

# APPROACHES *to* MEDIA

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## A READER



EDITED BY

**Oliver Boyd-Barrett  
& Chris Newbold**

FOUNDATIONS  
IN MEDIA

FOUNDATIONS IN MEDIA

*General editor:* Oliver Boyd-Barrett

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A member of the Hodder Headline Group

LONDON • NEW YORK • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND

First published in Great Britain in 1995 by  
Arnold, a division of Hodder Headline PLC  
338 Euston Road, London NW1 3BH  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

Distributed exclusively in the USA by  
St Martin's Press Inc.,  
175 Fifth Avenue,  
New York, NY 10010

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90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1P 9HE.

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

A catalog entry for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN 0 340 65229 2 (Pb)

ISBN 0 340 65230 6 (Hb)

1 2 3 4 5 95 96 97 98 99

Produced by Gray Publishing, Tunbridge Wells

Printed and bound in Great Britain by J. W. Arrowsmith Ltd, Bristol

## General editor's preface

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This volume is one of a series of five readers which aim to provide a comprehensive set of resources for media studies courses. Other volumes of the series address the following themes: media in global context; media industries and professions; audiences and reception; and media texts. Each volume of the series is intended to stand alone for the benefit of individual students or course organizers of courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels in media, journalism and broadcasting, communications, cultural and literary studies and, more generally, of courses in sociology, politics, and literature and education. Taken together, the volumes provide a broad introduction to the study of media, and they cover each of the major issues, topics, themes, approaches and methodologies encountered in the study of media. They are also intended to provide an international inflection both in source and in topic, which is in line with the processes of globalization of the media industries and with world-wide interest in the study of the media.

*Oliver Boyd-Barrett*

# Editors' introduction: approaching the media

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*Oliver Boyd-Barrett and Chris Newbold*

Our intention in this volume is to identify and illustrate what are arguably the major traditions of scholarly enquiry in the field of communications media since the 1940s.

Our principal purpose has been to provide convenient access for students of both undergraduate and postgraduate courses in mass communications to original articles that may be said either to have had a seminal influence or which have encapsulated in some way the major features of a tradition or part of one, and which students might otherwise have difficulty in locating. We think it is important to stress that our aim is to provide readers and students with a flavour of the concerns of each of the traditions we have identified, rather than try to include for each tradition an exhaustive or even a modestly complete range of all the key texts which it might reasonably be argued have been seminal. There is a strong historical inflection, given that it is often the older texts that are most difficult for students to track down, even though such texts often retain considerable influence on thinking within a field. We were inspired to set about this task in the context of preparation of the MA in Mass Communications (by Distance Learning) at the Centre for Mass Communications Research, University of Leicester, whose students are recruited from a number of different countries around the world, and whose access to good libraries is highly variable.\*

A secondary purpose of the volume is to introduce and provide a companion resource for the series of five volumes of which this is the first, and which together aim to provide key source and illustrative material, as well as original contributions to the major dimensions of media research, here identified as media globalization, industries and professions, audiences and media reception, texts and language.

Needless to say, there is no one way of narrating the history of media research nor of illustrating that history. There are different accounts of the history of media study, and the tensions and contradictions between these accounts constitute an illuminating study in itself. Furthermore, we are talking of a relatively young field of enquiry, and there is still considerable scope for review and reconceptualization of the significance of what has occurred over the past 50 years. Although it is not possible nor is it desirable to try to establish water-tight boundaries between any of the traditions that are

\*The volumes are course readers for the MA in Mass Communications (by Distance Learning) which has been developed by the University of Leicester for students on a world-wide basis. As such they offer what their editors believe to represent a range of rich resource materials for any course in the area of media. Readers of these volumes who would like more information about the CMCR distance learning degree should write to the Course Secretary, Centre for Mass Communication Research, University of Leicester, 104 Regent Road, Leicester LE1 7LT, United Kingdom.

variously identified here, it is useful to identify outstanding differences between different traditions of enquiry. This is because:

- many authors have been consciously influenced in their work by a sense of belonging, not necessarily exclusively, to one or more particular lines of enquiry;
- some authors are commonly identified – though not necessarily with their participation or consent – as belonging to one or another tradition;
- identifying differences between approaches, in the manner of a semiotic paradigm, can be an aid to the process of understanding any single approach;
- some of these traditions reveal a process of conscious self-reflection, development and progress which can best be understood through an awareness of the particular journeys which they have charted.

It is important to acknowledge that taxonomies (systems of classification) imposed upon a field of study can exaggerate differences and obscure interconnections, which is why it is best, where possible, to recognize the labels that researchers have tended to ascribe to themselves – although that in itself may not overcome the temptations of over-rigid compartmentalization. While media research is generally cautious if not critical of post-modernism, post-modernism's disregard for historical polarities and its relish for inter-textuality offers a reminder of the dangers of taking too seriously the outcome of divisions hermeneutically constructed.

The 'traditions' identified are not all of a kind, given that the sites and the motives behind any convergence among a group of scholars are different. We can speak of traditions which are represented in terms of the broad lines of their ideological trajectory: for example, pluralist studies are recognized by their premise that the media operate in a multi-interest society and are part of the process of competition for influence in such a society (whether or not particular authors who have been 'assigned' a place in this tradition were conscious at the time that they were likely to be thus assigned). Alternative points of convergence may be methodological, as in the new wave of ethnographic audience or reception studies, the significance of which can be understood only with reference to the strength of the proceeding popularity of hegemony theory, and the cruder or more reductionist assumptions which it sometimes made about the influence on the thinking and behaviour of individuals of systemic or élitist forces, operating through media.

Yet other points of convergence may be neither theoretical nor methodological, but simply taxonomic labels which signify a general area of content, as might be the case with the 'public sphere'. In practice, convergences around theory, methodology and content tend to be inter-related. The 'public sphere' signifies a broad interest in the way in which communications media relate to opportunities or the lack of them for the formulation by individuals and social groups of ideas, policies and policy options, with a view to the exercise of influence on the political process. But the term itself has been coined by Habermas (1962), and carries with it the traces of his particular historical account of the development of democracy and the welfare state, and which has developed along a particular trajectory of concern tending to focus on the role of public media, and the influence of the contrary processes in recent

decades of commercialization, privatization, consolidation and deregulation.

As well as recognizing differences, the volume draws attention to similarities, for example between the early 'functionalist' studies which asked how mass media functioned to integrate the lives and cultures of individuals with the broader, organic features of societies, and 'hegemony' studies which radically rephrased and humanized the question of the relationship between media and society – 'how do mass media participate in the construction of consensus among heterogeneous cultural groupings in the interests of ruling classes or élites?' It is not surprising, therefore, to find articles that could easily belong to two or more traditions. The classic study of Adorno and Horkheimer, for example, might have been identified as belonging to 'hegemony' theory or even to 'the public sphere'. It could as easily have been included as an introduction to cultural studies or located in a 'Marxist' category. Here, the editors have chosen a brief extract that serves as a robust statement of 'mass society' theory, a concern which inspired a great deal of sociological and literary writing at the time.

"We are painfully aware not only that we cannot possibly do justice to any one of the traditions which we wish to exemplify, but that some traditions are barely acknowledged at all. In some cases this is simply for lack of space. In others it is because the tradition lies too far outside the scope of mainstream social science to be relevant to the editors' main purpose. In other cases omissions signal the intention to include further source materials in later volumes of this series. The field of 'cultural' or 'media imperialism' for example, is represented here only by Schiller's 1969 classic formulation and has been located under 'political economy'. It has not been possible to represent each of the major stages of 'media effects' research; nor is there explicit recognition of the particular contributions of psychology and social psychology, although these tend to be concentrated in the fields of early effects studies on voting, attitudes and questions of media violence. The new social historiography is here represented in the section on media occupations and professionals by an extract from Scannell and Cardiff's social history of the BBC.

The multiplicity of different taxonomies and different narratives about the study of media over the years serves in itself as a caution against any temptation to attribute to any one taxonomy a particular 'truth' value. A classification is informed in part by the ideas that researchers have had about their own projects and about their significance in relation to preceding projects, and in part by the particular inter-relationships and contrasts which the editors, from the vantage point of a particular moment in time, can identify and justify as meaningful. Inevitably, these judgements, while informed and influenced by our membership of a relatively small intellectual community whose common culture is sustained by a substantial degree of shared access to a range of discourses and literatures, are to an extent idiosyncratic, and they are certainly temporal. Alternative classifications would have been quite possible, so there is no claim to exclusivity. In choosing this particular taxonomy, we have taken account of the (conflicting) meta-narratives that others in the field have offered. The volume has ten sections, each with a section introduction which contains references for further reading. In each section we attempt to offer a good chronological range, with representation of different foci within each range.

In order to secure a reasonably broad range we have generally chosen extracts in preference to complete chapters or articles. The volume as a whole is organized in terms of a loose chronology, Sections 2 and 3 tending to reflect predominantly contributions from the earlier years of the discipline, moving through 'media effects', 'public sphere', media occupations, to cultural hegemony and feminist studies, moving image, and finally, to the post-Foucauldian period marked among other things by a vigorous ethnographic approach to audience or reception studies. The volume as a whole does not include as much work as we would have liked from 1990s sources, but later volumes in the series will compensate for this; the historical inflection of this, the first volume, underlines its status as a 'companion' to later volumes as well as providing an account, in its own right, of the different traditions of research in the field.

For us, this has been an enlightening experience, sometimes a faintly nostalgic one where we have revisited contributions that have lain neglected for decades. We have been encouraged by the evidence of progress and development in the field even as we are also impressed by the cyclical character of intellectual fashion. But cycles, spirals for example, need not necessarily be circles. There are still very great differences of position, focus, ideology in the field. The success of the wave of 'new audience studies' for example does not seem to us to have reduced the necessity to maintain an interest in media industries, production and media texts, which have a great deal of bearing on the range of cultural products that are made available. We suspect that the gulf between academics and professionals is almost as great as ever, although among the academics there are some who are more clearly working on behalf of professional training than of theoretical development. There is a gulf, too, between those who are still consciously directed by theory and the ambition of theoretical development and others who, distrustful of and disappointed by such ambition, manage to work with little or no reference to formal academic theories at all. In this volume, however, we have tended to privilege contributions to theory because we believe it is through theoretical development that some of the most significant advances in the field have been achieved. But we suspect that the passion which fuelled earlier clashes in the field, between Marxists and pluralists, for example, is not present in as much force in the field today. The extraordinary political changes that were introduced through the Reaganite and Thatcherite eras, the collapse of the Soviet Union and of the communist republics of Eastern Europe, the economic prosperity of many countries of Asia and Southeast Asia are among a number of the forces which have contributed to a loss of certainty, but leading, perhaps, towards a greater appreciation of the values of eclecticism, open mindedness and dialogue in theory, research design and methodology.



# Acknowledgements

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The work of compiling a course reader of this kind, while very different from authoring an entirely original text, is often a fairly considerable challenge of intellectual consolidation and organization. So we have found in this case, and we are also very conscious of the fact that without the support and back-up of the distance-learning team, and of our colleagues in the Centre for Mass Communication Research, this volume would have been even longer in the making than in fact proved to be the case. We are especially indebted to Jane Walker, the Course Secretary, for her work in tracing copyright holders and in organizing the permissions, and to Jim McKenna, Research Assistant, whose work in keeping track of the contributions, maintaining them in order, and marking up and marshallng the final manuscript, was vital to the whole enterprise. We are thankful to all our colleagues, students, and not least our families who had to put with not a little disruption on our account.

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# Section 1

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## The field



## Defining the field

*Oliver Boyd-Barrett and Chris Newbold*

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If the study of media represents a 'field', it is a field with indistinct boundaries; a playing field, marked out for a variety of different games, subject to distinctive titles and rules, each game with its own painted lines, but the lines of each game overlapping those of others. Each game also has its own spectators, and among these there are some who have come just for the game in which they have most interest, and there are others whose attention spans the field for sight of any match that looks interesting or exciting.

The work in this first section represents attempts by some leading players of these different games at defining both the relationships between different approaches or traditions of enquiry within the field, and those between academe and the society which it studies and attempts to address. It also gives us a sense of what were the 'dominant paradigms' – the most fashionable games – at given moments of the history of the development of the field.

Within the bounds of the extracts presented in this section, the notion of the field as a whole, although often flagged, is rarely discussed, and perhaps even more rarely established. A few collective endeavours have attempted to make connections between differently-inflected attempts to identify field boundaries, such as those signified by the terms 'mass communication', 'communication', and 'media studies'. Not the least of these endeavours was 'Ferment in the field' (*Journal of Communication*, 1983), and, again, in the more recent volumes of that same journal, articles entitled 'The future of the field I' and 'The future of the field II' (*Journal of Communication*, 1993a, b). This latter volume is subtitled 'between fragmentation and cohesion', an indication, perhaps, of the unsettled and unsettling debate that periodically comes to the fore. The nature of this debate need not detain or restrain us too long here, suffice to say that the field is a term which enables us to discuss under one umbrella the eclectic nature of mass communications research. It is also important to remember that while such field-boundaries have long histories, and are often jealously guarded, they may have little actual substance or meaning to those outside academic discourse, and their significations may seem very fluid and elusive even to those inside it.

Much of the debate represented in these extracts came from contributions to the study of 'mass communication', which is indeed one of the earliest labels used to identify the field. This term has particular strengths, as it invites our attention to the industries and industrial practices which lie behind communications media such as television, radio, newspapers, film, and music,