see it in a common emphasis on experience for one thing. Whether through observation and measurement (empiricism), or in forms of knowledge, discourse and so on (constructionism) both camps take the realm of the social to be coterminous with experience. There is nothing, as it were, *beneath* experience – for instance, social structure, causality or more generally conditions of action which cannot be apprehended through the senses, or are not already inscribed in discourse. As for laws and prediction, while among constructionists the advocates of fluidity are clearly opposed to the empiricists' notion of the covering law, Foucauldians take regularities, stable discursive regimes and so on to be the defining characteristics of the social. Finally, in relation to subjective and objective domains the difference is perhaps more apparent than real. Certainly, while empiricists prize 'objectivity' in social science, constructionists tend to celebrate 'subjectivity'. Yet in each case what seems to be at stake is a form of idealism whereby the social world is always limited to our knowledge and experience. What we want to argue, then, is that renewed attention to a particular kind of social theory can help us move beyond these positions and their widespread adoption in media studies. It is not, we hasten to add, that we reject the insights which have been achieved through both approaches. Rather, that in their (often unexamined) metatheoretical assumptions each tends to block the development of a critical social science, and of critical media research, which can address questions of what is and what ought to be, as well as what is known and experienced.

However, alongside these tendencies there now exists a strong tradition of *critical social theory*, where historically informed and systematic exploration of such normative and explanatory questions is far more to the fore. This kind of systematic exploration is apparent, for example, in some of the writers listed earlier, often cited in media studies, but rarely addressed across a sufficient range of their work; writers who are appropriated for particular concepts and problems, such as Habermas, Bourdieu, Giddens, Mouffe and Butler. It is also apparent – perhaps even more apparent – in the work of certain writers who are very rarely referred to in media studies but who have produced what might be called – without

too much facetiousness – a ‘loose canon’ of critical theoretical work. These writers include Axel Honneth, Nancy Fraser, Alex Callinicos, Margaret Archer, Craig Calhoun, Seyla Benhabib, David Harvey, Andrew Sayer, Perry Anderson, Ian Craib and Derek Layder. They are broadly left/liberal rationalists who have a strong sense of the importance of the symbolic and so (though perhaps more by extension) of the media. We have our own preferences among these writers and thinkers, and among the tendencies they represent. But, to reiterate, our point here is not to advocate a particular line, so much as suggest that such critical social theory provides a systematic exploration of normative and explanatory questions that is potentially helpful for social research and for media studies.

### **The poverty of media theory: parochialism and mediacentrism**

In defending an enabling conception of social theory Derek Layder, cited above, was writing in response to a split in sociology, exemplified in the division between university modules on ‘theory’ and those on ‘social structure’ and ‘methods’. Such divisions are perhaps inevitable; large fields of enquiry will tend to split up into areas of specialism. The issues of concern are whether the different camps speak to each other, and whether a critical mass of researchers is able to combine, for example, theory and empirical work in a satisfactory way. There is certainly an echo of such splits in contemporary media and communication studies, where it is not unusual to find separate modules and textbooks on media or communication theory.<sup>4</sup> Doctoral researchers often apply to programmes in order to investigate a particular area – say, transformations in national broadcasting systems, or the way audiences in different countries respond to reality television shows – and are frequently asked to pay greater attention to what media or communication theory they will draw upon to make these questions of more general interest to the field. In this context ‘doing the theory’ can be seen simply as an irritating burden which distracts one from the real task in hand. Yet for that very reason examining how theory is taught in media and communication departments may be instructive. For teaching constitutes a disciplinary approach in the Foucauldian sense. If you make people learn things in a certain way you are defining the field in the strongest possible terms.

The most usual way to divide media theory up is according to the classic triangle of production, texts and audiences; see, for example, McQuail’s standard mass communication theory textbook (McQuail 2005) or Williams (2003) or Gripsrud (2002). It is built into the Open University’s famous ‘Circuit of Culture’ model (Hall 1997), which extends Stuart Hall’s discussion of the differences between encoding and decoding (Hall 1993/1973) by introducing representation, regulation and identity as extra topics.<sup>5</sup> This split makes pedagogical sense, for this is how much research



is divided up, with some researchers specialising in textual analysis, some in production analysis and some in audience studies, and with various theoretical interests and sources associated with each. It also makes some conceptual sense, for this way of thinking about the field at least forefronts the important asymmetry in the media between producers and audiences – however the power relations between these two groups are understood. What gets called ‘communication theory’ is somewhat different. Here textbooks and modules will often have a more historical bent, usually outlining the early development of the field in the United States, often setting ‘administrative research’ against the critical theory of Adorno and maybe other members of the Frankfurt school, tracing effects research through the 1950s and 1960s, and in many cases telling a story of how various forms of critical research influenced by cultural theory came along in the 1970s and 1980s to change the field.

These approaches to teaching media theory tend to be ecumenical, then. They discuss what we have been calling empiricism and constructionism together as part of an argumentative family of theories the oldest members of which are now reaching a ripe and respectable age. Such perspectives even at times touch on the kind of critical social theory that we discussed earlier, in the form of Adorno and perhaps Stuart Hall’s encounters with Gramsci and Althusser. Certainly this historical framing has some value.<sup>6</sup> The aim of giving students a sense of where their theory comes from is laudable, and history is good for the banal but valid reason that it tells us (in part at least) about how we got here. Yet the conventional history is also remarkably narrow. Indeed, it is striking that, other than in the highly selective way discussed earlier, critical social theory hardly appears in it. Consequently, media theory as it has been enshrined pedagogically is often lacking in philosophical questions of normativity and explanation. Metatheorising is rare.

We get a similar impression if we look at the academic field in another way, according to how it has characterised its central problematic. From this perspective we might say that a focus on media-in-society has progressively given way to forms of mediacentrism and parochialism over the years. Such tendencies can be seen in the trajectory of the ‘political economy versus cultural studies’ debate which has loomed large in the field. First a caveat; there is a question about whether we should be discussing this debate at all, because media studies really is more complex than the binary suggests. There are many approaches that do not fall easily into the ready-made categories, and many studies that are thought of as belonging to one or the other should not be pigeonholed in this simplistic way. However, the shorthand steadfastly refuses to go away just because it does refer to a significant institutional and intellectual split in the analysis of the media.

Both camps have their origins in the Marxism which constituted a kind of intellectual avant-garde across the social sciences and humanities in the 1970s and early 1980s. But where political economy focused on