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My Media Studies

Thoughts from Nick Couldry

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Now is a good time to be reviewing whether, and on what terms, it still makes sense to carve out a separate domain of critical research, marked “media studies.” As someone whose hinterland is in social theory and critical sociology in the C. Wright Mills “tradition,” I’m positioned differently from many in media studies, but one attraction of the field is its cross-disciplinary appeal and disciplinary inclusiveness. From my particular position, where would I like media studies to be headed during *Television & New Media’s* second decade on the road?

Let’s start from what media studies has taught us so far. The economics of cultural and especially media production matter. Media texts are complicated, spilling over into all sorts of secondary and tertiary material. Audiences are complicated too: They reinterpret, reuse, forget, ignore; a few form interpretative communities, many don’t. As these specific terrains have been mapped, we have started to realize that each is part of a much larger space of practices oriented toward media: what, given these processes’ complexity and fluidity, might be best called a media environment (on practice, see Couldry 2006, chap. 4; on media as environment, see Gitlin 2001; Silverstone 2006). Since *The Place of Media Power*, I’ve tried, from a starting point in audience research, to develop tools for grasping the vast yet highly structured nature of this media environment (Couldry 2000; cf. Couldry 2003b).

Where next then? While sticking to my earlier claim that researching media must, in some way, deliver on three basic concerns for any critical social science (knowledge, agency, and ethics: Couldry 2006, 25–30), I realize this tells us little about the main challenges visible on the horizon of media studies, so let me be more specific.

Media studies, while still doing many of the things it has learned to do so well (read texts, track audiences, and plot media’s political economies), needs to broaden and deepen its field of analysis. This is what I mean by “theorising media as practice” (Couldry 2006, chap. 3). Why? Not just to generate new things to occupy us, but more seriously to sustain media studies as critical research that cuts into media-saturated everyday life in a way that grasps media’s deep entanglements with processes of power. Let me suggest three ways in which this broadening and deepening of media studies might be pursued.

First, if, as we so often claim, our life worlds are media saturated, then we need to look at processes of media saturation through a wider angled lens. A media-saturated world is a world where actions oriented to media are precisely not limited

to production, direct consumption, and further circulation. Media norms are internalized and embodied; media resources become part of the infrastructure of many types of activity; powerful media actors (not just media organizations, but most states, many corporations, some political parties, and nongovernmental organizations) use that power to alter the action space around them. We still know far too little, with the possible exception of mediated politics (Meyer 2003), about how authority, value, and power—in short, competition in the social field—is being transformed by the intense mediation of all social activities, for example in schools, health services, or the legal profession. These are areas where media studies could connect productively with a wide range of disciplines, but this requires the definition of *media studies* to include the long-term consequences of mediation in many areas not directly concerned with media production, consumption, or circulation (cf. Couldry 2003a).

Second, there are interesting issues emerging about the social authority and reach of media institutions. As I have argued elsewhere (Couldry 2003b), the particular institutional arrangements around media intersect in particular places with the broader social construction of “the media” as a central access point to social realities. Clearly, old constructions of “the media” are subject to considerable tension in an era of fragmenting audiences, multiplying media technologies, intensified flows of images and people across national borders, and declining engagement with traditional state-based “politics.” Since until now modern states have relied on “the media’s” construction to underwrite a space where their politics can “appear,” contemporary states face a potential crisis of appearances, as much a crisis for traditional media institutions as for political actors. This crisis won’t be resolved soon but provides good reason to look closely at how media’s authority and ritual power are being sustained in various ways, for example through the metagenre of “reality TV” and celebrity culture.

The always partly transnational but often intensely local space of celebrity culture links to a third new dimension of media research: transnational comparison. Because of not just transnational media flows but also the welcome geographical dispersal of media studies as a discipline, the absurdity of defining the key priorities for media research from a supposed “center” is now obvious. What’s less clear is how the inherited concepts and methodologies of media research are adequate to reflect the complexities of transnational comparison: If there are “media cultures” (we generally assume there are), they are not the same in Los Angeles or Mumbai or Tehran, but we don’t yet have good templates for effective comparison. Yet there is no other way forward for any issue within media research except through an intensive transnationalization of concepts, methods, and historical reference points.

All of this arises the context of a broader crisis of voice within “neoliberal democracies” across political, economic, and cultural domains (Couldry 2008), which gives special bite to media studies’ continued interest in media’s role within the materialities of power.

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