

Media Matters

Race and Gender in U.S.
Politics

Second Edition

John Fiske

With a new introductory essay on
John Fiske's contribution by Black
Hawk Hancock



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With a new introductory essay on *Learning How to Fiske: Theorizing Cultural Literacy, Counter-History, and the Politics of Media Events in the 21st Century* by Black Hawk Hancock

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MEDIA MATTERS

Race and Gender in U.S. Politics Second Edition

Now, more than 20 years since its initial release, John Fiske's classic text *Media Matters* remains both timely and insightful as an empirically rich examination of how the fierce battle over cultural meaning is negotiated in American popular culture.

Media Matters takes us to the heart of social inequality and the call for social justice by interrogating some of the most important issues of its time. Fiske offers a practical guide to learning how to interpret the ways that media events shape the social landscape, to contest official and taken-for-granted accounts of how events are presented/conveyed through media, and to effect social change by putting intellectual labor to public use.

A new introductory essay by former Fiske student Black Hawk Hancock entitled "Learning How to Fiske: Theorizing Cultural Literacy, Counter-History, and the Politics of Media Events in the 21st Century" explains the theoretical and methodological tools with which Fiske approaches cultural analysis, highlighting the lessons today's students can continue to draw upon in order to understand society.

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To Lisa, Lucy and in memory of Matthew



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John Fiske, 1995

LEARNING HOW TO FISKE THEORIZING CULTURAL LITERACY, COUNTER-HISTORY, AND THE POLITICS OF MEDIA EVENTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the workings of institutions that appear to be both neutral and independent, to criticize and attack them in such a manner that the political violence that has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them.¹

Michel Foucault

As former students of John Fiske, the question we would always ask was: how does he do that? Specifically, how does John undertake his cultural analysis in a way that is both theoretically driven and empirically rich? What we really wanted to know was how to think like John Fiske.² This introduction intends to be an elaboration of some of the facets of his thinking which continue to serve as a model for others to emulate.

Media Matters is a practical guide to learning how to interpret the ways that media events shape the social landscape, to contest official and taken-for-granted accounts of how events are presented/conveyed through media, and to effect social change by putting intellectual labor to public use. *Media Matters* takes us to the heart of social inequality and the call for social justice by interrogating some of the most important issues of its time. Since *Media Matters* is Fiske's most sociological and empirically rich book, and the most accessible and public-audience oriented, the aim of this new introduction is to provide the theoretical and methodological tools with which he approaches cultural analysis. In doing so, it will map out the theoretical framework in *Media Matters* and the lessons we can continue to draw upon for understanding society today.

In short, this introduction will provide a guide to thinking and analyzing like John Fiske, tying these broader concerns together as a backdrop against which to read *Media Matters*. This introduction also aims to introduce Fiske's late work to a new generation, while at the same time encouraging those who are already familiar with his work to revisit material that has been out of print for some time.³ In doing so, it contributes to John Fiske's ongoing significance and legacy, and to us his students, a musing on the art he gave us, the elusive art we must all continue to study and master, the art of learning "How to Fiske."

The introduction is separated into three interrelated parts: Part one reflects on cultural literacy—how we learn to critically "read" or interpret media events in relation to the larger society around us and to key shifts in the social landscape since the publication of *Media Matters* that readers must keep in mind as we practice cultural literacy today. Part two explores Fiske's engagement with the work of Michel Foucault, specifically the issues of discourses, counter-histories, and counter-knowledges—as necessary for understanding a multicultural society structured in inequality and racial domination. Part three reflects on the politics of media events and the possibilities for effecting social change through intellectual labor.

It is necessary to remember that Fiske is very much a thinker like Michel Foucault in both breadth and depth. As a result, we cannot simply read his books as standalone volumes apart from the rest of his oeuvre. We must read the articles, interviews, and occasional pieces to help us better understand the books. This is a very important strategy in learning "How to Fiske," since the corpus is of a whole. While the books provide us with greater access to the big ideas, it was often in the shorter, or more specialized, pieces where the crystallization of his ideas was worked out. These pieces deepen our appreciation of the books, insofar as they supplement them in that they often contain alternative or different articulations of ideas we encounter in the books. Therefore, I will quote from these materials in several places and allow his own words to best speak for him.

CULTURAL ANALYSIS AS CULTURAL LITERACY

Cultural literacy is not simply the ability to understand and participate within a given culture; rather it is the ability to interrogate how media "matter" in our everyday lives and the ways media construct our political reality. In addition, cultural literacy requires us to analyze how media serve as conduits for deep social conflicts in society. Therefore, we must interpret media in relation to larger questions of social inequality and the ideological apparatuses that reproduce inequalities. Cultural literacy is never fully "accomplished" as if it were a subject over which one gained mastery; rather

it is the ongoing intellectual labor that one constantly engages in by grappling with the multiple “structures of feeling”—the dominant, residual, and emergent cultural currents—that shape society. Following Fiske, we must begin by considering all aspects of culture as “political” in that the production of meaning is always a contested site of social struggle through which the social order can be reproduced, but also questioned, critiqued, challenged, and changed.

MEDIA EVENTS

Central to Fiske’s cultural literacy is the ability to interpret what he refers to as “media events.” Media events shape contemporary life; media events give definition to a particular historical moment in society. As media have fundamentally changed our social relations in contemporary society, we can no longer rely on a “real” event vs. a “media” event distinction. Media events blur the distinction between media and reality. Media no longer produce secondary or supplemental images about reality for us; media now produce the very reality they mediate:

On the contrary, images produce a more urgent (though necessarily more unstable) reality than events themselves. Images which once stood in for a reality outside themselves, now increasingly displace that reality altogether. Images become our primary reality. Their exponential multiplication gives rise to the “defection” of reality and referentiality everywhere. Screens and images invade more and more of the territories within which we conduct our lives.

(Fiske and Glynn 1995: 507)

As media images saturate our society, differences and distinctions become eradicated or eroded. Where once media and reality were separated, they have now become one and the same as media define reality itself through the production of their own self-referential images:

In an image-saturated society, where media images come increasingly from a diverse array of sources—file footage, computer generation, Hollywood films, ‘photo ops’ (where the ‘real’ event exists solely for the purpose of media image generation), reenactment, and so on—the distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false’ or ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ images becomes difficult to sustain, if not entirely meaningless.

(Fiske and Glynn 1995: 509)

As the sources for the production of images proliferate, the notion of an “independent” reality is obsolete. Media determine all significance and

meaning through the entertainment codes, norms, and aesthetic values of media culture. In a media-saturated culture, distinctions of truth and false, real and unreal, objective and subjective become increasingly difficult to maintain. While he sees this as problematic, he does not succumb to a pessimistic viewpoint that society has completely “imploded” into the “hyperreal” where the world is nothing but images. While traditional notions of truth, reality, reason, and knowledge may no longer hold as they once did, they are still very much a part of the critical ways we go about discussing and analyzing the cultural conditions within which we find ourselves.

Media events structure our understanding of who and what we are as a society. As media events become highly visible spectacles that dominate the public consciousness, they draw maximum attention and become shared reference points for people across the social landscape. While spectacles, media events are never unidimensional; nor does the public passively consume them. Media events become flashpoints where the underlying currents of social life boil over into the mainstream of society. As events, they crystallize the deep anxieties, conflicts, and contradictions in society that are often passed over in mainstream media or excluded from official channels of information. As a result, media events become highly contested cultural and political moments that reveal a multiplicity of perspectives, and conflicting interpretations as to their meaning and significance. While media events are highly contested issues, they are also ephemeral and fade from public attention as new events occur and take their place in the public eye. What is most important is not the event itself, but the struggles that exist underneath the events, which continue on long after any one media event occurs. While the social clashes exposed in media events could lead to a political pessimism, they are rather opportunities for public debate and social engagement. As flashpoints of cultural struggles, media events are also potential points of political intervention and political contestation opening up areas of dialogue in the public sphere.

While the media events analyzed in *Media Matters* may have occurred in the 1990s, structurally similar events, particularly those centered on policing the black body, have occurred frequently throughout the 2010s. The heart of *Media Matters* has remained relevant over time—the methodological tools and theoretical frameworks help us to navigate the social landscape through which all media events (past or present) can be analyzed. We can draw upon the examples presented here as mirrors and foils to think about society today. As media platforms have proliferated since the first edition of *Media Matters*—with the development of smart phones, dashboard cameras, police body cameras, the internet, social networking sites, tablets, mp3 files, streaming, and virtual information storage—media are now more pervasive throughout society than ever. As a result, *Media Matters* remains just as

relevant as when it was originally published and has become possibly more important today.

STRUCTURE(S) OF FEELING

Media Matters provides an analytical framework for dissecting the politics of everyday life, for interrogating the cultural currents that run throughout society, and for critiquing the ways that media shape and circulate knowledge through society. Analyzing media events necessitates that we attend to what cultural theorist Raymond Williams terms “the structure of feeling” of our society—that is the understanding of what it feels like to be a member of a particular society in a particular point in time.⁴ Drawing on Williams, Fiske argues that we must always view culture as constantly in flux; culture is a dynamic unfolding amalgamation of processes and practices, a mixture that emerges, becomes dominant, and then eventually fades over time. As a result, we can see the world in terms of multiple temporalities. Culture is never completely coherent or integrated; rather, culture is the process of carrying on some traditions, reworking others, and inventing new ones. Culture is at once past, present, and future. It is the diachronic nature of culture that allows it to be something over which to be struggled. Denying cultural homogenization or universalization, people can always work within their specific material conditions to fashion ways of life of their own making. Although the dominant classes may exert inordinate influence over society, we are never completely dominated. Because the past informs the present, we may draw on resources from that past, shaping the present and future with them. As a result, the temporality of culture provides the opportunities for people to contest taken-for-granted assumptions and viewpoints in society. Therefore, the dominant, the residual, and the emergent are categories to capture and describe the ways that the social order can always be contested. Residual values and expressions can come to be oppositional to the dominant understandings and social organization, and emergent forms might also produce new meanings and practices that effect social change.

According to Fiske, culture is always political, as people can always find tools to resist the colonizing forces of capitalist society, the forces that seek to exclude and eradicate different ways of life from that of the dominant social order. No dominant order can ever exhaust the practices, intentions, energies, and capacities that human beings bring to bear on their worlds.

The cultural analysis of media events must always be an examination of specific times and places, of everyday practices, experiences, and representations in the material conditions of their production. The “structure of feeling” is a way to bridge our own personal experiences in relation to the social structures and historical formations within which we are situated. In

this sense, Fiske emphasizes how *feeling*—the meaning, values, and practices lived and felt by those who are caught up in them—has a *structure* that pulls together people's social experiences and articulates them in terms of shared outlooks and values. The notion of a structure of feeling is important in that it articulates how people infused their worlds with meanings that are never fully determined by the dominant social order. The structure of feeling serves to express subjectivities, communities, and ways of life that can never be integrated fully into the social order. Through the analysis of media events, Fiske reveals an unstable multiplicity of smaller structures of feeling in which different social formations, experiences, and perspectives are expressed. While these smaller structures of feeling may differ from the dominant social order, they are always situated in relation to that dominant order. Therefore the structure of feeling(s) is always a terrain of struggle, in terms of the ways in which social relations and social institutions are defined and structured.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN THE STRUCTURE(S) OF FEELING

As we learn to become more culturally literate, we must also become attuned to a number of societal changes that have occurred as we entered the 21st century within which any analysis of media events must be situated. Fiske identified changes in three interrelated domains in which the global changes associated with postmodernism were to be analyzed in the contemporary multicultural society of the United States:

The first is that of the social order and the social formations that compose it, and here the key words are diversity and multiculturalism; the second is that of economics, where the operations of late capitalism can be characterized as post-Fordist; and the third is that of culture, whose ways of knowing and whose cultural products are typically known as postmodernist. To simplify, we might say that multiculturalism operates in the social order as post-Fordism does in the economic, and post-modernism in culture.

(Fiske 1996b: 45)

These changes in the social, economic, and cultural orders have redefined the structure(s) of feeling in American society. While these three shifts are tightly interwoven and affect each other, they occur at different speeds, are always contested, and are never clear-cut. As a result they each warrant analysis in order to better understand the consequences of these shifts for the analysis of media events and the politics of everyday life.

MULTICULTURALISM

As Fiske argues about multiculturalism and diversity in relation to the social order:

The globalization of capital and its correlative global movement of labor are rapidly turning the European derived societies of the West into multiethnic, multicultural ones. Globalization always provokes localization and one result of these countervailing forces has been the erosion of the nation state from outside by globalization and from within by subnational localization. The subnational conflicts, often between ethnic groups, that are a related feature of the weakening of the nation state continue to produce huge flows of refugees that increase the transnational movement of people. Diaspora, exile, and immigration constitute the normality of a global society . . . And if we realize that those who do not migrate still experience the social effects of migration, then we can say with some certainty that everyone will experience an increasingly fluid and changing social order, and that unstable, multiethnic societies will become the norm that we have to learn to cope with.

(Fiske 1996b: 45)

The issue of diversity and multiculturalism is one that is reconstituting the very social organization of society. With the shifts in capital, labor, and people, the United States is becoming more and more diversified. As a result, previous stable structures, such as nation states, have given way to more porous and flexible social orders. At both the global and local levels, the migrations of people inevitably bring conflict and competition over resources. As a result, multiculturalism and the instability that comes with this new pluralism in the social order is now the reality we must confront. As a result, this necessarily means we must move from a model of society built around a broadly shared consensus of ideas, priorities, and values to one around multiple points of consent in order to account for the diversity that is constitutive of that social order. Only through making multiculturalism both central to our thinking about society and central to our politics can we hope to gain any purchase on achieving social cohesion and reducing, if not eliminating, the mechanisms that structure societies in inequalities.

POST-FORDISM

According to Fiske, the economic realm of late capitalism can be characterized by the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism:

Globalism is always countered by localism, and as capitalism increased its efficiency and distributed its products ever more widely and rapidly it gave

the countervailing tendency towards diversity something to fight against. But, true to its nature, capitalism spotted a market in what appeared to oppose it, and Post-Fordism rapidly diversified its products and their marketing in order to incorporate this tendency. Post-Fordist tendencies, then, are pushing the United States towards a capitalism of multiple, diverse, and short-lived products produced for multiple, diverse, and fluid markets.

(Fiske 1996b: 50)

Under the previous economic order of Fordism, capitalism sought to maximize profits by having its products appeal to the broadest possible audience. In doing so, it worked by constructing a homogenizing commonality across all spheres of life. Fordist capitalism worked through mass marketing and mass production that denied differences of all kinds (class, gender, race, etc.), in order to maximize efficiency and minimize the forms of the commodities produced. In response to the changing global order, post-Fordism has abandoned mass marketing and mass production in order to cultivate market segmentation and niche production. Where once homogeneity reigned, now diversification generates products for diverse locales and multiple and fluid markets. Just as the social order has been reorganized through diversification, a parallel shift in the economic order is seen.

POSTMODERNISM

Fiske argues that the cultural realm is defined by postmodernist cultural products and modes of understanding:

While what postmodernism is continues to elude anchorage, there is an emerging set of issues which most users of the word would agree are ones with which it centrally engages. One of these is the image saturation of late capitalist society that has volatized any notion of a stable and singular reality principle. In these conditions, truth loses its finality and objectivity, multiplies and becomes a process of constant resimulation and contestation. Television has no problems in coping with these symptoms of post-modernity; for, in deluging us with images more comprehensively than any other medium, it is responsible for producing those symptoms rather than responding to them.

(Fiske and Glynn 1995: 505)

Postmodernism defines the conditions whereby culture has shifted from a single coherent understanding of society to a multiplicity of competing and conflicting perspectives. In postmodernism, images are no longer direct reflections or representations whose meanings are self-evident (Fiske 1997). As a result, previously shared foundational notions of truth, objectivity, and

hierarchies of understanding and representation get called into question. The ways that knowledge is constituted becomes a political issue in itself. The constant resimulation of images that media produce only serves to further disorient us. As media platforms expand, society is ever more inundated with images and more efficient and effective technologies have emerged for producing more and more images. However, postmodernism only helps explain the top-down disciplinary regulation and organization of society. What postmodernism doesn't do is:

say what the people do with the signifiers they have torn away from the ideological signified. But the process doesn't stop there, they then go on to do something with them, and what they do with them is not postmodern at all. They relate them very securely to their immediate conditions of existence, to the immediate conditions of their everyday life. There is no infinitely deferred meaning in the lives of the people, there are very securely grounded meanings in the conditions in which they live.

(Fiske 1993b: 54)

What is more important than the media saturation of society is the ways that people interpret media and the ways they put those interpretations to use in meaningful ways in everyday life. While the social space of contemporary society may be an unending stream of media images that appears chaotic, analyzing society from the bottom up highlights the concrete and grounded conditions within which people make sense of and stabilize that flux. As a result, the analysis of media events becomes ever more important in helping us negotiate these cultural shifts in society today.

DIAGNOSTIC THINKING

These shifts in the social, economic, and cultural have opened up a multiplicity of understandings, perspectives, and ways of life that are not always compatible and congruent. As such, we can see Fiske as a diagnostic thinker who seeks to understand the contemporary reality in which we live—the structures of feeling—and one who offers practical modes of intervention into that reality.⁵ Fiske's mode of analysis is always one that is self-reflexive in that media events are always to be interpreted in the context of their historical conditions. *Media Matters* offers us a diagnostic framework to unearth the cultural currents that give rise to the politics of everyday life in the media events that momentarily crystallize them. This diagnostic illuminates the ways media events can reaffirm top-down hegemonic or ideological positions, but also opens those positions up to interrogation. By doing so, this expands our notion of the political by demonstrating how media events are

never straightforward and are always in need of analysis. Media events must be analyzed in terms of their specific contexts, and how different social positions in society render them intelligible and meaningful. Ultimately, media events reveal the complexity of social life and the social inequalities within which our contemporary society is structured.

COUNTER-HISTORY AND COUNTER-KNOWLEDGE

To fully appreciate Fiske's mode of analysis, we must turn to his engagement with the work of Michel Foucault. While he draws heavily on Foucault, especially *Discipline and Punish*, in his book *Power Plays Power Works*, where he works with Foucault's notions of power, bodies and resistance, there is another, although less explicit, Foucault that runs throughout *Media Matters*.⁶ This Foucault focuses on the historical construction of truth/knowledge that circulates in societies. Here Foucault's notion of "discourse" and "effective history" are drawn on to theorize the discontinuities in events and multiple interpretations that can be made of them, and to think against hegemonic representations and taken-for-granted assumptions about society.

Extending Foucault, Fiske draws out the multi-discursive and multicultural nature of contemporary society to emphasize the constant contestation by which dominant forms of knowledge and discourse seek to repress, marginalize, and invalidate other forms. The emphasis on "multi," rather than "plural," illuminates the multiple, competing, and non-consensual positions and points of view that exist in contemporary society. By exploring the power dynamics in society and by looking at the ways that the dominant discourses and narratives are constructed, "effective" counter-histories and counter-knowledges challenge the dominant point of view. Because knowledge and discourse are social products with political consequences for societies structured in inequality, they are always terrains of struggle over meaning and representation. Since the political power of "effective" counter-histories and counter-knowledges is not self-evident, Fiske engages in hard intellectual labor to document how power relations are always both productive and repressive, depending on how they are put to use.

DISCOURSE

Fiske argues for an analytical approach to the study of culture, one which moves beyond ideology:

I suppose the problem with ideology for me is its traditional Marxist use, which is very much a homogenous, top-down way of knowledge. And the more my focus has changed towards how people actually live in capitalism,