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Strategy Follows Structure: A Media Sociology Manifesto

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Sometimes the best sociology comes from non-sociologists. I was reminded of this truism the other day when I came across an article about John Bogle, the founder of Vanguard. Asked to explain why his company had substantially lower fees than other mutual fund companies, he pointed to its nonprofit ownership model that prevented profits being siphoned away to pay investors or shareholders. In short, Bogle concluded, "strategy follows structure."¹ If contemporary media sociology is in need of a new *raison d'être*, I cannot think of a better one.

Across the vast landscape of media studies, the trends in recent years have been for work that highlights contingency (to the point of voluntarism), complexity (verging toward obscurantism), and culture (ignoring institutionalized power). I speak here of claims, implicit or explicit, in certain strains of theories of networks or actor-networks, post-structuralism, and/or cultural sociology (as opposed to the sociology of culture), which is not to say that these diverse schools agree among themselves! While each of these approaches has its virtues, to affirm that strategy follows structure suggests a different understanding of the social world, a different research agenda, and a different way of linking theory, research, and practice. I do not claim that a critical, structural, "variation-oriented" media sociology should be the only kind of media sociology or the only kind of media studies on offer, but I do argue that it can contribute important insights that none of these other approaches are likely to contribute.²

To return to our non-sociologist but sociologically minded thinker John Bogle, I see four distinct propositions embedded in his claim that "strategy follows structure" worth underlining: First, there is such a thing as structure and it has an important social component.

Second, both structures and strategies are multiple (in Vanguard's case, there are of course alternatives to nonprofit ownership); this claim sets this approach apart from totalizing or holistic structural theories. Third, structure is pervasive and primary (generating strategies, rather than the inverse). And fourth, perhaps more controversially, some structural arrangements are normatively preferable to others (e.g. an egalitarian or social justice ethos inherent in the effort to keep fees low for non-elite investors). Let us examine each of these claims in turn before turning to some concrete examples of structural media sociology and a discussion of how structural media sociology counters or complements other approaches to media research and theorizing.

The elements of structure

At the most fundamental level, to speak of the structural is to emphasize the patterned character of human action and to thus create categories that group together various patterns. This move is fundamental to the sociological imagination. While each case is unique, it also shares certain properties with other cases, making generalization possible.

In creating categories, structural analysis inevitably selects and simplifies, opening itself up to charges of reductionism. But any attempt to model social reality involves simplification. Even Geertzian thick description makes choices about what to describe and what to leave out. Structural analysis at its best is simply more transparent about these choices. It encourages a constructive dialogue about which factors – or facets of a complex reality – should be incorporated if the model is to advance understanding and insight. Evidence thus consists of cases that are found to fit into this or that constructed category. Is this a kind of “violent” suppression of the particularity of any given case (an individual or particular social grouping)? In a sense, it is. But as Walter Lippmann long ago showed in *Public Opinion* (1922), simplifying categories – or stereotypes – are produced organically at all levels of society. A reflexive structural sociology has the potential, at least, of minimizing the symbolic violence.

Given that one should be skeptical of all categories, the key question is what to do next. One response, the luxury of the deconstructionist, is to only critique. This kind of work keeps empirical researchers on their toes. In the long run, it can lay the groundwork for new political projects responsive to societal transformations; in

the short run, by its refusal to engage with the “system,” it can leave the political field open to domination by the most conservative forces. Critical structural sociology, even at its most politically radical, mobilizes critique to (always tentatively) construct new categories that can then be mobilized – both to generate new insights, through the crucible of empirical testing, and to deploy them in real political struggles to combat injustice and discrimination of whatever sort.

Structure, however, generally refers to something more than persistent patterns. It also suggests the importance, if not indeed the primacy, of the social. The cultural turn was a wrong turn to the extent that it acted as if social structure no longer existed. Even if all social reality is discursively constructed, the concept of social structure calls attention to inequalities in the distribution of resources, material as well as symbolic. By diverting attention from such inequalities, the cultural turn is complicit with neoliberalism, as even the respected cultural theorist William H. Sewell, Jr (2005) has conceded. Cultural sociology, as articulated by Jeffrey Alexander (2007), acknowledges the existence of social structure but insists on “analytically” separating it from culture. Unfortunately, the effect is the same: social structure is effectively ignored.³ A structural approach to media sociology should neither dismiss nor privilege culture, but should seek to understand the complex (but not unpredictable) interrelations between the discursive and the social; there is also virtue in abandoning altogether the structure–culture binary, given that all human activity is both socially patterned and culturally meaningful (see also Gans 2012).

If the mere existence (and persistence) of social structural constraints is thus a first premise of structural media sociology, the second is that these constraints should not be understood in a holistic, all-or-nothing fashion. Fundamental to most sociological approaches is the search for and explanation of variation. Across the social sciences and humanities, field theory – incorporating its many permutations (see e.g. Bourdieu 1984, 1993; Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Lewin 1951; Martin 2003) – has arguably become the dominant model of structural variation. Further developed through a range of national and international comparative case studies (e.g. Benson 2009, 2013; Benson and Neveu 2005; Fourcade 2009; Kuipers 2011; Medvetz 2012), this institutional framework conceptualizes the social world as a set of hierarchically organized, semiautonomous more or less specialized spheres of action, each with their distinct histories and rules of the game. How do these social spheres or fields differ in their functioning, ideals, practices, and stakes? How did they come

into being and how have they changed over time? Which tend to be dominant?

Field theory offers a marked advance in analytical sophistication and explanatory power over the binary system/nonsystem model typical of work influenced by directly or indirectly by Weber's "rationalization" thesis. In Foucault (1995), disciplinary regimes may change over time but in a given era one reigns supreme and structures all social action, except at the very margins; in Adorno (2001), there is virtually no escape from the culture industry or the administered world.⁴ Under certain conditions, of course, institutional forces may produce homogenization (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), but there are always countervailing forces of differentiation (see e.g. Boczkowski 2010 for a compelling analysis of both processes in online news production). In field analyses, homogenization is a variable, not a destiny.

In his early characterizations of the "system," Habermas (1987b) seemed to be following in the totalizing tendencies of the Frankfurt School, but he has subsequently offered a more variegated rendering of the multiple institutional layers (organized civil society, academia and think tanks, media, legislative bodies, etc.) that lie between the peripheral lifeworld and the executive core of liberal democratic national systems (see Habermas 1996). Manuel Castells's detailed empirical modeling of the flows of "network society" acknowledges variations aplenty but fails to draw them together into an explanatory theory. Just to cite one example, Castells (2007: 244) argues that distrust in government is on the rise across the western world, yet notes in passing that the Scandinavian countries are an exception to this pattern. Always emphasizing fluidity and contingency, this ever-on-the-move sociology of flows doesn't stop long enough to wonder why: a sociology of structural variation would see in this anomaly precisely the kind of data that could refine its explanations.

Structural media sociology's third premise is that structures are pervasive and primary. Why not say structure follows strategy? Structures have to be structured before they can become structuring, do they not? ⁵ Absolutely, but structuring moments build on pre-existing structures, or as Marx (1994) put it far more eloquently: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." We start with a set of structures, simultaneously cultural and social, and we innovate by making new combinations. The capacity to act, and in certain ways rather than others, is structurally produced.⁶

At the individual level, the capacity to choose among strategies is predicated on a plurality of institutional structures, each with its own distinct logic. Even though each of us may be predisposed to act in a certain way given our family background, education, and occupation (in sum, our *habitus*), the persistence of some degree of institutional pluralism keeps open the possibility of constructing alternative subjectivities. This possibility is captured in Swidler's (1986) concept of culture as "toolkit" or Lamont and Thévenot's (2000) "cultural repertoires."

At the macro-societal level, widespread cultural innovation or transformation is more difficult to achieve. At moments of economic, social, political, military, even climactic turmoil – in other words, "critical junctures" (Thelen 1999) – there are increased possibilities of creating new institutions (and thus new subjectivities). At best, after the dust settles, what seem to be revolutions of one sort or another usually produce only limited change. A revolution would mean a dramatic deviation from a pre-established course, which is indeed difficult to achieve. "Path dependency" (Thelen 1999; Sewell 2005) is shorthand for all the factors that contribute to inertia: because it is too costly to retool, because of entrenched interests, because after a period of time it simply seems natural and the possibility of things being otherwise becomes literally unimaginable, and so on.

For all these reasons, investigation of the causes and effects of variable social structural arrangements lies close to the heart of the sociological imagination, and by extension, to what is distinctive about a sociological approach to media studies. I would add, however, a fourth and final element of such a research program that perhaps sits less easily with sociological orthodoxy: the need to acknowledge the normative element present in all research. To insist that strategies follow structures is to imply that some structures might in fact be preferable to others. The ongoing furor in some quarters over Habermas's attempts to construct a universal discourse ethics shows clearly the lack of normative consensus. But that should not preclude the attempt to discuss normative questions, far from it: all research, sociological or not, ought to make clear the specific political and ethical presuppositions implicit in the questions it asks.

Normative concerns inevitably guide one's choice of research questions and obviously underpin some of the most frequently studied aspects of media performance. Why do we study sensationalism, diversity, inclusion, and critique, or lack thereof, if we did not think that these somehow contribute to or detract from the good society, however defined? Media sociologists ought to set an

example to other sociologists – as well as non-sociologists – by always clarifying “what’s at stake.” For Habermas (2006), what’s at stake is the institutional structuring of an ideal public sphere or spheres, understood in relation to the imperatives of noncoercive, open-ended deliberation. Castells (2012) is less clear but at bottom he seems to be a participatory democrat, concerned with grassroots inclusion and mobilization against oppressive systems of power, whether economic or political. Actor-network theorists’ reticence toward making any claims about social power seems puzzling until one understands their overriding concern with the potentially oppressive effects of expert-produced systems of knowledge and their concomitant insistence on the ground-up production of social solidarity.⁷ Alexander’s (2007) cultural sociology, including his strong injunctions against any form of social reductionism, seems to be mostly motivated by a concern to promote noninstrumentalist forms of civil solidarity.

Specifying what’s at stake, however, does not necessarily require the sociologist to take a position. What matters is that the findings are situated in relation to transparent accounts of their implications. This is precisely the approach taken by Myra Marx Ferree, William Gamson, Jürgen Gerhards, and Dieter Rucht (2002) in their comparative study of German and US news discourse about abortion: rather than trying to make a global judgment of the democratic deficits or virtues of either media system, they situate their comparative findings in relation to four distinct democratic traditions.

The kind of normatively transparent, structural variation-focused sociology I have outlined so far could be enacted via a variety of media-related case studies, samples, and methods. One way or the other, however, it must be comparative: variation in both the independent and dependent variables must be incorporated into the research design. Cross-national research is useful to the extent that it provides additional cases and can help test the generalizability of single nation-bound findings; it is absolutely necessary if one is trying to test for the effects of variation in nation-state system-level characteristics, such as national media policies or journalistic professional logics.

Searching for consequential structural variation in media

The first thing to do is banish all references to “the media.” The word is plural. There is no single media logic. In addition of course to various technological mediums, there are: media systems (subna-

tional, national, and transnational), media organizations, and media producers and audiences (these latter sometimes interchangeable). These correspond, in turn, to fields of power, particular organizational fields, and the social space of classes. In *Shaping Immigration News* (Benson 2013), my study of US and French newspaper and television news coverage of immigration over the past four decades, I refer to these three elements of field structure as position, logic, and structure. Each of these facets of structural power shapes media production and reception in distinct ways.

Fields of power

Even if globalization is breaking down national boundaries, the nation-state still retains its primary structuring power (Morris and Waisbord 2001). This power is not unitary, however, but is constituted of oppositions. In secular democratic nation-states, an important structuring opposition is that between the commercial and the noncommercial, that is, between the logic of the consumer/client versus that of the citizen. As even Herbert Marcuse (1998 [1941]: 58) once acknowledged, in an otherwise sweeping denunciation of bureaucracy, there *can* be a real difference between private and public: “In the democratic countries, the growth of the private bureaucracy can be balanced by the strengthening of the public bureaucracy. . . . The power of the public bureaucracy can be the weapon which protects the people from the encroachment of special interests upon the general welfare.” Marcuse added one caveat: the public bureaucracy “can be a lever of democratization . . . as long as the will of the people can effectively assert itself.” (This passage is a fine example of structural sociology of media: Marcuse affirms that structure consists of institutional forms, that these forms vary, that variations in these forms produce different outcomes, and that these different outcomes are normatively consequential.)

Indeed, the overwhelming verdict of systematic discourse analyses is that noncommercial, government-subsidized media, including newspapers in many countries, are more critical, ideologically pluralist, and engaged with historical context and policy substance than purely commercial media (Aalberg and Curran 2011; Benson and Powers 2011; Cushion 2012).

Of course, it is not always the case that publicly funded media serve democratic ends; in many countries, what are called “public” media are in fact government propaganda agencies. Yet, commercial media also often serve, wittingly or unwittingly, as propaganda

mouthpieces for governments. Other commercial media effectively promote ideologies – party-based, religious, consumerist – without need of any direct link to government. The question, then, is not specific to government but to all institutional forms. What kinds of ownership, funding, organizational, and professional institutional arrangements promote more or less of various democratic (or other normative) discursive or social outcomes?

Weber's notion of "rational-legal" authority, as elaborated by Hallin and Mancini (2004: 192–3), points to a response. Bureaucratic systems, whether public or private, can be designed in ways that are self-limiting. Where there is effective rule of law, supported by custom as well as coercion, bureaucracies can in fact achieve a certain degree of accountability and autonomy. This is the conclusion of my recent co-authored study of public media regulations in fourteen leading democracies (Benson and Powers 2011).⁸ Countries with the highest-quality public media systems have regulatory and funding buffers to prevent partisan political control; they also have mechanisms to ensure democratic accountability and to encourage citizen involvement. Concretely, we found that the best public media systems have certain structural features in common: adequate public as opposed to commercial funding, multi-year funding cycles, autonomous oversight boards, and citizen engagement. A few concrete examples from our study will help illustrate these points.

In most Western European democracies, a "license fee" levied on all owners of television (and increasingly other media devices) funds public media systems. This system provides a direct link between public media broadcasters and their publics and avoids problems associated with funding derived from general government funds. In addition to establishing a buffer against dramatic changes in governmental funding, the license fee also has historically had "a social dimension," in that "by contributing to their national public broadcaster, citizens felt that it was more accountable to them than to the politicians" (Papathanassopoulos 2007: 156).

In the American context, public broadcasters have argued that direct charitable contributions from local citizens to local stations serve a similar role. Philanthropy, however, is not an exact substitute for universal public funding. First, it introduces a strong upper-middle-class influence over public media: this may encourage certain kinds of quality programs that might not otherwise be produced (see discussion in section on "social location" below), but it also creates incentives to ignore the needs and interests of noncontributing citizens. Second, the amount of funding that can be generated

by philanthropy is dramatically less than that which can be provided by a universal license fee or direct government funding. Even when individual donations and corporate sponsorships are added to the mix, US per capita funding of public media (PBS, NPR, and their local affiliates) is far below that of other leading democratic nation-states: just US\$9, compared to a range of US\$40–\$160 in the other countries in the study (Benson and Powers 2011: 61).

Total funding is important, but no less important for ensuring the viability and autonomy of public media are procedures designed to ensure their autonomy. In Australia, Denmark, Germany, and the United Kingdom, funding is established for multi-year periods, which lessens the capacity of governments to directly link funding to either approval or disapproval of programming. Charters or other media laws or regulations can restrict the capacity of governments to influence programming in a partisan direction. For example, the Swedish public broadcaster, SVT, is governed by a three-year charter and is owned by an independent foundation, specifically designed to insulate SVT from both state and market pressures. Administrative boards can also serve as a buffer between public broadcasters and the government in power. Their autonomy from political pressure may be bolstered by a variety of means: through staggered terms, limiting the capacity of a new government to immediately control all appointments; through dispersal of authority to make appointments; and through multiple layers of "external" and "internal" oversight, creating an "arms-length" relationship between the public broadcaster and partisan political interference or meddling.

Subsidies to newspapers in countries such as Finland, France, Norway, and Sweden are generally designed to be content neutral, to prevent closing of newspapers that will lead to local monopolies, and to promote pluralism of opinion not provided otherwise by market forces. According to the classic liberal formulation, commercial newspapers, because they are supposedly free of government control, will report on politics in a sustained and critical way. Some commercial media do, but many commercial media outlets offer little or no criticism of government or ignore politics altogether in order to focus on more audience-pleasing human interest, entertainment, and crime stories. In contrast, newspapers that are publicly supported and have a mandate to provide independent, critical coverage more often than not achieve this mandate (Benson and Powers 2011).

Finally, institutional structures have been set in place in many countries to promote democratic accountability of public media. Legal and administrative charters create mandates to provide diverse,

high-quality programming and inclusion of a wide range of voices and viewpoints. Funding structures and oversight organizations in Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands have attempted to ensure that public media are accountable to these public mandates and that public media listen to citizens and involve them in decision making. As the recent BBC scandals have shown, these ideals are not always achieved but, over time, public service media have shown that they offer a diversity and quality of content not supplied by commercial media alone.

It may be true that the license fee or other European-style regulatory reforms are for the moment politically unachievable in the United States; this is just another way of noting that the American institutional "path" long ago took a different direction to that of Western Europe and that regulatory, economic, and cultural inertia make it difficult to change course now. But this also shows the crucial importance of institutionalization: legislative or regulatory victories, no matter how quixotic such efforts may seem, are eminently worth trying because they are likely to have long-lasting effects.⁹

Only through international comparative research can one begin to see media systems as a whole. Through this lens, the distinctiveness of the US system – its extreme hyper-commercialism and weak public sector – is put in stark relief. Without this context in mind, American media research has tended to pose research questions that take the market model for granted, rather than to critically interrogate it in a way that might suggest serious alternatives. For example, Sarah Sobieraj's (2011) study of social activism and the media considerably updates Todd Gitlin's (1980) classic study, showing that many of the commercial and political logics at work in the 1960s still structure news choices in the 2000s. Activists face the same kinds of catch-22s: damned if they do (try to get their message out through the media, in which case it will be stripped of all substantive content), damned if they don't (give up on trying, in which case the message also remains unheard). Sobieraj finds that activists mostly forgo a third possibility: making full use of opportunities to reach publics outside the mainstream media. But there is a fourth possibility that she doesn't take much time to consider: why don't activists try to reform the media system in a way that would make it more receptive to ideas from the margins?¹⁰ Again, given the lack of substantial institutional variation in the US system (at least until recently), this is an understandable omission: cross-national comparative research can make visible what heretofore was invisible, namely, that the media system really could be organized in a different way. For example, my compara-

tive French-US research shows that French news media, including television news as well as national newspapers, are less likely than American media to reduce civil activism to personalized identity quests and more likely to acknowledge its organized collective character and to give space and time to its substantive arguments (Benson 2013). These different forms of journalism are not accidents but are rather the effects of institutional choices.

It must be emphasized that the differences between the United States and Western Europe are of degree rather than of fundamental kind. Cultural repertoires of civic solidarity and egalitarianism are available for use in American society just as market repertoires circulate in the Western European social democracies. The difference, as Michèle Lamont and Laurent Thévenot (2000) have argued, is that the market and civic solidarity cultural repertoires occupy different hierarchical positions on the two sides of the Atlantic: market logics dominate (but are contested) in America while civic solidarity logics dominate (but are contested) in continental Western Europe. What Lamont and Thévenot do not emphasize, however, is the extent to which national cultural hierarchies are anchored institutionally and materially. Civic solidarity is stronger in Western Europe because of social democratic government policies across a range of spheres of private and public life, including media policies. The particular ideological and formal characteristics of American and various European journalistic practices can thus best be understood as adaptations, accommodations, and forms of (limited) resistance to their national fields of power. In general, media sociology must situate its analyses in relation to fields of power in order to offer any real insight on the (variable) structural forces underlying distinct logics of practice.

Field and organizational logics

Within fields of power (still mostly national), there remains, at least in principle, some degree of variation across particular fields: artistic, scientific, religious, and civic/associational. In the realm of US media studies, investigations of field-based differences have been hampered in part because of the near-total dominance of commercial media. Scholars have tried to identify links between various qualities of news discourse and structural features such as advertising funding (Baker 1995) or publicly traded corporate ownership (Cranberg, Bezanson, and Soloski 2001). The results are tentative to the extent that for the most part these economic structural features have in recent years marked virtually all of the major US media outlets.¹¹

As economic and job losses mounted in the US newspaper industry during the 2000s – advertising has fallen by half (Pew Foundation 2012) and journalistic jobs have decreased by one-third over the past decade (Downie, Jr and Schudson 2009) – American professional and academic attention finally turned to the question of alternative ownership and funding models, both international and domestic. Santhanam and Rosenstiel (2011) set out to find out why US journalism seemed to be suffering more from the economic crisis than European journalism. The authors came up with three major conclusions. First, the publicly traded and private equity ownership forms that are dominant in the United States create higher profit pressures than in other countries and hence “force” owners to lay off workers in order to maintain these high profits. Second, because US news media are so dependent on advertising – as opposed to reader subscriptions and public subsidies, which provide a greater proportion of revenues in Europe – the drop in revenues was more pronounced in the United States when advertising dried up. And third, due to US government policies that allow or encourage debt-driven mergers and acquisitions, many US media companies were in a far more fragile economic position than their European peers when the financial crisis hit in 2008.

Even as the US media system remains resolutely commercial compared to its Western European counterparts (Kleis Nielsen 2012), the relatively strong philanthropic sector has contributed to an unprecedented experimentation in new ownership and funding models for journalism. Few of these nonprofit outlets are big operations. Their staffs range from a half-dozen to fifty. Their budgets range from US\$1 million to US\$10 million.¹² In contrast to the old “legacy” media which relied on business advertising for 70–80 percent of revenues, however, the nonprofit news outlets seek funds from a variety of sources – small and large individual donors, business sponsorships, local and national foundations. This natural experiment allows sociologists to study how variable forms of media ownership matter in ways that were not possible previously.

Research on field-based variations in media ownership is only beginning. For instance, media outlets owned by religious organizations – such as the *Christian Science Monitor* in the United States or the Catholic newspaper *La Croix* in France – might be expected to have a different orientation toward the news due to their religious and ethical commitments. Indeed, as the *Christian Science Monitor* managing editor remarked about the Christian Scientist church’s attitude about the *Monitor*: “They feel, as we do, that the charter of the paper

was to injure no man and bless all mankind through the practice of journalism with integrity . . . There is a charter to basically do good at some civic level.”¹³ Church financial support for the newspaper makes achievement of this mission possible. In my study of immigration news (Benson 2013), I found the *Christian Science Monitor* to be more ideologically diverse, comprehensive, and critical in its coverage than other US newspapers. Likewise, small media startups linked to the artistic field might be expected to be more experimental and less commercial in their orientation. This seems to be the case with the San Francisco *Public Press*, owned and funded by a northern California nonprofit arts association. The *Public Press* seeks to become the “*Wall Street Journal* for Working People.” Because it is free of advertising funding, it has been able to publish investigative articles on Macy’s department store and other major companies – the kind of critical business coverage that the business advertising-dependent *San Francisco Examiner* rarely if ever does.¹⁴

Going beyond traditional news organizations, Matthew Powers (2013) shows how variable forms of funding and organizational structure shape distinct logics of practice at the human rights NGOs that are increasingly becoming major sources and even producers of international news. Powers identifies three key structural variations inside NGOs: whether a human rights NGO has long-term or project-based funding; whether it seeks to influence broad publics or policy makers; and whether research or publicity departments dominate inside the organization. These factors not only affect NGO practices: ultimately, they narrow or broaden the public discourse, they help determine which issues or areas of the world will be given attention, and they influence the kinds of public or private solutions that will be considered viable. This research shows the need for media sociology to take into account variation in other social spaces that interact with the media to produce the news (as well as other forms of cultural expression). Countering the often unblinking praise accorded to civil society as a whole, Powers also demonstrates that different corners of civil society are more or less effective than others in meeting various democratic expectations. He thus provides an important reminder that variation needs to be taken into account in normative as well as in descriptive/explanatory analysis.

At the same time, it is important to stress that field-based logics of ownership and funding do not act alone in shaping news. They intersect with both the larger field of power (which in the US case is dominated by market logics) and with the pre-existing commercial and professional logic of the journalistic field. For example, despite

the *Christian Science Monitor's* self-conscious efforts to offer a different kind of quality journalism, the newspaper has increasingly felt constrained to maximize hits to its website, "monetize" its content, and in general "find a business model that works."¹⁵ Many of the new nonprofit news organizations emphasize professional journalistic values consistent with long-standing conventions of mainstream news (the main difference being that they may be more likely to put their ideals in practice than their commercially funded peers). Cross-national comparative research can help tease out this complex interplay between the logics of organizations, fields, and the larger field of power. Within a given macro-field of power, there may be substantial variation across the various mezzo-level fields, but the dominant fields in any given national field of power set the tone. Thus, *Le Figaro*, while highly commercial in the French context, is distinct from commercial US newspapers because it is shaped by a French national field of power far less commercialized than its US counterpart (Benson 2013).

Social location

Within national fields of power and particular fields, particular media outlets may still vary substantially due to their specific social location. Different media tend to be produced for different class fractions, a tendency that is only accentuating in this era of media fragmentation (Williams and Delli Carpini 2011). For this reason, the sociology of production and reception are intricately linked, and discursive "dispositions" are likely to parallel the structural "positions" of media outlets and their audiences. Social location is likely to trump the power even of the media mogul: at minimum, his or her success will be predicated on being able to efficiently locate and expand an audience by pandering to its preconceptions.

In my research on immigration news (see Benson 2009, 2013), the financial newspapers *Les Echos* and the *Wall Street Journal* were the most likely to emphasize the "good worker" frame, that is, the claim that immigrant workers were good for the economy and did work that domestic workers would not do. This frame clearly accords with the worldview of most of their business sector readership. Newspapers with the highest proportions of lesser-educated, lower-income readers such as the *Daily News*, the *New York Post*, and *Le Parisien* tended to focus most on crime and human interest and put ordinary citizens, rather than elites, at the center of their stories. Going beyond specific frames and sources, I also found that media outlets whose audiences

had the highest concentration of cultural capital (as measured by education and occupation) tended to offer the most ideologically diverse news: *Liberation* in France and the *Christian Science Monitor* in the United States.

Research that closely analyzes social class-based differences in the production and reception of news or other cultural forms remains all too rare. The need for this kind of structural analysis, however, is only going to increase. How the internet is transforming or not transforming social life can only be adequately understood in relation to such class dynamics. Euphemistically called lifestyle differences, such distinctions are at the heart of corporate marketing on the Web (Turow 2011).

Media sociology's distinctive contributions

If my analysis is correct, theoretical strategies ought to follow from structures too. Media studies departments are structurally compromised: their revenues mostly come from students who want to work in corporate advertising, public relations, entertainment, or journalism. This does not mean these students only want or will get a vocational education. It does mean that certain kinds of critical theory go over better than others: celebrations of "active audiences" and the liberating powers of new technologies are perennial favorites; theories whose critical components dissolve in their own obtuse abstractions threaten no one. A critical media sociology of structural variation is indeed structurally disadvantaged in this environment: its lucid questions hit too close to home. Early sociological interest in media notwithstanding (Katz and Pooley 2008), it's not as if there ever was a golden age either in sociology, political science, or anthropology for a critical institutional analysis of media, especially for studies focused on the United States. Rather than leading to resignation, however, such inherent difficulties only ought to strengthen our resolve to secure any institutional foothold that is possible for structural media sociology inside (as well as outside) the academy. Taking a page from cultural sociology, the time is overdue for structural media sociology to develop and diffuse its own "strong program."

In his book *The Media and Modernity*, John Thompson (1995) perceptively captured three major threads of media and communication research – a critical institutional tradition he primarily associates with the Frankfurt School and Habermas (but would incorporate in principle Bourdieu and other structural theorists), a hermeneutic/

cultural tradition, and a media-technologies or medium-theory approach inspired by Marshall McLuhan. Interest in media as technology has sparked the creation of an official American Sociological Association section in communication and information technologies. The hermeneutic tradition is well represented in the sociology of culture's culturalist turn, while the production of culture focused on the arts and music and inspired and mentored by Richard Peterson is enjoying a renaissance (Peterson and Anand 2004) in both cultural and economic sociology.

What is left for media sociology? Clearly, there is room for expansion in the critical institutional component of Thompson's tripartite model. Based on my casual observations of ASA conference catalogues and my experience serving as chair of the conference media sociology sessions one year, I would say that media sociology has become the primary home base and self-definition for sociologists studying news, social movement/media relations, social problems constructionism, and political communication more broadly, or to put it another way, organized communication practices in relation to media organizations (both mainstream and marginal). Media sociology can and must draw from – as well as contribute to – theoretical innovations in the broader sociology of culture and organizations. But whereas these other traditions can sometimes come off as abstract and disengaged, media sociology is almost always political, in the broad sense of the term. Media sociology ought to be – it isn't quite yet – the place where institutional, hermeneutical, and technological schools of media studies can engage in debate and mutual critique: think Bourdieu meets Alexander meets Latour. In other words, media sociology ought to privilege critical institutional analysis of media (given its current lack of representation elsewhere), but it should also remain in dialogue with other approaches.

To remain relevant, media sociology also needs to pay more attention to a range of popular cultural genres beyond news (see e.g. Grindstaff 2002; Lopes 2009). Sociologists ought to pay heed to political scientists Bruce Williams and Michael Delli Carpini (2011), who break down the artificial barriers between news, advocacy, and entertainment and analyze all of these genres in relation to their political usefulness and democratic relevance. Similarly, media sociology should not cede the question of innovation to organizational and economic sociology. In their research on "creative labour," David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker (2011) draw on these approaches while also asking questions about domination and emancipation rarely uttered in these subfields. Yet they also avoid the

totalizing tendency so common in critical theory in order to explore the variable structural factors that make creative autonomy more or less achievable.

At the same time, media sociology should take advantage of its position between sociology and humanities-oriented media studies to serve as an interlocutor, or even translator, between the two. Sociologists in interdisciplinary media studies departments have the rare opportunity to engage with theoretical and methodological approaches often effectively banned from even the most intellectually adventurous sociology departments – in some cases, to their detriment. Just to take one important example, American sociology is still remarkably western-centric, with Western Europe usually marking the outer limits of its international aspirations. As media sociology moves "beyond the western world" (Hallin and Mancini 2012), postcolonial theories (Shome and Hegde 2002b) can help comparative researchers be more reflexive about the fit of their ontological categories, as well as their broader epistemological and political preconceptions.

For its part, media sociology can provide some welcome clarity and rigor to the vague or overblown claims that often circulate in media studies. For example, what does it mean to say that global media flows are becoming increasingly transnational? In fact, most transnational media still operate in and through national fields. They may in some cases also constitute a transnational field (Kuipers 2011): in such cases, power dynamics are at least partially linked to the hierarchical relations among the nation-states involved. This is not to say that there do not exist transnational media, either large-scale transnational media or dispersed diasporic media. But what seems at first glance to be a chaotic, contingent, fluid process may in fact display patterned activity that can be linked to systematic structures of power at the subnational, national, and global regional levels (Couldry and Hepp 2012; Straubhaar 2007).

In his masterful social history of the telephone – whose introductory chapter offers one of the best critical overviews of social theories of technology – Claude Fischer suggests a tone of respectful dialogue with the more speculative branches of media studies while making clear the importance of empirically verifiable claims for sociological investigation:

Some writers, such as Kern, Meyerowitz, and Ronnell, have speculated about the implication of the telephone at deeper levels of the American psyche and of American culture than I have treated here. Ronnell has

suggested, for example, that the “ringing [of a telephone] corresponds to a deeper, more primal voice within us, perhaps a parental voice . . . We cannot resist the command.” They may be right, but it is a challenge to find reliable, relevant evidence. Thus, these sorts of arguments are difficult, if not impossible, to evaluate empirically. (Fischer 1992)

Media studies often imagines itself on the cutting edge. Sociology can help bring it back from the abyss. Against the ever-renewed fervor about how this or that new technology is going to change the world, the sociological impulse is ever skeptical. How many people are using this new gizmo? Who are they: what is their economic, educational, and professional background? And what are they doing, exactly? More often than not, it turns out that the new technology that is supposedly changing the world is not only not changing the world but is mostly reinforcing and extending pre-existing systems of power (Curran, Fenton, and Freedman 2012). With Raymond Williams (2003 [1974]) blasting away, Marshall McLuhan’s formalist probes about the inherent logics of media technologies are brought crashing back to earth. When I teach McLuhan and Williams back-to-back, most students think Williams won the “debate” but their heart still belongs to McLuhan. It must be conceded that there is something in McLuhan’s often-eccentric diagnoses that still rings true.

Obviously, there are limits to the sociological understanding: there are other forms of understanding and insight that should be respectfully attended to. In his poetic analysis of the unique aesthetic qualities of television itself as a medium, not as the purveyor of any particular content, Raymond Williams seems to cede some ground to McLuhan and to gracefully acknowledge the limits of scientific analysis: “when, in the past, I have tried to describe and explain this, I have found it significant that the only people who ever agreed with me were painters.” Maybe there is hope after all for a dialogue between the ever-warring artistic and scientific fields.

There are also wars aplenty inside sociology. This chapter is a call not simply for more sociological attention to media, but for a particular kind of comparative sociological attention. George Steinmetz’s (2004) conception of “critical realism” comes closest to what I have in mind: a theoretically driven, comparative research program that tries to steer a path between large-scale quantitative research oblivious to context and the small-scale qualitative research that insists that all cases are ultimately incommensurable. As Steinmetz (*ibid.*: 394) rightly insists, “the production of sociological knowledge involves movement among case studies, comparisons among case studies, and theory.”

While acknowledging complexity and contingency, this sociology searches for the patterns that help explain elements of social order. It continues to insist on the stark reality of the social, even if it is discursively constructed. And it engages politically not only in the critique of categories but also in their everyday use in relations of power. At every level, there is an attempt to explore how structures of power enable and constrain strategies of action. A media sociology that could accomplish all this would contribute mightily to both sociology and media studies. It might even be worthy of a manifesto.

Notes

- 1 Jeff Sommer, “A Mutual Fund Master, Too Worried to Rest,” *New York Times*, August 11, 2012, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/12/business/john-bogle-vanguards-founder-is-too-worried-to-rest.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0, accessed September 2, 2013.
- 2 I wish to thank Helen Nissenbaum for her helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay. That at least some corners of cultural theorizing find sociology threatening or at least off-putting is evident in the online editorial published by the literary-arts journal *n+1* entitled “Too much sociology.” See <http://nplusonemag.com/too-much-sociology>, posted April 8, 2013 and accessed September 2, 2013.
- 3 In *The Civil Sphere* (2007), Alexander has almost nothing to say about social class. The omission may not be innate to the “strong program” in cultural sociology but does seem to be typical of studies influenced by this approach.
- 4 Pessimistic theories of all-encompassing power are predictably attractive to each new generation of graduate students, and certainly this was the case with my own at Berkeley sociology in the early 1990s (going to graduate school, after all, constitutes a form of rejection of the system), as well as to radical theorists who eschew “empiricism” but effectively support their arguments with empirical evidence, just not systematic. It must be admitted, however, that variation is not only an empirical question. Holistic theorists may ignore variation because they think it is politically insignificant (e.g. variations within neoliberal capitalism do not take away from the fact that it remains neoliberal capitalism!). Research on the social effects of institutional variation has an elective affinity with projects of reform rather than quietism or revolution (the only choices that follow from totalizing models), albeit possibly quite radical reform.
- 5 I thank Patrick Carr of the Rutgers Department of Sociology for reminding me of the need to address both aspects of Anthony Giddens’s structuration process, the structuring as well as the structured (see Sewell 2005: ch. 4).
- 6 Most sociologists see structures, of whatever variety, as extensive and

durable. Actor-network theory sees them as fragile, ephemeral, and atypical, "patches of order in a sea of disorder" in the words of philosopher Michel Serres (Law 2009: 144). Perhaps structuralists and anti-(post-)structuralists alike tend to find what they are looking for. Gil Eyal (2010), however, has usefully suggested one possible empirical accommodation between the two models: that weak actor-networks are the "spaces between" strongly institutionalized fields.

- 7 For example, Latour (2005: 37) elaborates a conception of politics on a global scale that is more open-ended than that defended by Habermas. He writes that, through "those makeshift assemblages we call markets, technologies, science, ecological crises, wars and terrorist networks," we are already "connected" – "it's simply that our usual definitions of politics have not caught up yet with the masses of linkages already established."
- 8 Drawing on diverse primary documents as well as direct consultations with scholars and policy makers in each country, we examined public service media policy and regulation in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.
- 9 In all capitalist societies, social democratic victories (universal retirement income and health care for the elderly, disability support, etc.) were won over and against the "path dependency" of laissez-faire. Once institutionalized, however, neoliberal political forces have had a hard time repealing them: witness the ongoing difficulties of Republicans in the United States to privatize Medicare and Social Security. The same principle holds for media policy. The success or failure of efforts to maintain or expand the "public" component of the internet, against commercial encroachment, will have long-lasting effects (see Benkler 2006).
- 10 Sobieraj (2011: 164) at least notes in passing that "associations would be well served to work toward media reform (we all would)." This is admittedly not the focus of her study, which makes many other notable contributions. The problem is that the structure of the media system is so rarely the focus in any US media or cultural sociology.
- 11 Cranberg, Bezanson, and Soloski (2001) call attention to a particular shift in US securities law that allowed greater communication between institutional investors and company managers. This is a significant change because institutional investors have concentrated economic power and are arguably more oriented toward short-term profit maximization than other investors. Cranberg et al. argue that this legal change, combined with an increase in institutional investor holdings in newspaper companies (on average about 90 percent by the early 2000s; see Soloski 2005), has been a key factor in motivating cuts in newsroom personnel, the quickest way to increase profit margins. In this case, the authors' conclusions are based largely on temporal rather than spatial variation: it does not analyze cases substantially "less" dominated by

institutional investor stock ownership for the simple reason that few such cases existed in the United States at the time of the study.

- 12 See recent reports on the new nonprofit news published by the Knight Foundation, Pew, and the Oxford-Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.
- 13 Marshall Ingwerson interview with author, Boston, May 2011. These interviews are part of a research project on media ownership that I am conducting with Julie Sedel of the University of Strasbourg in France and Mattias Hesserus of the University of Gotteburg, Sweden. The project received initial funding from the Swedish Ax:son Johnson Foundation.
- 14 Michael Stoll interview with author, Boston, April 2011.
- 15 Author interview with Ingwerson, op. cit.

Media Sociology:
A Reappraisal

Edited by Silvio Waisbord

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First published in 2014 by Polity Press

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-7055-3
ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-7056-0(pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10.5 on 12 pt Plantin by
Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

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