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Why media studies needs better social theory

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Chapter 1

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Why Media Studies Needs Better Social Theory

David Hesmondhalgh and Jason Toynbee

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This book derives from a 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 meta-theoretical dimension – that is they do not establish basic premises about the nature of media in modern society. Except in a rather oblique fashion, they fail to confront issues of *causation*, from, within and to 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.

¹ 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 Judith Butler's concept of 'performativity' than to see her concepts analysed in relation to the fundamental principles underlying her work.² 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 essay 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

¹ In the broader sense in which we use social theory in this book, to include political theory and cultural theory. Some are perhaps more readily identified as other things – Habermas, Deleuze and Butler as philosophers, Foucault as a historian.

² Such fetishism is not unique to media theory of course. In sociology, the holy trinity of Marx, Durkheim and Weber have formed the basis of classical social theory for decades. All three of these names occasionally make an appearance in media and communication theory too. But it seems to us that sociologists would tend to make less selective use of this holy trinity than media studies researchers have of the theorists mentioned above.

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 inquiry.

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 to 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 in 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, and 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 generalizations 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 socialization, the rationality of knowledge, and the legitimation 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.³ 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

³ To clarify, this is not to say that Foucauldian work is atheoretical, but rather that its theory either concerns other things than society, or else treats the social as an epiphenomenon of discourse, power-knowledge, governmentality and so on.

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 over the past thirty years.

This is not only a matter of our own evaluation. Most significantly, the broadly constructionist approach has grown exponentially over the last twenty years 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 a 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) meta-theoretical 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 amongst these writers and thinkers, and amongst 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 MEDIA-CENTRISM

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.⁴ 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 TV 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 at 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 up media theory 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.⁵ This split makes pedagogical sense, for this is how much research is divided up, with

⁴ In our experience, research methods are much less often taught to undergraduates in media, communication and cultural studies than in other social science programmes, but that is another matter.

⁵ We should own up that we ourselves decided to maintain this division (while acknowledging its limitations) in putting together a new Open University media studies course for the 2000s, DA204 Understanding Media (see for example Evans and Hesmondhalgh, 2005).

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 USA, 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.⁶ 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

⁶ Especially when told with the enjoyable vigour of Scannell (2007) or the rigorous originality of Morrison (1998).

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. Firstly 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 pigeon-holed 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 80s. But where political economy focussed on cultural commodities and the role of the media sector in contemporary capitalism, cultural studies was concerned with the interlinked questions of ideology and representation. To put it in Marxisant terms, the former concentrated on the media as base, while the latter treated media as superstructure. This difference in identifying what was the central *problem* of the media in capitalist society increasingly turned into a difference about selecting *objects of study*. For political economy the focus tended to be on production, for cultural studies it was texts, and then very quickly audiences and consumption. And in a series of related splits, cultural studies analysed popular culture and entertainment media whereas political economy examined

news and factual media. As for the formulation of media policy, it was claimed by political economy while the everyday experience of media belonged to cultural studies.

Several points need to be made about these developments. First, they involved a double, theoretical-empirical carving up of the field. It may well be the case that the kinds of specialization encapsulated in the split constitute a legitimate academic division of labour. However what is problematic is the superimposition of such specialization on to the theoretical and normative divide between political economy and cultural studies. This has greatly reduced the possibility of grounding a theoretical debate between the two camps because each has little knowledge of (or respect for) the media events, processes and experiences investigated by the other.

The division has also been accompanied by a growing theoretical parochialism. Interestingly, as media and culture became increasingly important topics in the social sciences more broadly (the so-called 'cultural turn') so media studies itself grew more inward looking. Perhaps the fact that other disciplines were looking towards this emergent field had the effect of reducing the perceived need to look from inside out. The double theory-topic split surely had an impact too. Both camps in media studies grew more mediacentric, more concerned with justifying which media elements or processes were key, while the bigger question of the media in society, which the debate had begun with, became less important.

As for their political concerns, while political economy and cultural studies originally shared a commitment to human emancipation derived from Marxism, as Marxism lost credibility in the academy so each branch sought new political footings. On the one hand, cultural studies developed a form of (mainly affirmative) identity politics

influenced by feminism and black cultural politics, but also poststructuralist thought. Representation of particular group identities in and through the media became the main focus, while the everyday was taken up as the demotic emblem of a populist 'everyone'. On the other hand, by the early 1990s political economy was calling up Habermas's work on the public sphere to justify arguments for public ownership and control of the media in the interests of communicative rationality.

Finally, these crypto-normative rationales have been overlaid onto a persisting dispute about culture and economy. So, whereas political economy emphasised the importance of understanding the economy and polity as primary causal factors in shaping the character of media, researchers in cultural studies emphasised the first-ness of culture and the autonomous, constructed nature of all knowledge (see, for example, Hall 1997)

This story of political economy versus cultural studies is worth telling we think, because while it is a shorthand account of the trajectory of a complex academic field it nevertheless characterises a major dispute between distinct positions. For that reason, we cannot agree with those who impatiently snort that the division is entirely redundant and meaningless and we should just move on. Equally, we do not endorse calls for reconciliation based on the smoothing over of substantive issues of difference. This is simply not possible under present circumstances. For the various episodes of the schism, outlined above, now mutually reinforce one another to the extent that dialogue between the camps only deepens the split. The problem, then, is that media studies lacks theoretical frames which might enable synthesis and in turn transcendence of existing entrenched positions. Our view, as should already be clear, is that a more explicit address of critical social theory can help to provide such a frame, and enable dialogue to take place on clearer ground.

FROM SOCIAL TO MEDIA THEORY

There are two main elements we would want to take from social theory. The first is a much stronger philosophical grounding of normative questions. Media studies thinks of itself as critical, in the broad and often undefined sense that it seeks to draw attention to things that are wrong in the world, especially of course in the media. Yet, as we saw in the previous section incommensurate positions have developed across the field about what the good and the just might be. These, we would argue, are crypto-normative positions because they do not make clear the basis of their claims. So, cultural relativists tend to emphasise the context-specificity of values, and deny the possibility of arriving at ethical judgements outside the parameters of particular cultures. Any attempts to do so are labelled as universalist, via an assertion (more than an argument) that such universalism would deny cultures their autonomy. Relativism in media studies has also come in through the work of Foucault, who, as Nancy Fraser puts it,

vacillates between two equally inadequate stances. On the one hand, he adopts a concept of power that permits him no condemnation of any objectionable features of modern societies. But at the same time... his rhetoric betrays the conviction that modern societies are utterly without redeeming features. Clearly what Foucault [...] needs desperately are normative criteria for distinguishing acceptable from unacceptable forms of power' (Fraser, 1989: 33).

Meanwhile, among political economists and their liberal compatriots, universalism persists. Yet as with the anti-universalism of the relativists, it is not well justified in most accounts. It may be inferred from the materialism of some of the analysis; we all have

economic interests and it is therefore possible to evaluate the organisation of the media on the basis of how it relates to questions of distribution. Or else there may be a liberal appeal to communicative reason, the public sphere or simply the need for pluralism. But not only is the normative case very thin in both approaches (why does distribution matter, why is pluralism good and should everybody have to have it?) the standpoint of the researcher hardly gets addressed. This is important. We would argue that reflexivity about the position from which researchers research is a valuable contribution of postmodernism and a crucial counter to the assumption often made in empiricist research that neutrality is both desirable and possible. Still, such reflexivity need not exclude normative thinking. Indeed, our view is that we need to move beyond the Manichean binaries that prevail in what passes for ethical thought in many parts of media studies.⁷ There is no good reason why acknowledgement of standpoint and the particularity of cultures cannot be accommodated along with a universal ethics.

A number of strands in social theory can help us here. As Andrew Sayer suggests, '[h]uman beings are indeed extraordinarily diverse, but we should ask what is it about them which enables them to exhibit such variety?' His answer is that, '[f]or it to be possible for anything to be shaped in a particular way (for example by culture) it must be the kind of thing which is susceptible to such shaping, that is, it must have (or have acquired) the affordances and resistances which allow such shaping' (2004). Human

⁷ We would point, however, to interesting development in some media studies, involving much greater attention to analytical ethics (see, for example, Kieran, 1998 and Couldry, 2006) but also John Durham Peters' brilliant unpicking, in his book *Speaking into the Air*, of the normative assumptions that have accrued around the notion of 'communication'.

beings, we might say, depend for their very acculturation on a set of shared propensities which then issue in cultural difference. It follows that it is theoretically possible to build an ethics anthropologically, ‘up’ from what it is that is shared. This argument certainly helps to provide the ontological grounds for an ethics.

To specify what it might consist in we can turn to a growing body of work which would both delineate the normative and relocate it at the heart of social theory. So, there is the ongoing debate between Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth (2003) about whether it is possible to base an ethics solely on the principle of recognition.⁸ And we have the ‘qualified ethical naturalism’ of Andrew Sayer (2005) – ‘naturalist in that it considers that the very nature of good and bad cannot be determined without reference to the nature of human social being’ (218); qualified because it acknowledges cultural shaping of the interpretation of needs, and even in some cases of those needs themselves (219). Sayer draws here upon the approach of the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2001), who argues for the central importance of human flourishing in a practical ethics where compassion is key. Compassion involves a sense of social solidarity that is epistemological as well emotional in character. One recognises oneself in the other, one weighs the scale of the other’s predicament, one judges that the other person was not responsible for the predicament herself (321).

It is very common in media studies to hear ‘universalisation’ and especially ‘essentialism’ used as terms of abuse. The problem is that these values remain underexplored. An invocation of Gayatri Spivak’s notion of ‘strategic essentialism’ or Paul Gilroy’s ‘anti-anti-essentialism’ is as far as those media researchers concerned with such issues are

⁸ For a discussion see John Downey’s chapter in this volume.

likely to go. But the lazy and widespread accusation of essentialism in ‘the politics of culture’ runs the danger of brushing aside the important search for the characteristic properties of the good. The new attention to practical ethics in social theory, and especially notions of recognition and human flourishing as universal yet non-exclusionary norms, may thus provide an important resource for media studies in all branches.

A second element in critical social theory that might help to renew media theory is the concept of causality, the idea that the significant thing we are trying to find out about in society is why things happen – including of course why we have the media that we have. The predominant view in cultural studies is that the social is a matter of representation or discourse. This essentially flat notion does away with cause and depth. Instead there is radical contingency, actually a crypto-normative value because it implies that what’s good is the unexpected, and that exciting things happen in culture through discovery and the creative power of chance. Alternatively, as sometimes found in the Foucauldian *conspicuous*, there is a tendency to pose continuity – for example, Foucault’s leading question about the history of sexuality: ‘Was there really a historical rupture between the age of repression and the critical analysis of repression?’ (1990: 10). Ceaseless contingent change or monumental continuity; these seem to be the predominant approaches in cultural studies to the problem of history. Among materialists in the political economy tradition, on the other hand, the driver of history is big business, or an unholy alliance of political and corporate elites. Here there is certainly a big cause, but the danger is that it is treated as overwhelming and unchallengeable.

We would suggest, then, that what is lacking across the board in media studies is reflection on the general problem of social causality. This is an issue which social theory continues to be strongly interested in. At its centre is the long running structure-agency

debate in which there have been partisans on side or the other (for example the functionalist-interactionist dispute), but also attempts at synthesis which give due weight to both sides. Anthony Giddens' structuration theory is probably the best known of these (Giddens, 1984) and indeed it has had some influence in media studies (e.g., Moores, 2005). Yet arguably Giddens is guilty of 'elisionism' (Archer, 1995: 93-8), that is to say the running together of structure and agency such that they become inseparable. The possibility that causality arises in the relations between these elements thus disappears. Our preference would then be for a realist theory of structure and agency which insists on their ontological distinctiveness yet mutual impact upon one another across time. This should be coupled with an understanding of society as *deep*, that is to say consisting in layered structures or generative mechanisms, but where, nevertheless, higher levels are irreducible to lower ones. Some notion of 'emergence' is therefore necessary in order to account for new things and events, and clearly agency itself must be considered as an emergent property of human subjects (Archer, 1995, Bhaskar, 1998).

Abstract as it is, the enormous advantage of such an approach is that enables us to think about agency and structure together in ways which not only do justice to the efficacy of both, but which may be carried into empirical work to help explain their inter-relationship in the world of human experience and events. This connects to the issue of normativity. For agency, emergent from structure, clearly has a strong normative dimension. Nowhere is this more palpable than in the media where normative questions about the choices made by audiences, the state, companies, and individual producers are rightly central to research. Yet without some theoretical means for evaluating the cause of new kinds of interpretation, representation, or changing media regimes – that is to say through discriminating between structure and agency – we have no means of critical analysis, and ultimately no possibility of intervening in the world of the media.

There is one further issue that arises in relation to causality. We accused media studies of parochialism and mediacentrism above. Too much attention has been paid to the media qua media, either because the world is considered to be a product of representation with the media then being the central means of that representation, or else the media are treated as obscurers of the real world as in pessimistic political economy approaches. (Of course this is a caricature, but as before we are inclined to carry on painting with a thick brush for the heuristic advantages it may bring.) In such a context, theories of causality derived from social theory enable a return to the question of media in society, itself a variant of the culture and society problem sketched by Raymond Williams many years ago. We can begin thinking again about how media do things in society, how society impacts on media, and indeed how there is complex determination through and between each. Most of all this will call for a certain de-specialization, a looking outward from the media to social relations in general. But that's what social theory is very good at.

We should of course concede that this outline has been one that leans towards critical realism, and away from post-structuralism; that manifests a preference for the argumentative strategies of analytical and post-analytical philosophy over continental traditions; and that seeks synthesis rather than exploration. No doubt, some of our contributors would not share such preferences. However, there are general aims of good theorising that transcend such differences, and which we believe are apparent even in the uses of theory made by chapters far removed from our own inclinations. What's more, at a meta-level we would contend that the differences in this collection point up many of the issues we have been talking about. In other words, the book has a probing, question raising agenda about kinds of theory and what it is for, rather than a party line.

Undoubtedly, the use of social theory can enrich our understanding of social problems, unmet needs, suffering and dubious beliefs. It can also undermine the cosy assumptions of more abstract philosophy through its role in underpinning the exacting analysis of case studies. These may in turn suggest new avenues of analysis. We identify examples of this kind of more general use of social theory in media analysis in the outline of individual chapters that follows this section. That said, there needs to be a sensible division of labour between those who focus on philosophical underpinnings and those who employ social theory to achieve a more thorough investigation of the social through empirical work. We also recognise that some of the critical social theory that we have been praising here has not done nearly enough to integrate the theoretical with the empirical (this for example is still true of critical realism – an observation also made by Baert, 2000). So, as usual in the production of knowledge, we can say there is plenty more work to do.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

How then do the chapters in this book use social theory to enrich our understanding of the relations in and between media and society? We have identified four broad themes of central importance to media theory that our contributors address in the four parts that follow.

The first part is concerned with the theme of *Power and Democracy* that has been so central to much of media studies. Chapter 2, by Kari Karppinen, exemplifies for us the potential benefits of careful attention to critical social theory when it comes to questions of normativity. Karppinen confronts head-on the questions raised by the very widespread

commitment to pluralism in media studies and media theory, manifest in the abundant concern with difference, identity and anti-essentialism in the literature. As Karppinen explains, the problem is that the pluralism implicitly invoked by much media studies is a very ambiguous normative principle. It is not unusual to see the work of Chantal Mouffe mobilised to criticise Habermasian approaches to democracy, and Karppinen summarises the debates here. He points out though that the radical or agonistic pluralism of Mouffe and others has rarely been applied to the media in the form of institutional proposals or concrete political questions (cf Born, 2006). In fact, such radical pluralism is more often mobilised in the cause of a naïve celebration of multiplicity – and Karppinen shows that this is directly at odds with the work of Mouffe. Radical pluralism in fact directs our attention to macro-political concerns that are consistent with the aims of political economy, and potentially provide a much more solid basis for it than Habermasian public sphere theory.

While Karppinen writes in metatheoretical mode, in Chapter 3 Daniel Hallin offers a historical account of media change that draws upon social theory, and contributes to it by enriching our conceptions of a key term in social and political theory of the last twenty years: neoliberalism. Hallin points out that accounts of media marketisation and neoliberalism often rest on vague and simplistic formulations and offers a more adequate version. He does so by painting a fuller picture of the institutions that had previously counterbalanced market logics in the media, namely the strong ties between the media and organized social groups such as political parties, trade unions and churches; and journalist professionalism. Hallin shows how this situation changed through media commercialisation, and through social and political changes. However, Hallin emphasises that these changes involved more than a shift to consumerism and commercialism. The social movements of the 1960s and 1970s counterculture played an integral part in

undermining traditional forms of authority and, significantly, journalistic professionalism contributed to and was influenced by the rise of these new social movements.

Neoliberalism, then, is not something that can be rigidly opposed to populist anti-elitism and new social movements; they were to some extent mutually reinforcing. Hallin also questions the assumption in some accounts of neo-liberalism (such as Wendy Brown's) that neoliberalism has meant the collapse of the liberal democratic values of the 1960s and 1970s. He stresses the importance of holding on to the complexity of the way that market forces have affected the democratic role of the media, without losing sight of the many troubling features of media commercialisation. This, then, is media analysis that shows us the complexity of media/social relations, and suggests to social theory the importance of thinking more adequately about the media.

Like Karppinen, but coming from a rather different direction, John Downey in Chapter 4 wants to move beyond Habermas. He makes the point that while Habermas is referred to constantly in media studies, the Critical Theory of other writers has been virtually ignored. Yet its insights, particularly in the shape of Axel Honneth's work on recognition, have enormous significance for any politically engaged understanding of media. Downey's starting point is an essay by John Corner which attempts to put to rest the concept of ideology. Both imprecise and incoherent in its different versions ideology is a concept which has had its day. However Downey disagrees and calling upon John Thompson's book about ideology, and then Honneth himself on recognition ethics, he argues for a recovery of the concept of ideology and for its central place in a media studies. Quite simply, without it there is no way of showing how power is carried symbolically, nor what it is that is systematically devalued and misrecognised in dominant forms of media. Finally, Downey makes a link between critical media studies and activism, suggesting that renewal in the academy depends not just on the development of

ideas, but also a re-engagement with ‘media construction’ - alternative media, media campaigns and ultimately that central part of the struggle for human emancipation which is symbolic.

How do we conceive of social communication in an era of globalisation – or at least of ‘globalising tendencies’? As Philip Schlesinger suggests in Chapter 5, this is a vital question for understanding power and democracy in modern societies. Answering it requires ‘thick’ theories of social communication that encompass culture, everyday life and emotional attachments to place, but that also recognise the continuing importance of political institutions. Schlesinger distinguishes between those statisticians who emphasise the continuing importance of the nation-state, and those cosmopolitans who see a degree of political hope in a diminishing role for the nation-state. Many in media studies have tended to take the latter route. By contrast, Schlesinger argues that the European Union demonstrates the fragility of cosmopolitan visions, and he provides a critique of various visions of European-ness as part of a new cosmopolitan order, including Habermas’s ‘thin’ emphasis on the importance of the European constitution, and Ulrich Beck’s failure to address the institutional realities of the EU. A crucial issue here is that the European Union is both a federation and a regulator. Mediated communication in the form of Europe-focused journalism is strongly geared to the latter. Schlesinger finds that national public spheres remain robust, and there is little immediate prospect of transcending them in the name of a cosmopolitan political space.

Part two, moves us on from issues of media and political power broadly considered, to the question of *Spatial Inequalities*. Here geography and its attendant theoretical problems enter the picture – the mobility of peoples, capital and communication; but also the fixity of social structures of inequality at a global level, and indeed forms of resistance to them.

We begin with David Hesmondhalgh (Chapter 6) who is concerned to harness theories of imperialism to media analysis in a new and critical way. Arguing against the long standing concept of cultural imperialism which he finds both imprecise and simplistic, Hesmondhalgh calls on David Harvey in order to set out a theory of *capitalist* imperialism, one with a strong media dimension. This takes the form of the expansive global copyright regime which, via international treaty and increasingly tough policing by the US, is bringing poor countries into the ambit of commodified culture. Strong copyright, then, represents a much more clear cut instance of imperialism than the complex flows (and sometimes benign outcomes) of the old 'cult imp' model. More, David Harvey's theory of overaccumulation helps to explain why this massive expansion of the domain of cultural property is happening now. It is nothing less than 'accumulation by dispossession', the latest twist in the long history of strategies through which capitalism has coped, so far at least, with its systemic crises. By commodifying culture and media, via extensions of copyright term and strong global enforcement, capitalism rebuilds its economic muscles while at the same time expropriating the symbolic creativity of some of the world's poorest cultures.

Chapter 7 by Annabelle Sreberny converges in an interesting way with Chapter 6. The writers of both reject the standard critical model of global media organization, namely 'cultural imperialism'. Sreberny, however, comes from a completely different, poststructuralist direction. Citing Iranian president Ahmadi-Nejad's open letter of May 2006 to US president Bush, she takes Lacan's discussion of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter* as her point of departure. The tale of this fictional letter, object of subterfuge and trickery, is understood by Lacan to show that 'a letter always arrives at its destination'. Sreberny prefers Derrida's alternative reading though, according to which

there is always an excess of meaning in a letter, such that it *never* arrives. How does this metatheorising bear on the missive from Ahmadi-Nejad? The point is that in Bush's refusal to acknowledge it – an ostensible snub – a multiplicity of meanings opens up, a Derridean excess which confounds the power of the global hegemon to control global communications. This is not only a symbolic event however. Changing material conditions in the shape of the internet and new media channels located outside the occident have enabled precisely the kinds of challenge to the interpellation of audiences that is represented by the letter and its vicissitudes of reception.

Where Sreberny focuses on resistance to the power of the West, a resistance enabled via new forms of mediated global visibility, in Chapter 8 Faye Ginsberg shows how indigenous peoples are now using media as mirrors to their own cultures, elaborating – yet conserving – traditions. With three case studies from Inuits in the Arctic, indigenous peoples of the North West coast of Canada, and aborigines in Australia, Ginsberg develops the concept of 'cultural activism' to point up the way in which such communities are confounding 'Digital Age' theory. Castells and others had announced a paradigm shift (another version of the historicisation of the present which we noted earlier), a shift marked by the advent of the internet and digitisation. But Ginsberg shows that new media technologies have an entirely different meaning in the hands and eyes of cultural activists from indigenous communities. What is at stake here is neither the construction of a wholly new virtual realm, nor the destruction of existing cultural ground, but rather as she puts it, the extension of 'traditional cultural worlds into new domains'. In effect, then, Ginsberg takes the media practice of indigenous peoples as a kind of theory-in-action, and a means of refuting both the extravagantly optimistic Digital Age, and patronisingly pessimistic Digital Divide discourses. These are theories which have to be interrogated in the light of the praxis of others.

The theme of the redemptiveness of media practice is carried forward by Purnima Manakekar. In Chapter 9 she explores how ‘mobile media’ are transforming not only the sense of time and place experienced by diasporic communities, but therefore too the larger world social historical formation. The mobility of media which is involved here derives partly from the way in which diasporas have become the subjects of new forms of media representation. Mankekar discusses an emerging new genre in Indian film that focuses on migrant communities in London and New York. In an important sense, the mobility of these peoples, their translocation from India to the west, provides the narrative theme. Yet, as Mankekar notes, the experience of mobility and migration is actually just as important for the people who remain, physically, at home. In this way India becomes a ‘node’ in an imagined, mediated world, and homeland and diaspora – far from being binary opposites – become ‘mutually imbricated’. Mankekar is not arguing against what she takes to be dominant theoretical positions, as was the case with Ginsberg. Rather she suggests mobile media bear out and extend what anthropologists and social theorists have already been delineating – the greatly increased salience of time-space relations in a globalising world.

The theme of *Spectacle and the Self* provides the motif for part three. In one of the most important attempts to apply social theory to the media, published in 1995, John Thompson contrasted the relationships between power and visibility characteristic of the contemporary media with those identified by Foucault in his analysis of the panopticon in the following manner: ‘thanks to the media, it is primarily those who exercise power, rather than those over whom power is exercised, who are subjected to a certain kind of visibility’. Furthermore, observed Thompson, this modern form of media power was quite different from pre-modern forms of spectacle, for ‘the visibility of individuals and

actions is now severed from the sharing of a common locale' (both quotations, Thompson, 1995: 134).

These questions of power, visibility and spectacle have not become less significant in the era since Thompson's book was published (see Kellner, 2003, for a good recent book-length treatment). Three of our contributors address these issues (alongside other key social-theoretical questions concerning the media) and two of them relate media spectacle to modern subjectivity. For Nick Couldry, in Chapter 10, spectacle represents a starting point for thinking about how a number of key social theories conceive of power and of society. Actor Network Theory, currently highly fashionable amongst many influenced by post-structuralism, Couldry finds on balance to be of limited value. One reason given by Couldry echoes our discussion of normativity above. Bruno Latour dismisses the 'totalising' panoramas of theorists, politicians and others, but he can offer no way of sorting out bad panoramas from good or less bad ones. ANT's limited ontology means that it also has little to say about representation – essential to understanding the media's role in society. Couldry instead offers an account of media based on 'ritual analysis', emphasising questions of belief and legitimation that are sidelined in ANT. Couldry is closer here to Durkheimian and Bourdieuan sociology than to Marxist ideological analysis, but he offers a 'deconstructive' version of ritual analysis, which questions the 'myth of the mediated centre' in much media sociology, in its Parsonian-functionalist and other variants. Importantly, though, Couldry aims to deconstruct the social in a very different way from ANT and from post-structuralists such as Laclau and Mouffe who from a position of militant anti-essentialism claim there is no object such as society, instead there is only the 'openness' and non-totalizability of discourse. For Couldry, this is an 'inverted universalism', an 'absolutism of denial' that undermines the historical claims that Laclau and Mouffe want to make (and, we might

add, potentially has strong implications for the way in which Karppinen sees other work by Mouffe as a potential resource in renewing political economy and democratic theory). Couldry turns to the under-explored work of Roy Bhaskar for a more adequate and yet still sceptical account of the notions of 'the social' and society.

Couldry proceeds from the concept of spectacle to interrogate and reconstruct the normative and ontological bases of social theories. In Chapter 11, Helen Wood and Bev Skeggs approach the political dimensions of spectacle from the bottom up, analysing one of the most important media phenomena of the last decade, reality television. Critics who decry the depthless spectacle of reality television miss a crucial aspect of its politics, say Wood and Skeggs. For reality television, centred on representations of working-class people (and especially working-class women) demonstrates in a supremely visible way the way that class is being remade. In particular, there is increasing emphasis in neo-liberal societies on self-management, on the responsibilities of people to manage their own lives effectively. One problem with this shift is that it downplays the social forces constraining people's abilities to make choices and take action, and instead implicitly explains social behaviour in individualistic, psychological terms. This shift is dramatised in reality television, which places (working-class) people in situations with which they are unfamiliar, and then assesses their performance and worth on the basis of how well they cope. Wood and Skeggs make the interesting claim that the emphasis on *nowness* and immediacy in the programmes makes it even more difficult to demonstrate the self-reflexive depth associated with moral worth in modern societies. This is especially true of that sub-genre of reality television that emphasises the modification of behaviour in the name of providing 'useful' advice to audiences. But more generally, Wood and Skeggs show how reality programming's use of sensation and emotion, and in particular its combined use of melodrama and documentary genres in its telling of 'intimate stories',

combine to produce spectacles that demonstrate and perpetuate new forms of moral inequality. There is a politics of spectacle here, then, but it is not quite the politics that those who mourn the decline of documentary say it is; rather it refers to new forms of selfhood mandated by neo-liberalism. Wood and Skeggs therefore draw on the way that social theorists such as Giddens and Beck show how the individual is compelled to make her/himself the centre of her/his own life plan and conduct, but they strongly dispute the downplaying of class in such theorists. Here we see how media theory can challenge and enrich social theory by focusing in much greater depth on questions of representation.

Those same social theories concerning the reflexive project of the self provide Alison Hearn's starting point in her essay (Chapter 12) on personal branding and self-promotion, and she too refers to reality television as a manifestation of some troubling dimensions of this project. Hearn connects these ideas with other theories concerning the central role of 'promotionalism' in modern society (Andrew Wernick) and new modes of capitalism. Echoing Wood and Skeggs, and anticipating the next section's discussion of labour (especially Matt Stahl's chapter), Hearn observes how 'the responsibility for self-fulfillment and meaningful community is downloaded onto the individual worker' leading to new forms of working experience and subjectivity. She draws on the work of Mauricio Lazzarato, David Harvey; Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello amongst others to develop these ideas. This new kind of relationship to the self is apparent in various media phenomena: reality television such as *The Apprentice* and *American Idol*, as already mentioned, but also the personal branding movement in management (for Hearn, this movement invokes an image of autonomous subjectivity which actually undermines such autonomy through its instrumentalism) and websites such as 2night.com and social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook. Hearn is

careful to qualify her claims by making clear that self-promotion is nothing new. But she suggests important new developments in the relationships between power and visibility. We are, she implies, making spectacles of ourselves in socially damaging ways.

The contributors to the fourth and last part of the collection, *Media Labour and Production*, bring to these familiar topics in media studies a certain theoretical freshness that derives partly from their address of a key question we have been considering throughout this essay – is the present a new epoch in media structure and practice? At the same time there is also a more properly metatheoretical concern with the nature of media production and its significance vis a vis reception or consumption. The question here is – does media labour matter and if so why?

Toby Miller's Chapter 13 tackles both these questions. Miller sketches out a binary model of existing media studies. Media Studies 1.0 includes the tradition of media effects research which emerges from bourgeois intellectual anxiety about how the masses might be affected by the shock, danger and sheer seductiveness of modern mediated life. Version 1.0 also takes in variants of political economy and critical theory that have scorned popular culture. By way of contrast, Media Studies 2.0 is optimistic, and invests audiences with a hermeneutic power that can emancipate them from the sort of bondage posed in 1.0. Condemning the narrowness of both (1.0 ignores activity and struggle in the media; 2.0 denies structure and real power relations) Miller advocates 'frottage' between them. The theoretical means of achieving this consist, first, in a rejection of the originary binarism of the Cartesian mind-body duality, a binarism that underpins the Media 1.0 versus Media 2.0 opposition. Instead, Miller insists (with Lawrence Grossberg) on a dialectical shift towards 'politicizing theory and theorizing politics'. And that in turn suggests paying renewed attention to labour broadly considered, as well as

internationalisation of media. Miller thus concludes with a critical case study of the global ‘precariate’, a new layer of international labour – insecure, exploited, displaced – located in sectors as diverse as media and office cleaning.

In an important sense Chapter 14 by Matt Stahl, on ‘rockumentary’ film, constitutes a case study in this precariousness of media work.. Taking the 2004 film *Dig!* as his centre piece, Stahl suggests that the emerging genre of the rock documentary serves to provide instruction in ‘good’ creative work. On the one hand, as exemplified in the career of the band The Dandy Warhols, we are shown a form of labour ‘that promises to foster autonomy, self-actualization and de-alienation’. On the other, and this is picked out in the disintegrating career of the Warhols’ erstwhile friends and colleagues, The Jonestown Massacre, we are presented with a narrative of self-indulgence, moral decline, and financial collapse. This is what happens when you *abuse* autonomy. The moral is clear. If creative labour is a zone of freedom, then it is one which has to be constantly sustained through discipline, focus, and above all, plenty of hard work. Stahl’s contribution to theory, then, consists in showing how theses on the cultural construction of work (from Weber to Beck) find corroboration in rockumentaries – these are training manuals for learning to labour in the neo-liberal knowledge economy.

Contemporary journalism has little in common with rock music making we might assume. However Chapter 15 by Chris Anderson suggests a strong parallel. Both ‘professions’ are riven by insecurity, and in both cases there is deep ambiguity about the nature and status of the occupation. Surveying US journalism research since the mid-1970s, Anderson offers a critique, and then synthesis, of what he identifies as the three key strands in scholarship. Tracing organisational analysis of journalism (mainly from the late 1970s), work on the production of journalistic discourse and interpretive

communities (chiefly Zelizer since the early 1990s), and journalism-as-field (a still flourishing Bourdieuan approach) Anderson shows the enormous explanatory power of theoretical integration. For it is only by bringing the three approaches together, he argues, that we can make sense of the current journalistic moment in which, on the face of it, journalistic expertise is being challenged by a new information laity of bloggers and netizens. In this context, then, professional journalists struggle to establish a jurisdiction over journalistic expertise while at the same time attempting, as he puts it, ‘to control the cultural discourse that both defines them in relation to others and defines the very nature of their expertise’. Organisation, discourse, field - all three theoretical frames are needed to make sense of the present conjuncture Anderson insists. Or to put it in the terms we used at the start of this chapter, if you want to historicise the present in media studies you have to develop some kind of theoretical overview of how you medium works.

In the final chapter in this collection, Jason Toynbee (Chapter 16) returns to the questions concerning the relationships between production, audience and texts raised by Toby Miller. Toynbee’s aim is not only to argue for the precedence of production, but also to show how critical realist philosophy can provide a much more serious basis for such a claim than existing schools and tendencies – notably empiricism and subjectivism. The media show a fundamental asymmetry between producers and consumers (in spite of the many absurd claims about the effects of ‘user-generated content’ in social networking sites and the like). So producers have precedence because they control form and content but this only takes us so far. How is production organised and what shapes its output? Answering these questions, says Toynbee drawing upon critical realist social theory, requires adequate consideration of structure and agency. On the structure side, critical realism provides an ontology which brings together structures (economic and otherwise), ontological depth and horizontal conjunction. This means we can avoid

having to choose between macro- and micro-causality, between inference from text and from causal linkage, but can use both approaches instead, and better reflect the need for multiple perspectives in understanding the complexity of media-society relations. On the agency side, critical realism offers a formulation of agency as intentional, yet also limited by the opacity of social being, which is of fundamental value in understanding media production. For it helps explain how media making can be instrumental, in other words subject to market control or more broadly influenced by powerful social forces, and yet at the same time can exist as a zone of relative autonomy and counter-intuitive expression. Finally, Toynbee uses critical realism to argue against the tendency in media studies to downplay the *referential* function of the media. The media have a special capacity to represent the world beyond mere hearsay. And of course producers can unknowingly, or more rarely intentionally, make falsely objective texts. For Toynbee, this means that there is a need for textual analysis which will itself be driven by an ethic of objectivity.

Looking back on this chapter survey perhaps what emerges most strongly is the sheer variety of theoretical sources currently being called upon in the field. Earlier we suggested that integration should be a goal of new theoretical work in media studies. And indeed, the chapters in this book do integrate ideas from within and beyond media studies. Integration generates both intellectual development and lucidity – positions become clearer. The next step, then, might be to move in another direction, dialectically towards strong argument and intellectual struggle between clearly opposed positions, with a view to synthesising and winnowing out the *best* media theory. That will be a difficult conference to organise, and a tough book to edit. We look forward to them though.

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