

Culture Meets... Media: "Media Rising"

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Elihu Katz and Jeff Pooley (2008) maintain that sociology abandoned mass communications research. This may have been true at one point, but in recent years increasing numbers of sociologists are claiming back this territory as they realize how obviously central media are to their research questions. Just months ago, at the initiative of three enterprising young sociologists – Casey Brienza (PhD Cambridge), Andrew Lindner (PhD Penn State), and Matthias Revers (soon to be PhD at SUNY-Albany) – media sociology gathered enough signatures to gain status as an official section-in-formation of the ASA. In August, Brienza, Lindner, and Revers organized a well-attended preconference on media sociology and another is in the works for next August in San Francisco. The drive for institutionalization is moving forward at a rapid pace and scale, exceeding initial expectations.

What is also needed, however, is the intellectual elaboration and explanation of what media sociology can or should be. At the New York media sociology pre-conference, I was privileged to be able to address this question along with my distinguished colleagues Michael Schudson, Andrea Press, Eleanor Townsley, and Dhiraj Murthy. Although there were many points of convergence among us in our visions of a revitalized media sociology, there were also not surprisingly some differences in emphasis. At the kind invitation of the *Culture* editors, I will happily seize this opportunity to elaborate my remarks and make the case for a particular kind of critical media sociology attentive to social structures and political consequences. I will conclude with some suggestions related to the particular challenges and opportunities for media sociology in relation to interdisciplinary media studies.¹

In his book *The Media and Modernity*, John Thompson (1995) perceptively identified 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 field theory and various critical political economy approaches), 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 (CITASA), though this section certainly goes well beyond McLuhan. In the tradition of Raymond Williams (2003 [1974]) and Claude Fischer (1992), CITASA-affiliated sociologists are conducting outstanding research that situates technologies in their social contexts of production and use (see, e.g., Hargittai 2010; Earl and Kimport 2011; Neff 2012; Murthy 2013). The hermeneutic tradition is well represented in the section on culture, or "cultural sociology" as it is increasingly referred to, while the production of culture focused on the arts and music and often 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? At the outset, it's important to stress that there is room for more: the pie is growing. This proliferation of sections is yet another sign of strength of our related fields of inquiry. Media sociology

would supplement and enhance rather than supplant communication and information technologies, cultural sociology, and economic sociology. I can imagine at least two, non-mutually exclusive, roles for media sociology. One role would be media sociology as the biggest of the big tents: it could be the place where the institutional, hermeneutical, and technological schools come together to engage in debate and mutual critique. In this big tent role, media sociology would also serve as a crucial interlocutor with disciplines outside sociology. I will return to this point, but in most of my limited remaining space I want to advocate a second role that would focus on expanding the critical institutional component of Thompson's tripartite model, which is arguably currently underserved.

To succinctly express what I mean by such an approach, I will quote the famous money manager John Bogle. Asked to account for why the Vanguard company he founded has substantially lower fees than other mutual fund companies, Bogle pointed to its mutual ownership model that prevents profits being siphoned away to pay investors or shareholders: in other words, he explained, "strategy follows structure."² If contemporary media sociology is in need of a new *raison d'être*, I cannot think of a better one. There are at least three distinct propositions embedded in Bogle's claim that "strategy follows structure" worth underlining: First, there is such a thing as structure, it is pervasive, and it has an important social component. Second, both structures and strategies are multiple. And third, 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). Returning to fundamentals, I will briefly elaborate and illustrate each of these claims.

To speak of the structural is to emphasize the patterned character of human action and to thus create categories that group together various patterns. Structure, however, generally refers to something more than persistent patterns. It also suggests the importance, if not indeed the primacy, of the social. 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. The cultural turn was a wrong turn, and arguably complicit with neo-liberalism (see, e.g., Sewell 2005), to the extent that it often acted as if social structure no longer existed.

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 this sociological approach is the search for and explanation of variation, in marked contrast to the totalizing claims common in much contemporary work influenced by the Frankfurt School or Foucault. For example, in their research on "creative labour," David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker (2012) successfully identify the variable structural factors that make creative autonomy more or less achievable. Under certain conditions, of course, institutional forces may produce cultural 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). Homogenization should be understood as a variable not a destiny.

The third normative element perhaps sits less easily with sociological orthodoxy, even though normative concerns obviously underpin some of the most frequently studied aspects of media. 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.”

Perhaps the most important single thing to do is banish all references to “the media.” The word is plural. There is no single media logic. Media may vary across mediums, across various types of commercial versus non-commercial ownership and funding, across nation-states, and across social class locations: finding out exactly how and when and why is a research program for several lifetimes. For example, 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, though schematic, is a fine example of variable structural sociology: 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.) Similarly, as my French-American comparative research on immigration news (Benson 2013) shows, cross-national differences in news formats and content can be linked, at least in part, to distinct institutional histories and mixes of commercial and civic capital in the formation of national media fields. Within and across these national fields, one can also still find substantial discursive and stylistic distinctions between media that occupy different social circuits of production/reception.

In sum, much like George Steinmetz’s (2004) “critical realism,” a variation-oriented structural media sociology acknowledges complexity and contingency while doggedly searching 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. I am convinced that this kind of research, done well, will propel media sociology toward ever greater visibility and influence vis-à-vis both scholarly and general publics.

Even so, one should not underestimate the obstacles. There’s little chance that sociology will ever regain its once dominant position, but how could it given that this growing field is now crowded with anthropologists, historians, computer scientists, comparative literature scholars, and inter-disciplinarians of all stripes? These disciplines, both within and across departments, are already fiercely fighting for institutional resources for media research, from grants and fellowships to new

faculty positions. Moreover, as Michèle Lamont (2010) convincingly shows, there remain sharp differences in criteria of excellence across the disciplines. Where sociologists are not already present in force, their disciplinary compatriots may have real difficulties gaining entrée. Yet we have no choice but to enter the fray. In the long run, media sociology’s future lies outside as much as inside sociology departments.

On the one hand, media studies will be stronger if sociologists are paying attention to the work produced in other disciplines. Against the ever-renewed fervor about how this or that new technology is going to change the world, the sociological impulse is ever skeptical. With Raymond Williams (2003) blasting away, Marshall McLuhan’s formalist probes about the inherent logics of media technologies are brought crashing back to earth. Media studies often imagines itself on the cutting edge. Sociology is there to help bring it back from the abyss.

On the other hand, media sociologists should be open to other approaches and to critiques of their own models and assumptions. For 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 2002) can help comparative researchers be more reflexive about the fit of their ontological categories as well as their broader epistemological and political preconceptions. Likewise, in his own poetic analysis of the unique aesthetic qualities of television itself as a medium rather than as the purveyor of any particular content, even Williams (2003: 76) effectively concedes some ground to McLuhan and 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.”

Williams, as always, has it just right: argue your case, as forcefully as possible, but retain an open mind. Media sociology’s future will be shaped by how well we adhere to this credo – as well as how well we institutionally anchor it, both inside and outside the mother discipline. The (renewed) battle is only beginning.

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Amuses

Recent articles collected and reviewed by the Newsletter Graduate Student Editors,
Michael Rodríguez-Muñiz

Zubrzycki, Geneviève. 2013. "Aesthetic revolt and the remaking of national identity in Québec, 1960-1969." *Theory and Society* 42:423-75.

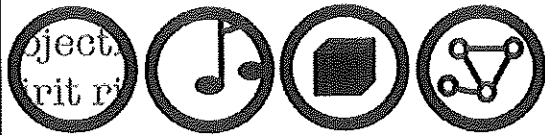
Ever since Durkheim, iconic symbols have long served as conduits through which to theorize and empirically study the relationship between meanings and materials. Geneviève Zubrzycki's recent essay makes an important contribution to this intellectual trajectory, and more broadly the growing interest in materiality among cultural sociologists (e.g. Alexander 2008; Griswold, Mangione, McDonnell 2013; Mukerji 2011).

Drawing heavily on the visual and material turns in the social sciences, Zubrzycki explores the *performativity* of icons, that is, the capacity of icons to actively constitute and configure, rather than merely reflect, social and symbolic relations. And yet, Zubrzycki's ambitions are not simply to generically assert that materiality matters, or even that it shapes meaning-making, but rather to demonstrate how, and under what historical and social dynamics, "the aesthetic and material form of an icon can...alter its 'inner' content, its meaning" (p. 427).

The historical case study at the heart of Zubrzycki's essay is well suited for her theoretical agenda. Zubrzycki offers an empirically rich and thoroughly researched account of the rapid transformation of French Canadian national identity during the "Quiet Revolution," a nearly ten-year period of popular upheaval between 1960-1969. At the heart of matters was the biblical figure of St. John the Baptist and his lamb, the hegemonic emblem of the dominant Catholicized French Canadian national imaginary that came under attack from a growing secularist Leftist movement. Zubrzycki interprets this emergent iconoclasm as an example an "aesthetic revolt," which she defines as a "*dual process whereby social actors contest and rework iconic symbols in the public sphere; those symbols acquiring, through those material manipulations, significations that push forward the articulation of new identities and provide momentum for institutional reforms*" (p. 428, italics in original).

As Zubrzycki narrates, the aesthetic revolt against the icon of St. John erupted most powerfully in annual parades, which had traditionally served as key sites for the articulation and elaboration of French Canadianness. Opposition leaders charged that the popular depiction of St. John the Baptist as child and the lamb respectively connoted dependence and passivity – and thus were unfit representations for a modernized, self-sufficient *Québécois* "nation." Interestingly, attempts by the Catholic Church and parade organizers to modify – in light of criticisms – the material features of the icon only led to further destabilization. Ultimately, Zubrzycki argues that the emergence of a secularized and separatist *Québécois* identity cannot be fully understood without attending to the aesthetic revolt unleashed during annual parades, which eventually, both figuratively and literally, "decapitated" St. John the Baptist.

Attentive to the complex interaction between material affordances, cultural understandings, historical conjunctures, and political movements, Zubrzycki offers evidence that "the force of symbols resides not only in their content, but also in their form and the stages on which they are displayed and contested" (p. 465). Indeed, the case of the "Quiet Revolution" and its aesthetic revolt over iconic representations of the "nation" uncovers a useful opening for a "cultural sociology of historical change" (p. 424).



culture

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Chair's Message:

Here, There and Everywhere

Mabel Berezin, Cornell University

Letters from the Chair are a peculiar genre of writing. What might one or should one say in a 1000 to 1500 word allotment? *Here, There and Everywhere* for some reason popped into my mind as I was contemplating this missive while sitting cramped in the not so friendly skies of United! As Chair of the Culture section, a section that started with many members who were interested in the arts, I report with some chagrin that I actually googled my title because I was not quite sure that I remembered its origin. And yes, it is a Beatles' song; and yes, I should have known that cultural fact. Moreover, culture is really not akin to love—but maybe, in fact it is—as culture's ontological status is here, there and everywhere. So my free association at 30,000 feet, my “blink” moment to invoke Malcolm Gladwell, is not so far off the mark.

But alas, I had something slightly more mundane in mind when my title hit me—metaphorically of course. I was thinking that I wanted to cover more than one topic in my initial message from the health of our section to the planning for next year's ASA to some of the highlights from our New York meeting. I will close with some commentary on the collection of essays from the panel that I organized on politics and culture that appears in this newsletter.

Section Membership is at an all time high of 1208 members again making Culture the largest ASA section. Students represent 37% of our membership. Attendance at our panels at ASA was strong. Some session sessions had overflow crowds. We had nine regular sessions and six section sessions.

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WANTED

New Newsletter Editor(s)

Beginning of Term: Fall 2014

Please direct any questions to our Section Chair, Mabel Berezin

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