KEYWORDS FOR MEDIA STUDIES

EDITED BY

Laurie Ouellette and Jonathan Gray

"Written by many of the key scholars in media studies, this book is a wonderful introduction to the history, circulation, and meaning of concepts in the field. A useful, thorough, and compelling primer for anyone interested in media criticism today."
—Lynn Spigel, Northwestern University

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Introduction

Laurie Ouellette and Jonathan Gray

Keywords for Media Studies introduces and advances the field of critical media studies by tracing, defining, and problematizing its established and emergent terminology. Like the authors of other books in the New York University Press Keywords series, we take our bearings from the Welsh scholar Raymond Williams. In *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976/1983), Williams presented a "shared body of words and meanings" for understanding "general discussions of . . . the practices and institutions which we group as culture and society" (15). Less a dictionary or an encyclopedia than a holistic conceptual map organized around words, his book charted the history and usage of "key" words as a means of "recording, investigating and presenting" problems of culture and society to which they were bound (15). Williams did not set out to define a definitive canon of important terms, or to fix their significance for all time. Rather, he charted the dynamic relationship between language, knowledge, and subjects. By tracing the origins and meaning of words across changing social, economic, and political contexts, he opened up space to interrogate and disrupt commonsense assumptions about culture and society in the present. *Keywords for Media Studies* adapts this approach to the vocabulary of critical media studies. The pages that follow present sixty-five keywords, reflected upon by leading scholars tasked to show how their meanings, histories, and usage intersect with and inform problems and debates in media and society.

Curiously, "media" receives scant attention in Williams's own *Keywords*, taking up barely more than a single page. This is likely because Williams, who wrote about television, the press, and radio, understood media less as a singular entity than as an integral and multifaceted aspect of culture and society—as suggested by his two cross-references to longer entries on "communication" and "mediation." It is nonetheless worth considering what he did say about media, a Latin term he traces to the sixteenth century, when it conveyed a "sense of intervening or intermediate agency or substance," such as between a "sense or thought and its operation" (203). In the eighteenth century, the term was adapted to newspapers, to the extent that newspapers were understood (by capitalists) as "mediums" for advertising. A "conscious technical sense" of distinctions between print, sound, and vision as media began to emerge during this time as well. According to Williams, the term "media" was not widely used until the twentieth century, when the plural phrase "mass media" became common parlance for the new institutions and cultural output of broadcasting, the press, and cinema. Only with this development did the formal study of media (initially called "mass communications") emerge, operating with a "converged" understanding of these three senses of media, says Williams (203).

We can see elements, traces, and rebuttals of these early definitions of media across the entries assembled in this book. For example, while many scholars

approach media primarily as "forms and sign systems" (Williams 1976/1983, 203), newer scholarship on mediated affect has revitalized an understanding of media as acting on and between the physical body and the senses (see "Affect," chapter 3). Assumptions about technological specificity—the notion that different media (print, radio, television, the web) have specific properties that "take priority over anything actually said or written or shown"—are still commonplace, even as many scholars reject technological determinism (203). As Williams points out in his entry on mediation, the "modern use of media or mass media" continues to assign various degrees of power to media institutions to distort the "real" and impose mediated relations (ideology) on social consciousness (206). The term "communication," understood as early as the seventeenth century as "to make common to many or to impart-an action" (72), was initially applied to the development of roads, canals, railways, and other physical facilities—a focus that lives on in the analysis of "space" and "infrastructure" in this volume. Only with the development of "other means of passing information and maintaining social contract," he writes, did communication come to refer predominantly to the press, broadcasting, and other mass media (72). In long-standing debates about the power of the mass media, it also is "useful to recall the unresolved range of the original noun of action, represented at its extremes by transmit, a one-way process, and share, a common or mutual process," Williams reflected, for the "intermediate senses—to make common to many, and impart, can be read in either direction, and the choice of direction is often crucial" (72–73).

We point to these discursive lineages not to minimize profound changes in media and society since Williams published his *Keywords*, but to situate the contemporary study of media within a history of ideas manifested in taken-for-granted terms that require more contextualization and unpacking than we usually grant them. Taking cues from Williams, the contributors to *Keywords for Media Studies* are keen to historicize thinking about media and society, whether that means noting a long history of "new media," or tracing how understandings of media "power" vary across time periods and knowledge formations. We have asked our authors to situate their "key" terms within the interdisciplinary discipline of media studies, so that this book—in addition to explicating influential words—chronicles a history of ideas about the objects of academic inquiry and the conceptual frameworks in which they have been examined, interrogated, analyzed, and understood. However, even more than Williams, we have urged them to go beyond description and summary, to take stock of media studies now, to intervene in debates, and to chart new arguments. This book introduces those new to the field to some key terms, research traditions, and debates, and their contexts and histories, while also offering both these readers and those who have been teaching and researching in the field for years a sense of new frontiers and questions. We've often been inspired and encouraged by reading these entries, and hope our readers will similarly use them perhaps to understand the field of play better, yes, but also to see prospects for future work.

What Is Media Studies?

Critical media studies is usually traced to the 1940s, when theorists associated with the Frankfurt School cast their gaze on the burgeoning US mass media and cultural industries. From the 1970s and 1980s, the critical study of media developed at rapid pace, influenced by literary studies, film theory, medium and technology theory, feminist criticism, television studies, and, perhaps most important, British and American cultural

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studies. These varied (and sometimes contentious) bodies of scholarship differed from the social scientific mass communication tradition that arose in the 1920s in their engagement with qualitative analysis, social, cultural, and political theory, and power relations. In this book, we understand media studies to be focused on this critical tradition, which is (and has always been) broadly interdisciplinary.

While media studies is (and has always been) an intellectually diverse endeavor, it has developed recognizable paradigms, traditions, and perspectives that can be mapped for incoming and established scholars. Institutionalized in university departments of media studies as well as designated "areas" within compatible fields such as communication studies, visual studies, and cultural studies, critical media studies remains an especially popular academic inquiry, with introductory and specialized courses offered at the graduate and undergraduate levels. Indeed, at a time when many academic disciplines are suffering from reduced enrollments and diminished institutional support, critical media studies continues to thrive and grow, producing media workers, critical consumers, and new generations of teachers and scholars. Because the development of new media technologies, globalization, privatization, and other sociohistorical factors continues to alter the media landscape, the critical study of media has been forced to remain especially innovative, self-reflexive, and vibrant. While rooted, as Williams insisted, in a discursive past, critical media studies is also experiencing a conceptual renaissance, as scholars and theorists work to keep pace with the transition from mass media to customized, on-demand media culture, interactive relationships, and global media flows.

Keywords for Media Studies maps the enduring concepts and traditions of critical media studies, as well as emerging developments and new directions in theorizing media now. The sixty-five entries present an expansive guide to the terminology associated with critical media analysis in the broadest sense. Instead of categorizing media in narrow, medium-specific terms ("film," "TV," "radio"), we have followed Williams's emphasis on broader conceptual frameworks and modes of analysis (such as "gaze," "flow," and "sound"). In addition to covering familiar media-centric terms such as "institution," "technology," "production," "representation," and "audience," we have also chosen terms such as "hybridity," "identity," and "labor" that understand media within wider social, cultural, political, economic, and global contexts. Finally, we have included foundational terms for critical media analysis (such as "myth" and "hegemony") alongside newer analytical terms (such as "affect" and "assemblage"). As a result, the pages that follow present a comprehensive and forward-looking resource for emerging and established scholars alike.

Studying media is hard, for despite common usage that can imply "the media" is a monolithic, singular object, media are plural and varied. New media constantly join the pantheon of "old" or existing media, shifting the entire landscape at times, or slotting simply into age-old patterns at other times. Society itself changes, thereby revising the stakes or relevance of various media. Technological change and/or aesthetic innovation can repurpose a medium. Norms of production, distribution, delivery, exhibition, and use change. Thus, any study of the media occurs at a point in time, and all studies are open to revision. This book brings together some of the leading thinkers in media studies to assess where we are right now, in some cases explaining how we got here, and in some cases gesturing to possible roads ahead. It is not a dictionary, aiming to define terms that surely all our authors would regard as volatile and ever changing; nor is it an encyclopedia, aiming to give the elusive totalizing account of a word and promising an equally

elusive objective rendering. Rather, we are inspired by Williams's interest in approaching a broad terrain by exploring what are the words that matter discursively. Which words' complexities need to be understood to in turn better understand how media work? We charged our authors with presenting these complexities. We also charged them with noting where the word is right now. And we invited them, should they wish, to intervene in the word's life, and to call for new or additional approaches.

Comparisons and Selection

If one compares our table of contents to those of earlier keywords collections in media and cultural studies—not only Raymond Williams's *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, but also Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris's 2005 *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* and John Hartley's 2011 *Communication, Cultural and Media Studies: The Key Concepts*—the addition of some words over time might gesture to their rising currency. Most obviously, as new and digital media have played increasingly dominant roles in both society and the analysis of media, a host of associated issues have risen to prominence, resulting in the additions of a cluster of words—among them "access," "convergence," "copyright," "data," "interactivity," "personalization," and "surveillance"—that did not appear in the earlier two books. Less obviously, the increasing sophistication of critical scholarship on the intersection of media, the body and identity, and the development of new approaches to studying mediated identities and subjectivities has warranted new terms not in any of the three books, such as "appropriation," "cosmopolitanism," "intersectionality," "play," and "reflexivity."

However, we'd pose that scrutinizing tables of contents to see "what's new" belies much of what is in fact new. If we hope to see a field in motion, we are more likely to witness that mobility in the evolution of definitions for similar words from 1976 to 2001 to 2005 to 2017. Thus, for instance, "ordinary" appears in Williams, yet Graeme Turner's entry on "ordinary" in this volume was written in an era of ubiquitous social media and reality television that has recalibrated our relationship (as amateur content providers and audiences) to the ordinary. "Race" (or, for Williams, "racial") appears in all four books, yet Herman Gray's entry here is situated within the current moment of ubiquitous visibility, biopolitics, and a supposedly "postracial" America. Susan Douglas's entry on "feminism" considers much of the same history as does Bennett, Grossberg, and Morris's entry, yet provides updates for the current moment. And a whole host of other terms—"audience," "author," "citizenship," "industry," and "text" among them—are by no means new additions to media studies' critical vocabulary, yet the field's understandings of them have shifted considerably in ways that our assembled authors delineate. We invite readers, if they are interested, to track definitions over time and across volumes.

By pointing out continuities and differences across various keywords collections, though, we aim not to start an odd academic game of Matching Pairs, but to underline the very point of an exploit such as the creation of a keywords collection. Words can carry layers of meaning, and they can be not only *sites* of conflict, change, or conservatism but key *actors* in the forces of conflict, change, or conservatism. They can be rallying cries that unite, weapons that assault, or salves that calm and heal. For all their visual simplicity (as with the short words "race," "class," or "labor") and even when a lazy dictionary might suggest they are fixed and unspectacular, some words matter immensely and are anything but simple. This book sketches out something of

a cartography, a relief map of media studies and its own prominences by defining, discussing, critically engaging with, and in some cases redefining some of the most important words in the field.

Inevitably, some readers' favorite keywords won't appear in these pages. We aimed not to canonize, nor to suggest that only these words matter. Presented with finite pages and words, we had to make decisions about whether friendly concepts might be able to travel together under one heading, and at times about which words demanded redefinition and which may already have been handled well elsewhere. Nevertheless, we assembled a group that is simultaneously eclectic, interesting, and austere enough to cover a range of traditions and research questions within media studies. While we have offered a brief answer to the question "What is media studies?," the pages that follow present a heftier and more engaging answer in aggregate.

In closing this introduction, we offer our thanks to our authors, for being so easy and fun to work with, and for allowing us to be appreciative readers, not (just) taskmaster editors.

1

Access

Elizabeth Ellcessor

"Access" is usually understood to refer to the opportunity, ability, or right to gain entry to a space or possession of a thing. One of the most common formulations is *to have access to* a given object, action, or context. Discussions of *media access* have followed this usage, in terms of gaining access to the means of production, granting access to positive or realistic representations, enabling access to telecommunications networks and mass media content. Typically, media access is prioritized in matters related to news, politics, and economics, while it is less commonly made relevant to discussions of entertainment or social media.

"Access" has a positive and positivist bent; each of the examples above presupposes that it is beneficial for people to have access, and that access is a discrete state that can be identified and achieved. Given these tendencies, it is unsurprising that the use of "access" in media policies and within media studies has routinely conveyed some combination of media availability, affordability, or consumer choice. The limitations of such a discourse of access are evident when we consider US media policies in relation to access and then in relation to disability.

From the Communications Act of 1934, which established broadcasting as a commercial service operating in the public interest, access to mass media has referred to the ability of individuals to act as consumers, making choices from available media technologies and content. "Access" as availability and (limited) choice figured the public largely as receivers of media, rather than as producers. Access to the airwaves was limited by licensing, which ostensibly ensured the public interest and certainly reduced the diversity of producers and enabled the development of broadcast networks and later media conglomerates.

Telecommunications law, by contrast, initially established access in relation to availability and affordability through concepts of universal service and common carriage. Under these provisions, common carriers (such as telephone companies) were protected from liability for the content carried by their networks. This was justified through a mandate for universal service, whereby these carriers would extend access to and use of the network to all, making telephony a public utility managed by private interests.

Yet, availability, affordability, and consumer choice were insufficient tools with which to include people with disabilities in the mediated public sphere. For example, without specialized hardware, the availability and affordability of telecommunications were irrelevant to d/Deaf Americans. Similarly, without closed captions or audio description on television, the public interest of d/Deaf or blind viewers was not met. Routinely, laws, technologies, and studies of media have played catch-up, assuming an able-bodied media user and only later considering how people with disabilities might require different conditions in order to access media (Goggin and Newell 2003).

Disability reveals some of the limitations of dominant discourses of "access," and these limitations extend to any conception of *having access to* media technologies, affordances, and content. This understanding of "access" leaves out the infinitely variable material and experiential dimensions of access. Media access may take many forms; unorthodox means of accessing media may produce new articulations of bodies, technologies, policies, and culture. The volunteer captioning, informal distribution, and group viewing of films by d/Deaf audiences during the mid-twentieth century represented an intervention into cultures of filmgoing, the practices of Hollywood, and ultimately federal policy, as the nonprofit Captioned Films for the Deaf was brought under the aegis of the federal Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1958 (Schuchman 1988). Conceiving of media access as an object or state of being to be possessed hides such histories and fosters a unitary and potentially exclusionary vision of what access entails and how to promote it. For instance, although graphical user interfaces increased access to personal computing for many people, they created a barrier for blind users; then, in combating the digital divide, programs promoted access to computers that used these systems, reinforcing a singular vision of "access" and further ostracizing those for whom such access was insufficient. The legacy of such histories is that Americans with disabilities remain significantly less likely to have access to, or use, digital media.

Media studies needs to move beyond the noun form of "access" to consider it as a verb. "Accessing" should be seen as a variable moment or process by which one may enter a literal or figurative space, acquiring desired items, activities, or outcomes. If, instead of *having access to* something—possessing access—we were to think in terms of *accessing* that thing, more versions of access and subsequent media engagement can be observed, studied, and made the basis of theory. With this perspective, "watching television" ceases to be a taken-for-granted activity and becomes a variable assemblage of screens, remote controls, captions and audio descriptions, tablet computers and mobile phones, domestic and public spaces, individual and group practices. Furthermore, "accessing" must take on a subject; any statement about access must consider *who* is accessing, forcing considerations of diversity and marginalized perspectives by refusing the normativity of an unnamed subject. In doing this, analyses of media access can make increasingly meaningful interventions in the democratic roles of media content, technologies, and policies. Like formulations of access as availability, affordability, and choice, the framing of access as an object can go only so far. "Accessing" enables deeper, more nuanced, and more inclusive studies of and interventions in the ways in which people and media are brought together.

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