

and research devoted to media and communication. It is not surprising that this has given rise to a need for periodic assessment of identity and direction of the kind that we are concerned with here. One prominent theme that emerged for discussion was precisely to do with the status and identity of the field or discipline of communication, that has often had to struggle for recognition and at times lose some of its territory to breakaway 'factions'. Peter Dahlgren addresses some of these issues, without offering certain remedies. In his contribution, Graham Murdock reminds us that the study of mass media has significant origins in social criticism as much as in fears of harm or the practical needs of industry, and looks at prospects for recovering critique.

Liesbet van Zoonen represents the challenge of 'cultural studies' to the once dominant social scientific and rationalist paradigm in her strong plea for a recognition of popular wishes and popular taste in determining the larger role of mass media in society, especially in politics. One of the most significant changes in media of recent years has not been technological or 'demassification', but the transformation of extensive media systems in Russia and other states of Eastern and Central Europe according to the western model of pluralist democracy. Karol Jakubowicz reflects on the challenge and achievement, especially where new systems seek to embody both public service and free market principles. In keeping with what is certainly a growing tendency in research, Sonia Livingstone outlines and assesses the benefits and pitfalls of cross-national comparative research. Finally, Winfried Schulz focuses on one of the most widely current concepts deployed to account for links between media and society, that of 'mediatization'.

In this issue, articles are presented in somewhat shorter form than usual in order to maximize the attention that we could give to components of our symposium. Much else of great interest could have been included, but we hope this selection will stimulate readers themselves to reflection and debate on the future of the field. While we did not reach agreement on priorities for theory and research, the outcome of our discussions was certainly not pessimistic. Unlike Bernard Berelson, who famously concluded 40 years ago that the state of communication research was withering away, our feeling was that it was if anything running away, even if in need of some clearer direction that, despite our efforts, we are not yet able to provide. For both these debates and the ensuing proliferation of research, both empirical and conceptual, the *European Journal of Communication* will continue to provide a forum.

Theory, Boundaries and Political Communication

The Uses of Disparity

■ Peter Dahlgren

ABSTRACT

■ While the themes of fragmentation and insufficient coherence dominated discussions in the field of media and communication studies a decade ago, today they seem less urgent, even if at times still problematic. In terms of theory, the field is well served by its permeable boundaries, since much of its theory is 'imported'. Moreover, theory needs non-doctrinaire critical stances to address the distress of the world. Systems of political communication are in rapid transformation, and we need good theoretic tools to confront the changes. This subfield is still very much coloured by traditional political science; however, we also see important contributions for the public sphere and culturalist approaches. All three have strengths and weaknesses, all have their differences that must be respected. Yet there are some signs of complementarity, and if we avoid orthodox positions, we may well find more synergic interplay between them. ■

Key Words citizens, democracy, media studies, media theory, political communication

Life compels us to give our attention to particular things. Beyond these imperatives we have a degree of freedom where we can choose to engage in some things, and ignore the rest. The trick, of course, is to know which concerns are obligatory and which are optional, not least since the boundary between them shifts as circumstances change. It is interesting to note the kinds of concerns that were obligatory in the field of media and communication studies a decade ago, as documented in the two

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theme issues, summer and autumn 1992, of the *Journal of Communication* (and published as a separate book by the editors Levy and Gurevitch, 1994); those looking for yet more historical comparison can look at the special issue of the *Journal* from autumn 1983 ('Ferment in the Field').

In the early 1990s, a good deal of attention was directed at disciplinary matters, about the fragmentation of the field and the possibilities for better coherence. While some voices suggested – with a good degree of accuracy, in my view – that the divisions might have been more pronounced than an examination of the field's intellectual history warranted (see Peters, 1994), discussion was quite intense. Perhaps this was due at least in part to the fact that at that time, the field was busy institutionalizing itself in many countries of Europe as separate departments from the 'mother disciplines'; the issue of its intellectual/scientific foundations was much on the agenda. In the US, of course, the field was already quite established, but was still struggling with its status problem within the university. Moreover, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, much of the academic world was grappling with 'postmodernism', which meant, among other things, intense reflection over the foundations of knowledge, epistemological issues and disciplinary boundaries. Themed issues of journals within many disciplines attested to this self-reflection; in this sense, the focus on 'fragmentation' was not unique for media studies.

Today, the situation has changed. In the following discussion, I briefly take up the notion of the field's overall porous boundaries and its cohesion, especially in regard to theory. This theme is still with us and is at times still problematic, though I would suggest that today our concern about this aspect of the field is becoming discretionary, optional. Our sense of the field as a plural confederation of topics, traditions, methods and theories is becoming normalized. Indeed, the permeable boundaries of the field can be seen as one of its strengths, given how much of the theory is imported from other disciplines.

More in need of our attention, however, are specific areas within the field, where, for example, diverse theoretical currents are at play, at times interfacing productively, but often simply ignoring each other, not meshing well, or in some other ways inadequate. I imagine that many such domains could be identified within the field; here I address the rambling terrain of political communication. On the one hand, the conditions and practices of political communication are currently undergoing profound changes. On the other hand, as an area or subfield, it now has several different theoretical strands at work within it, e.g. political science, public sphere theory, newer cultural elements, and not

least political philosophy. This heterogeneity is problematic but also potentially useful, since the various traditions all have something to offer, even if the disparate theoretical elements are not necessarily compatible. Thus, the first order of business is not choosing which strand(s) to ignore, but rather trying to identify their potential complementarity, and from there consider possible steps towards integration. There is much work to be done here.

Optimal permeability

Today, media and communication studies has achieved its institutional anchoring in many of the universities of Europe. While our status in the academic world may sometimes still be a sensitive issue, our existence seems relatively secure, not least as a result of all the students studies that we attract; we are thus generally popular among university deans. While the theme of coherence/fragmentation of the field as a whole is still with us, it is less compelling than it was a decade ago. That the field as such is very much a 'configuration of research influences' as Kavoori and Gurevitch (1994: 415) called it, strikes us as more acceptable today. We have learned our postmodern scientific lessons: we are a bit more at ease with epistemological ambivalence, more tolerant of difference, and perhaps more appreciative of pluralism. Of course, one of the main difficulties of the sprawling character of the field today lies in the pedagogic challenge of presenting it to students in a manageable way.

In terms of theory, the field is permeable, resulting in a sort of 'free flow' across it borders, though this flow tends to be unidirectional: we import more theory than we export. We can note some exports, however: for example, anthropology today is often eager to incorporate media analyses into its work, even if media theory as such tends not to get much developmental attention (see Askew and Wilk, 2002; Ginsburg et al., 2002). Yes, there is of course also 'in-house' production of media theory, but a good deal of the heavy-duty, road-tested theory we use has been brought in from the outside. This pattern of importation is evident not only historically, but also even today, as media studies continues to appropriate theory from other fields. Theory-wise, media studies would be quite anorexic if it did not nourish itself in this way. Just to take one example: theoretical work on modernity and globalization by Giddens and others has become established within media theory, not only via their own writings but also through the synthesizing work of people like Thompson (1995) and Tomlinson (1999). Strict policing of the borders would of course be absurd and counterproductive.

Given that the field has held together relatively well despite such centrifugal forces, one might well conclude that the much-lamented permeable boundaries and eclectic character of media studies in fact ranks among its assets. This would perhaps be an even stronger asset if we spent more energy in actually grappling with the theory we import, really working it over to make it our own. We are prone to bring in new theory 'as-is', ready to wear, and then put it to use in our respective corner of the field, without, for example, comparing it to neighbouring theoretical efforts. My thought here derives from a loose comparison with cultural studies, a field with which media studies shares some – though decreasing – overlap. As I have argued elsewhere (Dahlgren, 1997), despite the difficulties deriving from its amorphous character, cultural studies has shown a capacity and willingness to engage with many currents of contemporary thought, often in a self-reflexive manner. In its best moments it theorizes creatively and comparatively, probing issues of epistemology, meaning, power, cultural practices and products. Obviously the comparisons between the two fields can only go so far, but I would like to see a bit more of this kind of restless theoretic energy and intellectual exuberance in our own encounters with theory.

Undoubtedly, the most significant manifestation of our permeable borders at present is found in the area of Internet research. There is hardly any field in the human sciences today that is not engaged in researching the Internet in some way. This generates some occasion for fruitful transdisciplinary contact, as for example the current major project in Denmark on media, democracy and the network society (Centre for Media and Democracy, 2003). However, much of this research on the Internet and other newer media is unfortunately still characterized by field boundaries – and also competition for research funding. Further, it raises the issue of our field's identity in a new way: via the ubiquity of Internet studies, many colleagues in other fields rightly feel that they too are 'doing media research', albeit from their own horizons. This challenges us to clarify what we can bring to bear on this research that others cannot do, e.g. what is particular about a media studies approach to theorizing the Internet? We can no doubt provide convincing answers to ourselves, though we may have to exert ourselves more to convince funding agencies, university deans, other departments and the non-academic world. We have some marketing to do.

Optimal permeability involves not just imports and their integration; it also entails our familiarity and possible participation in theoretic domains outside our own field. Generally, we at best read literature from other fields, but we less often have – or generate – the opportunity for

discussing or publishing within other fields. That this is so should be no surprise, and it is certainly at least as true of other disciplines. Yet, I can at times find frustrating the 'disciplining' I experience in knowing that with the scarce time I have available, and the various kinds of responsibilities I have within the field, I have to turn down all too many possibilities for extra-field involvement.

Media theory as a critical guide

It can be difficult to speak about 'theory' in a general way; I am reminded that we are not always so successful in this when I read some of our undergraduate theses. Theory in their texts is at times treated as some kind of decorative window dressing, tacked on to some data or an argument; alternatively it is understood as simply quoting the more abstract passages of the course literature. It gets somewhat easier to talk about as we move from the field in general to specific areas of work. I won't here attempt any definition of 'theory', but it is useful to keep in mind Denis McQuail's formulation, that theory is not just formal propositions, but also 'any systematic set of ideas that can help make sense of a phenomenon, guide action or predict a consequence' (McQuail, 2000: 7). Such a view highlights theory's function as the intellectual scaffolding for the research we do. It serves to orient us, to pull together sets of facts and assumptions, and offers normative dispositions. It helps to provide significance to that which we observe, and to suggest the implications of various types of action or intervention. In this sense, there may not always be demarcated distinctions between formalized theory and the more general (and less systematic) thought modes that we use.

Theory can of course also blind us, structuring shadows in our thought processes and obstacles to our perceptions. Thus from a bird's-eye view, it would seem to be healthy if we can maintain a balance between the systematic, codified and 'finished' character of theory, and its discursively open, admittedly probing and eternally unfinished quality. That, of course, is a tall order; we tend to take theory as bedrock, ignoring its 'constructed' quality, at least in the short run, which may ultimately be for the best. Too much fast-shifting change in theory would generate unmanageable entropy in the intellectual and research world. In the long term, however, we can usually see the processes of theory evolution, how it undergoes modification and even dramatic changes. In the case where too many theoretical currents are present at the same time, we usually resist entropy by pragmatically selecting (consciously or not) some strands to work with and disregarding the rest. This of course,

however, always runs a risk that something potentially useful might be lost.

Media theory, as a specialty within social theory, has an obligation to help us better understand not just the institutions of the media or the processes of communication, even if these are central, but also fundamental features and processes of the modern world, which is increasingly known to us via the media. This world, our societies, our cultures, are not only in rapid transformation, but also in many ways in distress, a reality that theory cannot ignore. The catalogue of ills is all too familiar and too long to repeat here, but I would simply underscore the massive discrepancy between the current states of suffering, deprivation and constraints on human freedom, and the potentials inherent in the world for transcending to some degree these circumstances.

This would seem to evoke the need for at least some kind of 'critical theory' as a theoretic horizon or trajectory within media theory, though I am reluctant to use the term. Today it all too readily associates to specific schools of thought (e.g. Frankfurt), theory battles of the past, and the ambivalent legacy of the various 'isms'. The current historical juncture of course does need to carry forward that which is useful from past endeavours, and integrate it with contemporary theoretic developments. We are no doubt stuck with such concepts, so perhaps the best we can do is to firmly emphasize that 'critical' has a broader meaning than the traditional associations with various forms of neo-Marxism. It emerges, robustly, out of the Enlightenment tradition, not least from Kant's incitement for people to pull themselves out of unnecessary limitations on knowledge. Following that lineage down to the present-day results in a plethora of various perspectives, positions and modes of engagement that can help us elucidate and illuminate our modern media society and deal with it in constructive ways.

The 'critical' thus becomes more of an intellectual stance rather than a specific doctrine (Pieterse, 1992), and thereby finds expression in a wide range of theoretic trajectories, from feminism to informatics, from political economy to ethnic studies. In this sense, I certainly share the notion that Graham Murdock discusses in his article in this issue about the need for 'retrieving critique'. The modern critical stance seeks to specify the conditions and sources of suffering, exploitation, unfreedom, and it struggles with an eye to finding progressive paths beyond them. It has no a priori truth claim, and certainly should not strive for some exclusionary status vis-à-vis other modes of theorizing; it is dependent on dialogic openness. All that it can do is present evidence and arguments for its case. Theory, then, seen in this light, strives to articulate typical

social reality with developed notions of better alternatives. It is thus imperative that in the theory we use in media studies – which may not always be 'media theory' *per se* – we find helpful normative guides to the good society. Here of course we have to be careful: I am suggesting guides that can prompt question-asking and inspire research, not value-laden biases that lead to misrepresentations of reality.

Destabilized political communication

To make the discussion a bit more concrete, I turn to the area of political communication. In my own recent studies I have been working with the theme of democracy and the media (Dahlgren, 2002, 2003); while I sometimes sense that the concept of democracy seems almost as tired as many of the old 'isms', I try to remind myself that behind this familiar old signifier there lurk ever-present and crucial questions about how we live together, about how we solve societal conflicts, about power and accountability. Democracy in this sense can still function as a critical concept, since it invites us to think about the good society. That actually existing democracies have increasingly fallen on hard times has become an ever-pervasive theme in both the public debate and the research literature. The compelling evidence for the stagnation of democratic systems, popular disengagement from formal politics, for growing cynicism among citizens, but also for the emergence of newer forms of extra-parliamentarian political involvement, all suggest important research questions about the media and democracy, and the need for sharp theoretical tools.

Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch (2000) recently presented a useful overview of the ways that the traditional systems of political communication in western democracies have been destabilized by changes in late modern society (see also the collection by Bennett and Entman, 2001, for an overview of this landscape; Garnham, 2000, takes up these themes from a more historical and philosophically ambitious perspective). Among the major trends they mention are increased sociocultural heterogeneity, and the impact that this has on the audiences for political communication. Also, they take up the institutions of the media, the massive growth in media outlets and channels. They discuss changes in the formats of media output, the blurring and hybridization of genres and the erosion of the distinction between journalism and non-journalism. New technologies of communication such as the Internet also scramble the media milieu in a variety of ways; among other things, this makes horizontal, civic communication much easier. Also, the geography of

political communication is in flux, as the significance of traditional national borders becomes weakened. They note too that there are not only more political advocates today, but also what they call political mediators, which includes the massive growth in the professionalization of political communication, with experts, consultants, spin doctors, etc. sometimes playing a more decisive role than journalists.

The consequences of such transformations run deep. Blumler and Gurevitch (2000) are concerned about the integration of the political communication system. Cacophony emerges with such media abundance and so many political actors. They call attention to a bifurcation between traditional parties and single-issue, 'subpolitical' groups – who sometimes are 'populist' in an unsavory way. And while the Internet and other new media extend political communication, the authors point out that the anarchic, extra-institutional character that prevails here does not always promote civic communication; a good deal of it is isolated (and at times unpleasant) noise that does not contribute to democratic will formation. They see the emergence of 'porous' politics, that can materialize all over the social terrain, and manifest itself in many contexts, including popular culture; this 'infinite' view of politics is increasingly confronting the more traditional 'bounded' notion.

To this overall perspective we can also add the altered contract between capital, labour and the state that has emerged in the neoliberal era. Since the 1980s we have witnessed in western democracies a political turn where market forces have been given much greater reign to define the social landscape, consolidating social power that lies beyond democratic control and accountability. The impact of these developments is of course felt on the global level, and not least in the media industries, which have generally witnessed widespread deregulation and harsher demands for short-term profits. This has, by extension, further exacerbated the difficulties that political communication systems have in fostering society's democratic character (Baker, 2002).

Disparate strands

Coming to grips with these transformations requires developed theoretical horizons. While international debate tends to emphasize the negative character of the contemporary situation, it is also crucial that we are as sensitive to nuances as possible, and are alert for progressive potentials. Analytic tools are provided by a number of theoretical strands. In this final section I just briefly reflect on three traditions that are theoretically informing political communication. This is not the place for any

ambitious comparisons, but I just wish to suggest that despite the disparate qualities these traditions manifest, it should be possible to find ways in which they can complement each other.

Dominant within political communication today is still the mother discipline of political science. Most of the research work done in political communication still reflects this heritage. The political science tradition has evoked criticisms over the years, for being too formalistic, too bound to the prevailing political/institutional arrangements, too wedded to constrictive methodologies – and too non-responsive towards its critics. I tend to agree; yet it is indispensable. It covers the important realm of formal, democratic politics quite thoroughly, even if critics of course criticize the way it goes about its research and the theoretical premises it uses, which lean towards state-centred and traditional liberal notions of democracy.

Over the past decades there have emerged alternative streams that chart their own directions within political communication. For the sake of brevity, I mention just two. One is the broader Habermasian tradition, that includes a range of interests and approaches that take up not only the public sphere, but also such themes as communicative rationality, deliberative democracy and civil society. I call it the 'public sphere approach', given the familiarity of the concept. The public sphere approach emphatically asserts the norm of democracy, often understood in procedural terms with an emphasis on its deliberative character; it thereby gravitates towards republican conceptions of democracy (van Gunsteren, 1998; Barber, 1984; Beiner, 1995), the theoretic model that puts robust civic engagement in the limelight. This tradition also looks at institutional arrangements, especially in the media, as well as constellations of power and patterns of communication, that can foster or hinder moving society in that direction. Much work on public service broadcasting, for instance, has such theoretical framing.

A third tradition – a second 'challenger' to the political science approach – builds on various kinds of cultural theory; to label it a 'cultural studies approach' may seem convenient, but not necessarily illuminating, given the heterogeneity of that field. I settle for 'culturalist'. I should add that all three of these traditions variously engage with another domain of intellectual endeavour that always remains a source of inspiration for theory, namely political philosophy (though at times it may be difficult to distinguish it from some current versions of social theory). The culturalist approach cuts through political communication from a different angle. First it must be said that there is not as yet that much work amassed in this tradition explicitly concerning political

communication. What the culturalist approach has addressed in particular is the theoretical dimensions of citizenship, which in turn offer frameworks for analysing and assessing features of political communication (e.g. Preston, 1997; Isin and Wood, 1999). Themes such as meaning, identity and social agency are highlighted, sometimes in a poststructural mode with links to radical or neo-republican political philosophy (e.g. Clarke, 1996; Mouffe, 1993).

For starters, we have to accept and appreciate the differences between these traditions. Each can do things the others cannot; each has its own coherence and its own limitations. They manifest a sort of division of labour. Yet, we can also observe 'leakage' between the boundaries. For example, the 'public sphere' as a concept is no longer just the property of the public sphere tradition. While Habermas's concept originally bore traces of Adorno's tutelage, he himself has been modifying it and bringing it more in line with his later work on communicative rationality and deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1996). The concept has many parallels with the liberal notion of the marketplace of ideas and similar metaphors, and today it has entered into more mainstream usage where the problems of journalism are discussed and researched, with its Frankfurt School origins often remaining in the background (a development that of course evokes mixed responses).

Another example of permeable borders here is between political science and the culturalist perspective. In recent decades certain kinds of subpolitics, identity politics and single-issue politics have made their way into the discourses and agendas of the formal political arena (e.g. women's issues, gay rights, environmental issues, abortion, political consumption directed at corporate policies, alter-globalization themes). Political science is thereby confronting these developments and increasingly addressing non-traditional politics; even if these phenomena are largely framed by the prevailing theoretical horizons, we are finding notable exceptions (see for example, the recent collection on political consumption by Micheletti et al., 2003).

Some of the respective limitations of these traditions also sail into view. Thus, public sphere approaches, with their commitment to deliberative democracy and republican civic engagement, seem at times oddly removed from the everyday sociological realities. They avoid, for instance, confrontation with the fact that in western democracies, most people most of the time are simply not politically engaged, and there seem to be no good grounds on which to expect this, short of a revolutionary situation. The power of the normative ideal might be productively balanced by a greater attention to the everyday circum-

stances of citizens. Public sphere theory seems oddly removed from the empirical realities that it claims lie at its centre, namely the processes of public opinion. Political science appears more realistically accepting of such conditions, perhaps in part due to its liberal-individualist assumptions. The culturalist orientation, for its part, can turn our attention to such topics as the subjective realities of citizenship, their processes of sense making in concrete settings, and how these may impact on participation and the modes of (dis)engagement. The culturalist approach, however, tends not to address the structural, institutional dynamics of democracy and political communication, and certainly the political science approach is strongest in this regard.

Political communication in today's world is a vast, sprawling social field of almost infinite variety, criss-crossed by the media and encompassing many different forms of associations and networks, actors, communicative contexts and styles, cultural frameworks and power relationships. Democracy has entered a troubled era, and we need open, probing theoretical constructs to guide research and not least provide a critical stance. The three traditions I have mentioned offer different inflections of key concepts such as politics, citizenship, deliberation and even democracy itself. While respecting their divergent character, we will still make better progress if we see them all as potential resources to engage with, juxtapose and compare, rather than doggedly defending one against the others. Allowing for the play of difference here does not involve serious risk, and it may give unexpected payoffs.

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Past the Posts Rethinking Change, Retrieving Critique

■ *Graham Murdock*

ABSTRACT

■ This article takes issue with three central ideas in contemporary writing on communications and change – postmodernity, the 'digital revolution' and cultural globalization – arguing that they overvalue the 'new' and take insufficient account of historical continuities, structural inequalities and the scale and scope of economic restructuring. It suggests that analysis needs to start from the globalization of capitalist imperatives and its shifting relations to state logics and go on to explore the variable and contradictory ways this process is reconstructing communications systems as industries, cultural formations and everyday resources. ■

Key Words capitalism, cultural commons, globalization, modernity, new media

The embrace of the new

Our world is changing, and communications are central to this change. (Byers and Smith, 2000: 1)

Something very new is happening in the world. . . . A number of overlapping trends are involved [but] the first, and in my opinion in some ways the most important one, is the world-wide communications revolution . . . 'Gee-whiz' types . . . see a world breaking quite radically with the

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