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Media as practice

a brief exchange

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Nick Couldry

Mark Hobart's comments greatly enrich the space of argument in which my original piece was situated. That piece, written in late 2003, was part polemic, part manifesto. I wrote it fast, because the then recent adoption of practice theory in sociology – in particular, social theory and the sociology of consumption – seemed to have urgent implications for the sociology of media, my own field. So while I was well aware of the deep philosophical currents swirling around the term 'practice', I deliberately stepped across them for my immediate purpose of disrupting current schemas for analysing 'media' and suggesting some new ones.

What emerges from our two pieces, written at different times and for different purposes, are two rather different ways of introducing practice theory to media research. The first, 'radical' approach (Hobart's) adopts practice as its key philosophical concept to ground a complete reorientation of our epistemology of social analysis. A second, 'instrumental' approach (my own) is more limited in scope and intent: it develops the analytical implications of certain debates and terms from practice theory to dislodge old habits in the specific field of media analysis. Underlying this difference, I suspect, is an underlying philosophical divergence between certain ontologies and epistemologies of the social which gives most weight to discourse and interpretation (for example, that of Ernesto Laclau, which Hobart applies to media research) and the rather different ontology and epistemology of so-called 'critical realism' (developed by Roy Bhaskar) which is concerned above all with the material bases of power. I have explored the implications of that divergence for understanding media power elsewhere (Couldry 2008).

The basic point, as I see it, is as follows: without denying for one moment the reconceptualisation by Foucault, Latour and others of power as dispersed (a fundamental shift in modern social thought), power is still an arrangement of people and things, actions and discourse, that involves coordination, sometimes over large scales, even if that coordination always must be enacted locally. My worry is that what at first seems radical in Hobart's reading of practice theory – and who could doubt him when, like Bourdieu, albeit within a very different language, he argues we must each be sceptical towards the power relations built into the analyst's pose – risks preventing us from grasping how contemporary power works, in part, through media and the stretched-out processes of mediation.¹ Here I welcome, incidentally, Hobart's suggestion of the term 'media-related' to replace my term 'media-oriented' practice, so as to emphasise that practices of interest in relation to media include many that are not oriented to media, indeed may be turned away from it. I could not agree more.

So there is a great deal of common ground between us which must be recognised. But it would be wrong equally to minimize the genuine philosophical divergences which shape our different perspectives on practice. It may be productive simply to list some of the philosophical choices involved here while leaving it to the writers of later chapters and to readers – to form their own views about which, if either, of our epistemologies of practice is more useful for understanding media.

There are a number of major philosophical issues which it is clear (and here Hobart and I completely agree) need to be aired more widely within media research. There are broad philosophical debates:

¹ See Couldry (2000: 4-7) for a longer discussion on this point which draws on actor network theory.

- realism/anti-realism.
- the problems of incommensurability and translation – my view on this is shaped by Donald Davidson's (1984), I think, classic debunking of the apparently fundamental problems of radical incommensurability.
- the question of whether a notion of intersubjective understanding can be developed which avoids making transcendental assumptions. I believe it can, while Hobart doesn't (for a recent discussion of Davidson's contribution on this, see Grant 2007: 145-48).

Moving more towards the philosophy of social science, there is the question of:

- the ontology of social description -what entities do we suppose are fundamental to any description of the social world, and in particular how do we understand power and agency and their interrelations?

While in relation to media research, the main questions would seem to be:

- the consequences of genuinely internationalising media research (see here for some recent thoughts, Couldry 2007).
- the relative priority we give to problems of interpretation and translation versus the need to register regularity and hierarchy where it occurs in and between particular scales.
- our understanding of media power, and how and why that understanding is transformed as we increasingly compare research on media in different parts of the world.
- the legitimate role of philosophical argument in guiding, or laying rules for, empirical analysis in media research or in any other area (if legitimate, there is the further question of which philosophical debates and reference points are useful and which are not).

Hobart and I agree, I suspect, much more than might be immediately apparent, that these are the outstanding questions requiring clarification, but we draw on different philosophical and argumentative resources to address them.

A richer debate within media research will result, I believe, if we bring our philosophical premises out into the open and debate them. I look forward to more of this kind of debate and welcome Hobart's contribution in encouraging the debate about practice theory in media research in a more philosophically explicit direction.

Mark Hobart

Nick Couldry's response is important and constructive. A concern we share is that, with its empiricist, at times positivist, pedigree, media studies scholars prefer to get on with 'normal science' (Kuhn 1970) rather than reflect occasionally on quite what is involved in doing it. Ignoring, or being ignorant of, the philosophical presuppositions of any theory or practice condemns one endlessly to replicate the safe-looking, but ultimately sclerotic, certainties of moribund paradigms. Given the crisis that its practitioners are gradually recognizing media studies is in, Couldry and I agree that it is crucial that we start to question existing theoretical frameworks, and that is what our two pieces are about. So I welcome his drawing attention to the philosophical divergences between how we imagine practice. It is only out of such argument that the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches will emerge.

The philosophical debates that Couldry lists – realism, translation, intersubjectivity and the ontology of social description – do indeed need reconsidering urgently, most obviously for the study of non-Western media. The risk is of claiming to understand others using culturally specific frameworks which are imagined to be universal. Questions about translation and intersubjectivity, for example, may undermine taken-for-granted assumptions and threaten media studies as we know it.² I question, though, whether these complex epistemological and ontological questions boil down, as Couldry suggests, to the relative importance of interpretation and discourse as against the materiality of power. While we both reject the prevailing, but largely unthinking, empiricism, Couldry's choice of Bhaskar's critical realism as the route for an internationalised media studies presupposes a Kantian transcendentalism, which runs counter to the recognition of historical and cultural difference.³

When it comes to Couldry's account of what the main future research questions are, the differences between us become apparent and informative. Our intellectual backgrounds, disciplinary training and what we understand as the purposes and limits of inquiry lead us to approach the issues in quite different ways. To what degree they are incompatible or incommensurate will, I trust, emerge out of further argument.⁴ Couldry writes from the heartland of Euro-American media studies and is reasonably comfortable approaching it as a science, but he is concerned how genuinely to internationalise it. His suggestions for future research presuppose that normal science is working reasonably well but needs some updating and revision. Coming to media studies as an anthropologist, I am struck *inter alia* by the complacent Eurocentrism of media studies, reminiscent less of a self-critical discipline than a closed and self-confirming system of belief like Zande witchcraft (Winch 1970) or Nuer religion (Feyerabend 1975: 250-51). How, for instance, are we to determine that the scientific regularity which Couldry seeks to establish through research is not to a significant degree a product of the frame of reference?

² I am grateful to Virginia Nightingale for pointing out to me how the object of study in most media studies is now defined around and reifies particular assumptions about media production. Similarly, treating communication as mechanical, and so largely unproblematic, neatly avoids how complex and uncertain a set of relationships communication comprises.

³ 'Only transcendental realism ... can sustain the idea of a law-governed world independent of man ... that is necessary to understand science' (Bhaskar 1978: 26).

⁴ For reasons of space, our original and much longer exchange had to be drastically shortened. The full version is available at http://www.criticalia.org/Debate_on_Media_Practices.htm.

Similarly, Couldry is concerned to establish hierarchy, but this applies not just to the object of study but to the relationship between media researchers and their subjects of study, who are knowable only in the terms designated by Western scholars. Anthropologists recognize this, sadly, as epistemological imperialism. In stressing the materiality of contemporary media power, Couldry is locked into a Western dichotomy of discourse versus materiality; and is also unable to recognize, let alone step outside, the formidable hegemony of Western academe. To me the materiality of power is only one of its modes. Phrased in other terms, historically, media and communication studies involve *inter alia* a tension between two substantive goals: servicing Western media industries and political activism. Anthropology by contrast, insofar as it can escape its colonial heritage, is, I think, of necessity critical. That is, its task is to challenge the hegemony of which it, like media studies, is part. For this reason I am much more sceptical than Couldry about how open the research agenda of media studies can ever be. Like the objectivity and impartiality of the news, I consider it a fiction necessary to the smooth running of academia, as news is of the polity.

We both recognize and appreciate that the differences between our approaches are not simply a matter of choosing philosophers who suit our taste but of drawing upon philosophical debate to try to articulate quite different ways of appreciating what knowledge does. It would be easy to put labels on what we are doing: naturalism *versus* humanism, conservatism *versus* radicalism, normal science *versus* trendy poststructuralist critique and so on. That misses the point and it enables people to carry on uncritically recycling tired, self-confirming and increasingly uninteresting work. To dwell on the differences is to miss the fact that Couldry and I both agree that media studies, and the study of media practice, without critical philosophical debate is sterile.

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