

If only practice were so easy: a response to Nick Couldry

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Appearances notwithstanding, media studies is remarkable for its relative lack of critical theoretical or philosophical debate.¹ Little wonder then that media and communication studies are, by their own admission, in crisis. So I warmly welcome Nick Couldry's article on media practice and his rejoinder to me. My reading suggests he broadly agrees with my stress on practice, but registers caveats and disagreements. Although Couldry has yet to develop his theoretical account, it would appear that we each adopt fairly obvious, but antithetical, accounts of media practice. Couldry's position, as I understand it, might be described as cautiously conservative, while mine is more radical. Couldry adopts a cumulative account of knowledge and wishes to conserve and build on existing achievements, while remedying their shortcomings by adding practice.² By contrast I have grave reservations about much current theory. My approach is radical in that I wish to reconsider all media and mediation as practice, root and branch.

Evidently I have failed to be clear enough about my argument. If Couldry who is philosophically literate is confused, other readers may well be so too. This is not however the place to rehearse the theoretical argument, so I confine myself to sketching out the background to my account of practice.³ My aim is to rethink not just the production, dissemination, and readers' or audiences' engagement with media by reference to their constitutive practices, but also the innumerable practices of commentary by politicians and media producers themselves. In place of abstractions such as structure, agency, hegemony and the like, I consider those finely-honed practices through which scholars claim, enunciate, argue and challenge such notions. Although there are differences of degree and kind, democratically on this account there is no sharp dichotomy between the practices of producers, audiences and commentators, of known and knowers.

The arguments for attempting a thorough-going account of practice are several. It is parsimonious, elegant (Hesse 1978) and therefore easily invalidated. It

¹ 'Theory' in media studies is largely reduced to massaging concepts, many adopted idiosyncratically from other disciplines (think of 'text' and 'discourse'). The lack of engagement with wider philosophical argument is striking. Among the reasons seems to be nostalgia for the originary Gramscian political moment of media studies, together with an awkward coupling with communication studies which, for the most part, is theoretically antediluvian. This has resulted in media studies scholars not only dismissing post-structuralism (Chen 1996) and film theory, but even selectively cherry picking the philosophers whose work underpins or aims to engage with cultural and media studies, like Laclau and Butler (e.g. Hall 1996: 142). Unfortunately at times Couldry slips into this stance, as when he complains of my use of Laclau. I look forward to what an international media studies grounded on a transcendental – and so ahistorical and acultural – argument for realism or naturalism (Bhaskar 1979) would look like.

² Such approaches usually assume a capitalist metaphor of knowledge as happily accumulating and finesse away the revolutionary metaphor, by which new knowledge overthrows previous knowledge (Hobart 1995).

³ For those interested, I give bibliographic references as I go along.

defamiliarizes conventional approaches and knowledge. By rethinking the object of study, it problematizes the relationship between ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ approaches and invites a critical rethinking of action, the human subject, their relationship and issues of explanation more generally. As concepts and theories have presuppositions and histories, it largely avoids imposing these under the guise of the self-evident, natural or normal.

My account of practice draws on various sources. Following the later Foucault, I am interested in the historical and cultural diversity of the ‘micro-practices’ of power/knowledge which he argued make up social life, with special reference to the mass media, because of their articulatory role. Following Laclau, I question totalizing accounts of, say, culture (aka convention), structure or ideology, and human subjects, in favour of analyzing the practices through which these are constituted and antagonisms articulated. I would argue such practices constitute not only the object of study but also the knowing subject. Such an account is evidently anti-dualist,⁴ to the point that I would wish not to separate mind from action. Following Collingwood, this approach

does not ask what mind is; it only asks what mind does...[and] renounces all attempt to discover what mind *always and everywhere does*, and asks only *what mind has done* on certain definite occasions’ (Collingwood 1942: 61, italics in the original).

Following Taylor, I treat mind and consciousness as historically situated action and ‘something that is achieved’ (1985: 90). In short, I am trying fairly systematically to redescribe culture, structure, mind and ideas as historically and culturally specific practices. So I was amused to see Couldry depict my understanding of practice as idealist. As I take understanding to be a practice, nothing could be further from the case.⁵ As Couldry attributes to me (as presumably others might) a whole raft of positions that I have argued strenuously against, something is going on.

Let me give two examples. I do not assume that practices are more likely to be unorganized than organized, flat rather than hierarchical. As Goodman argued ‘coherence is a characteristic of descriptions, not of the world...there is no such thing as a structure of the world for anything to conform or fail to conform to (1972: 24, 31). My concern is neither with assuming or divining some ultimate essence of the world, structure or practice, but with the conditions under which people (including notably scholars) have claimed or denied them as being something or

⁴ In much of his argument Couldry seems to favour some form of dualism both in invoking Davidson against Quine (see Taylor 1985: 77-9) and in contrasting discourse/interpretation and power/materiality. One reason for citing Laclau and Taylor is that these are the two philosophers whom Couldry’s own source, Schatzki, draws on at length.

⁵ A similar misplaced charge was laid, as Hirst pointed out (1985: 45ff.), against Collingwood. This will, I hope, clear up other confusions. Couldry raises the question of how, on my account, I am to achieve the *accurate* translation of practice. This presupposes however some *a priori* standard or a correspondence theory of the kind I question. On my account, there are practices which the practitioners or others may label ‘translation’ under certain circumstances, and there are practices of evaluating those practices and so on. The aim is to problematize the intellectual practices of translation and representation, as part of reconsidering the implications and consequences of the articulations that scholars themselves make.

A residual Either-Orism is also at work. At moments it seems that, if I am not a realist or materialist (which Couldry evidently favours), then I must lean towards idealism. The other charge, that of relativism, incurred presumably because of my criticism of rationalism, I have addressed in detail elsewhere (1985, 1992)

other to other people on particular occasions with varying consequences. That is I am interested in how groups and people articulate and counter-articulate rival ways of knowing, understanding, acting upon and engaging with the world. In such processes mass mediation is evidently implicated.

Couldry also attributes to me a commitment to some form of interpretivism and some remarkable ideas about the human subject. This is slightly odd as in my original piece I criticized pre-Heideggerian hermeneutics in favour of an analysis in terms of articulation, precisely because it refuses the dualism of mind and body. In other words, following Derrida and Foucault, I am post-, rather than anti-, hermeneutic (Hobart 1982 to 1999).⁶ Couldry also states that my vision of ‘understanding is the transmission of *ideas* between hermetically sealed individuals’ instead of intersubjectivity. To clarify, I seek to problematize both intersubjectivity and Euro-American projections of the subject onto others (1986, 1990, 1997) in favour of a more Foucauldian analysis of the historical and cultural practices through which people (and sometimes other entities) are objectivized as subjects, objects or whatever (1982). Likewise I have questioned the political and epistemological imperatives that lead authorities as diverse as development agencies (Hobart 2007) and media studies scholars (2005) to uphold transmission models despite their evident inappropriateness.

That Couldry could so consistently attribute to me the precise contrary to my argument raises intriguing questions. Unless I am even more ignorant and confused in my presuppositions than I thought, what is going on? Let us try to glean what we can of Couldry’s position to see if this helps. His ontology is significant, because it is not confined to practice. In addition, Couldry allows in various other explanatory notions including structure, convention and some conception of the human subject.⁷

All my work...has aimed to extend our understanding of what I would still prefer to call the ‘structural’ role that media do indeed have in social life (Couldry p 2).

Convention, and more generally, habit are the broad terms we use to characterize a state of affairs where certain actions, understandings, and expressions get repeated *without* the causal input of interpretation (Couldry p 3, emphases in the original).

There are several problems here. Probably the least significant is the much-argued status of structure and convention⁸. As Couldry offers no critique of post-

⁶ I assume Couldry does not simply mean that, if I am not a card-carrying materialist or realist, I must *ipso facto* be an interpretivist. However, a pervasive dualism seems to run through Couldry’s comments. He writes of discourse as if that were a synonym for text, rather than the anti-dualist account of the later Foucault, where discursive practices are situated and involve power inseparable from knowledge.

⁷ I am not quite clear what Couldry takes to be the nature of the human subject. ‘Why after all believe in advance that what for convenience we might call a space of practices’ (the various practices of a particular collection of individuals) is more likely to be unorganised than organized?’ (Couldry p 2). This suggests that humans as subjects may relatively unproblematically be considered to be individuals (on the highly specific genealogy of this notion, see Bakhtin 1981; Rorty 1976).

⁸ Whereas Couldry is happy to take structure and convention as philosophical substances, I am interested in how apparent regularities come to be asserted, denied and opposition silenced. As such argument, contestation and conflict is often not made public, it is not easily observable. Consider the difference between the order and apparent compliance of students in lectures and classes compared with what they say about the lecturer elsewhere.

In addition, Couldry invokes a spatial metaphor of practice over ten times in a short piece. Taken together with the visual metaphor of observing (regularities, hierarchy, organization, subjects), it suggests that the default presupposition of uncritical realism is at work in which mind is ‘the mirror

structuralism or hybrid ontologies like Bourdieu's,⁹ for the moment we must assume that his is a conventional account of structure and convention. However there is a serious problem of explanation. If structure, convention, individuals and practice all have distinct, different, irreducible and non-derivative roles in explaining social life, what precisely is the explanatory status of each? And what is the relationship between them? What is the *explanans* and what the *explanandum*? Structure, convention, individuals and practice cannot each determine social action without trivializing the notion of determination. Or are we in a world in which the explanatory defects of any one is dealt with by deferring to and supplementing by the others, with all the attendant Derridean traps of *différance*? It is hard to see how Couldry can argue that his account of practice comprises a new paradigm even by the casual standards in use in the human sciences when, at least until he explains otherwise, practice apart it seems to be the default commonsensical position in much media studies. In any event, epistemologically the approach is so untidy and confused as to be largely vacuous.

How deep the differences are becomes clearer when we consider Couldry's account of understanding and translation. These he argues can adequately be addressed by recourse to intersubjectivity and a principle of charity, so opening two cans of philosophical worms which wriggle in directions he would hardly wish. In each case Couldry depend upon universalizable arguments which run directly counter to the evident advantage of a practice-based approach, namely its sensitivity to historically and culturally specific circumstance.

As to intersubjectivity, if recognition of others as subjects or objects is not just a matter of degree and kind, but is open to changing understanding by the parties involved and is conditioned in any instance by a range of circumstances which are so extensive as to be partly unknowable, what does intersubjectivity consist of on any particular occasion?¹⁰ And who gets to decide? Instead of solving the problem, by appealing to Wittgenstein's language games, Couldry falls back on pre-Heideggerian analytical philosophy which deals with ideal situations not lived experience.¹¹ To use his own image, Couldry has to 'anchor' the essence of the subject and intersubjectivity independent of any actual situations so that the knowing subject – the media studies scholar – may enunciate *ex cathedra* (or, in this instance, *ex London SE14*). If Couldry's approach cannot grasp what a fellow media

of nature' and knowledge is about polishing the mirror and making accurate representations (Rorty 1980). This would start to account for why Couldry has difficulty with my account of knowing and understanding as situated practices.

⁹ As Nightingale notes, the blending of semiology and sociology in 'new audience research' equally raises problems of translation (1996: 59) which Couldry's recourse to charity does not address.

¹⁰ As Schutz, an obvious starting point, noted of the sort of Weberian position adopted by Couldry:

Weber makes no distinction between the *action*, considered as something in progress, and the completed *act*, between the meaning of the producer of a cultural object and the meaning of the object produced, between the meaning of my own action and the meaning of another's action, between my own experience and that of someone else, between my self-understanding and my understanding of another person. He does not ask how an actor's meaning is constituted or what modification this meaning undergoes for his partners in the social world or for a nonparticipating observer... [He pays] little attention to the ways in which an interpreter modifies meaning... Far from being homogeneous, the social world is given to us in a complex system of perspectives... He naïvely took for granted the meaningful phenomena of the social world as a matter of *intersubjective agreement* in precisely the same way as we all in daily life assume the existence of a lawful external world conforming to the concepts of our understanding (1967: 8-9).

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of why Wittgensteinian language games are inapplicable to understanding translation, see Habermas 1988: 117-70.

scholar is arguing, why should we assume he can appreciate in significant detail how people living under varied circumstances relate to the media? How, for example, does his approach advance understanding of how different viewers actually engage with television?

Couldry's response to issues of translation is similarly problematic. He invokes Davison on the need for a principle of charity in translation. Not only do most of the problems of intersubjectivity return with knobs on, but he ends up with a largely situation-free account of language which might be suitable to philosophers, but is unhelpful to studying socially situated practice. Gellner offered a sustained critique of the charity principle for the kind of language use at issue. For example,

why should it not be a part of their use that the ambiguity of words, the logically illicit transformation of one concept into another...is exploited to the full by the users of what seems to be 'one' concept?... It equally blinds us to the possibility of, for instance, social control through the employment of absurd, ambiguous, inconsistent or unintelligible doctrines (1973: 39)

In short, practice defies the neatness for which Couldry seeks. For the mass media above all, I would have thought he would want to allow such complex and indirect use of language.¹² And who gets to wield the principle of charity? His approach sidelines questions of power in translation (Asad 1986; Hobart 1990). Couldry neatly demonstrates quite how ill-equipped existing media theory is to address media practice elsewhere. Indeed I begin to worry how well it can work on its home turf.

Couldry's argument exemplifies a wider point about academic practice itself, which is just how closed it is around known worlds and inscribed conventions of thinking. I am reminded of how Martin Hollis demonstrated with unimpeachable reasoning the impossibility of any other logic than the western one (Hollis 1970; cf. Hobart 1985). The Indian logicians writing for last couple of millennia had the misfortune not to have read Hollis and so did not realize what they were doing was impossible.

This discussion may help clarify why I argue for a radical account of practice. *Inter alia* the reasons are philosophical, political and moral. A cluttered ontology entails endless confusion as to whether you are attempting to explain, interpret, describe, or play with smoke and mirrors. Couldry's appeal to convention takes on a new significance. Perhaps what media scholars do is simply follow conventional procedures – normal science – however incoherent?

Short of opting for a naïve realism (Collingwood 1940: 20-33) which treats actions and thoughts as presupposition-free, scholars might consider the implications for power/knowledge of their arguments, because these come with all sorts of presuppositions entailed. Consider the consequences of unreflectively describing or imposing ideas of the human subject and intersubjectivity on others through, say, development projects, ideas about psychiatry, counselling, child-rearing. And what is at issue is not imperialism of the media industries, but of the supposedly left-liberal media scholars in their writing and teaching. That, as I understand it, is hegemony at work.

Finally, if post-coloniality is not to be a potentially cynical cover for such hegemony, it requires some kind of open, unfinalizable dialogue, even if this

¹² Whether images, and so film footage, can so easily be encompassed in a principle of charity raises another set of questions.

threatens the comfortable accumulation of academic capital. It requires throwing aside the safety mechanisms of clawback – structure, convention, principles of charity and so on – by which media scholars insulate themselves in favour of appreciating how other people may understand themselves and articulate the world in ways media scholars can barely imagine. At least, it was in that hope that I moved into media studies, not to redescribe a heterogeneous changing world in threadbare old categories. However different our approaches to practice, I am sure that Nick Couldry would share this hope.

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