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The 'Theory' in Media Theory: The 'Media-Centrism' Debate

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With the launch of a new journal called *Media Theory*, the question presents itself as to what is 'media theory', as distinct from social theory as applied to the media. There are certainly plenty of studies that consider the media in relation to the great traditions of sociology and critical theory, as there are also applications of various strands of political theory (pluralism, elite theory, class theory) and economic theory (neoclassical, political economy, institutionalism) to the media (Winseck, 2011; Waisbord, 2012; Cunningham *et. al.*, 2015).

Social theory can sometimes enter the media curriculum in unusual ways. In an earlier teaching role, I recall being part of a teaching team for a unit called 'The Media & Society'. In this unit, 'society' was synonymous with 'other things' that would be considered when you analysed the media, typically including gender, class, nationalism, race, power, sexuality, and so on. These social categories were rarely explained in any detail, at least not to the undergraduates, and functioned as marker points from which we could explain something related to a particular media text (a film, a TV show, a music video, a news story, an advertisement etc.). We also had distinct approaches to the teaching of film, with a unit with the title of 'American Film & Society' coexisting with a unit called 'European Cinema'. Putting aside the film/cinema distinction, the titles also suggested that the study of American film required that more attention be given to social relations and how they played out in particular films (e.g. constructions of race in *Do the Right Thing*), as distinct from the

more aesthetic focus given to the equivalent European films studied in the other unit.

So, is media theory basically social theory as applied to the media? And if so, would a new journal on ‘media theory’ be justified? In this short paper, I want to consider some approaches to media theory that have worked in the other direction – understanding media as having the capacity to reshape the social, rather than simply being shaped by the social.

Debating Media-Centrism

An interesting way to frame this discussion is to draw attention to recent work that has addressed the question of *media-centrism*. In a recent work on the role of media in enabling citizen participation and political citizenship, Grabe and Myrick (2016) make the argument that a more media-centric approach to understanding informed citizenship can enable a better understanding of trends in contemporary politics than the traditional approaches of political studies. They argue that political theorists underestimate the significance of media in democratic theory, because they use the ‘rational actor’ models of politics, and do not adequately consider ‘the deliberate entanglement of emotion with knowledge acquisition and political participation’ (Grabe & Myrick, 2016: 216). As a related point, the focus on information media and ‘hard news’, rather than entertainment and ‘soft news’ genres, fails to understand the extent to which so many elements of contemporary politics are played out in these popular genres, whose audience reach now considerably exceeds that of the traditional news media formats.

While Grabe and Myrick propose the need for a more media-centric approach to studying politics, David Morley (2009) called for a *non-media-centric* approach to media studies. By this, he meant giving more attention to the material as well as the symbolic dimensions of media. One example would be thinking about communications alongside transportation, as the infrastructure that moves people and commodities, as well as images and information, around the world. It would also involve considering in more detail how nation-states block as well as facilitate such

globally networked flows. A less media-centric approach, for Morley, would 'place current technological changes in historical perspective and returns the discipline to the full range of its classical concerns' (Morley, 2009: 114).

The question of media-centrism provides a window from which we can see how the relative weighting given to the media alongside other factors can generate different insights. For Grabe and Myrick, observations from how people use the media to engage with political phenomena opens up insights that often elude conventional political theory. Benjamin Moffitt (2016) has made a similar point about populism, observing that one of the features of populist political leaders is that they spend far more time engaged with the media – and entertainment and infotainment media more so than conventional news and current affairs – than their more traditional counterparts who lead the major political parties. By contrast, Morley feels that in media studies, the social perspective has been lost in some recent work on global and digital media, particularly around questions of '*who* is mobile in relation to *which* material and virtual geographies ... who has access to what, how that access is patterned and what consequences that access has for everyday experiences of movement' (Krajina *et. al.*, 2014: 688). This suggests that debating media-centrism may be one fruitful line of research associated with a new journal dealing with media theory.

The Ambiguous Legacy of Stuart Hall

Few individuals have played as central a role to the formation of contemporary media theory than Stuart Hall. A detailed overview of Hall's main arguments about the media would be beyond the scope of this paper, but his work brought two key concepts derived from Marxist theories of culture and ideology – the concept of hegemony, first proposed by Antonio Gramsci, and the concept of 'relative autonomy' derived from Louis Althusser – and placed them at the heart of understanding the relationship between media and wider social forces. While Hall was not exclusively a media theorist, he did identify the contemporary mass media as being central to questions of culture and ideology, noting in an early essay that 'the media have established a decisive and fundamental leadership in the cultural sphere

... They have progressively *colonized* the cultural and ideological sphere' (Hall, 1977: 340).

In the hands of a sophisticated theorist such as Hall, the balancing acts associated with mixing British cultural history with European structuralism (Hall, 1986), or proposing a 'Marxism without guarantees' (Hall, 1996) could be managed. Hall sought to maintain a notion of determinacy between culture and other levels of society (economy, politics, law etc.), and indeed saw the relationships between these levels as being 'mutually determining' (Hall, 1996: 44) in any given society. Indeed, the enduring significance of Marxism for Hall was its insistence that 'no social practice or set of relations floats free of the determinate effects of the concrete relations in which they are located' (Hall, 1996: 45), and in various works he distanced himself from the work of Michel Foucault, post-structuralism, and the discursive politics of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. At the same time, as Tony Bennett observed, Hall 'puts discourse on both sides of the equation', meaning that since "material conditions" ... are discursive in form, [they] cannot fulfil the role assigned to them of setting limits to discourse' (Bennett, 1992: 256).

As Hall's Marxist critics (e.g. Stevenson, 1995; Sparks, 1996) would observe, the 'social practices', 'concrete relations' and 'determinate effects' referred to in Hall's work continued to anchor it back to critical political economy. There is therefore a push and pull in the application of Stuart Hall's work to media studies. It can largely abandon political economy, except as a backdrop to understanding struggles over semiotic power, or the competing interpretations of images generated by socially-situated audiences (e.g. Fiske, 1992), or it can move in the direction of dominant ideology theories, albeit with more attention given to aberrant or resistant readings. For Murdock and Golding (2005: 61), studies of interpretations of media texts and online user self-expression are 'micro studies [that] are absolutely essential to a proper understanding of how people sustain their social relations, construct their identities and invest their lives with meaning', but must be accompanied by 'detailed examination of ... how the economic organization of media industries impinges on the production and circulation of meaning and the ways in which people's options for consumption and use are structured by their position within the general

economic formation'. In this way, the potential indeterminacy of cultural analysis of the media is folded back into the relatively stable structures of political economy and the ontologies of social theory.

The Mediasphere

In Hall's work, the tension between social structures and their modes of representation is often resolved by placing inverted commas around terms such as 'reality' and, as shown above, political economists have often responded by placing semiotic analysis back within the sphere of ideology and the formation of identities, bracketed off from the more 'objective' fields of political and economic power, which remain largely explained by Marxism. But other approaches have asked whether, if such forms and relations exist within discourse and representation, we could start from there instead. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) made such an argument around the concept of hegemony in political theory. Rejecting the distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices, and instead insisting upon 'the material character of every discursive structure' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 107). Breaking from Marxist political economy allowed them to point to the importance of representational keywords, such as 'democracy' and 'the people', as rallying concepts for the formation of cross-class alliances, in an approach that has proven important for understanding contemporary populist political movements.

A comparable move was made by John Hartley in his account of the *mediasphere*, developed in *Popular Reality* (Hartley, 1996). In the context of a historical analysis of the rise of journalism as the 'sense making practice of modernity' (Hartley, 1996: 33), Hartley identifies journalism as constituting the forms of discursive practice that bring together the producers of meaning, the spaces – physical and discursive – where knowledge is distributed and circulated, and populations that are both the consumers of media and potentially empowered citizens of modern nation-states. For Hartley, the relationship between knowledge producers (journalists and other cultural producers), media forms and their audiences constitutes the mediasphere, which 'connect[s] the public (political) sphere and the much larger semiotic (cultural) sphere, within the period of modernity' (Hartley, 1996: 78).

This framework allows Hartley to argue, as Grabe and Myrick do, that any understanding of contemporary politics and political culture needs to go beyond the domains of mainstream news, traditional journalism, political television etc. – the public sphere as traditionally defined – to include entertainment media, fashion magazines, advertising, and other forms not considered to be ‘hard news’. It also allows Hartley to reassert the centrality of the readership, or the consumers of media and culture, to the generation of meaning. The people are thus not only the citizens of a nation-state, or of a national polity, but also ‘citizens of media’ (Hartley, 1996: 71), capable of deploying the means of communication to advance democratic political objectives. In later work, Hartley would propose that such ‘media citizens’ are taking advantage of digital technologies to produce new forms of collective association, and self-organisation, around politics as much as around entertainment (Hartley, 2012: 143-145). Such an analysis can be seen as anticipating some of the more ‘populist’ political formations that have emerged in the wake of the ‘Occupy’ movement, such as the rise of Bernie Sanders in the U.S. and Jeremy Corbyn in the U.K., which have challenged traditional hierarchies within established political institutions as much as they have proposed new strategies for gaining and using political power.

Medium Theory and Media Ecologies

One very interesting debate in media history is that between the Canadian communications theorist Marshall McLuhan and the British cultural studies theorist Raymond Williams about how best to understand media technologies. For McLuhan, the media are fundamental to shaping human culture, and technologies are first and foremost extensions of our human capacities: ‘The personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology’ (McLuhan, 1964: 23). Since the ways in which we communicate, and hence our culture, are embedded within the technological forms that we use, the media influence not only what we think but also how we think.

His work explored the proposition that how societies communicate with one another through media technologies in turn shaped both the society (the social body) and the individuals within it. In other words, media form shapes its content. For McLuhan, the key to understanding electronic culture is neither in the technologies themselves, such as machines or computers, nor in the uses of their content or alleged 'effects', since the content of a medium is always another medium: 'the content of a movie is a novel or a play or an opera ... the "content" of writing or print is speech' (McLuhan, 1964: 26). Rather, the key issue is to understand how media technologies subtly transform the environment in which humans act and interact.

McLuhan's work was famously critiqued by Raymond Williams in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (Williams, 1974), which may be considered to represent the core counter-propositions from media and cultural studies. Williams argued that we have to see technologies as socially shaped by the political economy of the institutions that are engaged in their development. As a result, how a technology develops, and how it is used, is a matter of social and political choice; Williams discounted the idea that technologies themselves may shape such choices as ideological, believing that it obscured the element of social choice in ways that implicitly endorsed the control being exercised by existing powerful interests (Williams, 1974: 131).

In the context of the Internet and digital media, the frameworks developed by Williams and McLuhan generate important differences in focus. The social shaping of technology approach that Williams championed draws attention to the decisions made in the development and adoption of new media technologies; which people, groups and social institutions have the power to make such decisions, and what are the possible alternative uses of these technologies. It thus draws attention to the political economy of communications media and technology. By contrast, McLuhan's approach stresses the extent to which cultures become so immersed in modes of being and behaving that are shaped by their wider technological environment that our very ways of being human are inherently linked to the technological forms through which we extend our capacities and senses. Such an approach questions the extent to which we can therefore seek to understand culture independently of the technological forms through which it is always already mediated.

The approach associated with Williams has been the dominant one in critical media and cultural studies. But approaches that owe at least some debt to McLuhan have had some influence. One example is Manuel Castells' highly influential theory of the network society (Castells, 1996, 2009). Endorsing McLuhan as well as the postmodernist theories of Jean Baudrillard, Castells proposed that a network society is one where 'reality itself ... is increasingly captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting ... in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience' (Castells, 1996: 373). Drawing a similar link between culture and communication to that identified by McLuhan, Castells argued that 'because culture is mediated and enacted through communication, cultures themselves, that is our historically produced systems of beliefs and codes, become fundamentally transformed, and will be more so over time, by the new technological system' (Castells, 1996: 328). The implications for Castells are not confined to questions of culture and identity: the network society is based upon new forms of economic relations, while communication power is seen as shifting from the territorially based institutions of the nation-state to globally integrated networks and assemblages (Castells, 2009).

Joshua Meyrowitz (1994) used the term *medium theory* to refer to works that focus upon 'the potential influences of communication technologies in addition to and apart from the content they convey' (Meyrowitz, 1994: 50; c.f. Ellis, 2009). Such work includes the communication histories of Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, histories of print literacy and the origins of the book associated with authors such as Walter Ong and Elizabeth Eisenstein, and work on how 'electronic media ... altered thinking patterns and social organisation' (Meyrowitz, 1994: 53). Meyrowitz argued that such work needs to be complemented by consideration of how communications media reshape forms of social interaction, with particular reference to the relationship between group identity, socialization and hierarchy.

A related approach comes from what have been termed *media ecology* theories (McLuhan & Zhang, 2013; Ruotsalainen & Heinonen, 2015). Such approaches understand media 'not only as means of communication, but more as social environments akin to any other social environment' (Ruotsalainen & Heinonen,

2015: 2). Their proponents argue that ecological metaphors are particularly relevant to an age of the Internet, and of mobile and social media, since 'media as social environments [are] analogous to physical social environments' (Ruotsalainen & Heinonen, 2015: 1-2). The idea that the platform is the content, which appeared incongruous to many of Marshall McLuhan's original readers in the 1960s when used with regards to television, may make a lot more sense in an age of Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter, accessed from multiple mobile media in ambient everyday environments.

Mediatization

The final approach to be considered is that of *mediatization*. This has been most commonly referred to in political communication, with the *mediatization of politics* thesis, which has proposed that the changing structural relations between media and politics has developed to a point where political institutions, leaders and practices are increasingly dependent upon media and conform to the logics of media production, distribution and reception (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Esser & Strömback, 2014). But the mediatization of politics is for a number of key authors part of a wider mediatization of culture and society (Lundby, 2009; Couldry & Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2013).

According to these authors, the growing role of media to all aspects of public life has been a feature of the 20th and early 21st centuries. In order to differentiate this approach from media theory more generally, it is important to distinguish *mediatization* from mediation. Couldry and Hepp (2013: 197) observe that *mediation* 'refers to the process of communication in general – that is, how communication has to be understood as involving the ongoing mediation of meaning construction'. In the field of political communications research, such mediation goes back at least as far as the studies of public opinion and media influence by Walter Lippmann, Edward Bernays, Paul Lazarsfeld and others. But whereas mediation refers to technologically mediated communication in general, *mediatization* 'refers more specifically to the role of ... media in emergent processes of socio-cultural change' (Couldry & Hepp, 2013: 197). In relation to political communication, it marks the difference between what Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) referred to as the 'second

age' of political communication, marked out by the rise of broadcast television as the primary medium through which political information was provided and its consequences understood, to the 'third age' of political communication, where the public sphere itself, and hence the world of political action, is increasingly constructed through the media.

Mazzoleni and Schulz argued that the mediatization of politics did not in itself entail 'a media "takeover" of political institutions' (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999: 248). It was instead part of a process where politics 'has become dependent in its central functions on mass media, and is continuously shaped by interactions with mass media', so that 'the language of politics has been married with that of advertising, public relations, and show business' (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999: 251). Aeron Davis observed similar trends in arguing that the spread of promotional culture in the 21st century saw that 'politics, markets, popular culture and media, civil society, work and individual social relations have all adapted to promotional needs and practices' (Davis, 2013: 4).

Key indicators of the growing mediatization of politics include: politicians being increasingly focused upon how their actions play out in the media; the capacity of media institutions to shape the political agenda; political actors being increasingly aware that they compete for attention in the news with celebrities, human interest stories etc.; the growth of market research and public relations strategies within political parties; and the 'professionalization of political advocacy' (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999: 213) in order to 'gain control over the media' (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999: 252). The mediatization of politics is facilitated by wider trends in society and culture, the media, and politics, including an increasingly competitive media environment, the challenge of the Internet and social media to traditional communications channels, a polarization of political engagement between the highly engaged and the disengaged, the decline in traditional forms of political affiliation, and the associated decline in the membership of political parties.

The 'mediatization of politics' thesis was associated with political leaders such as Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, who promoted 'post-ideological' politics, were comfortable

with the growth of an 'entertainment frame' in political news, and invested heavily in the political communications strategies both to gain public office and after they were elected (McNair, 2011). There have been subsequent refinements of the mediatization of politics thesis, with one issue being whether 'the media' should be treated as a homogeneous bloc, while in practice important distinctions exist between public service and commercial media, 'quality' and 'tabloid' media, print, broadcast and online etc. (Lundby, 2009). Another issue, raised by Block (2013), has been whether the institutional model developed by Mazzoleni and Schulz rests upon an overly functionalist understanding of the role of media in democratic politics, and whether there is a need for consideration of the cultural dimensions of how citizens interact with mediated political communication.

Between the 2000s and 2010s, there have been important developments in both politics and media that indicate the need to modify the mediatization thesis, at least with regards to politics. The rise of the Internet and social media platforms as alternative modes of political communication have been linked to other shifts in politics, such as the rise of populist leaders and movements, the election of Donald Trump as an 'outsider' U.S. President in 2016, and the resurgence of candidates from the traditional left such as Jeremy Corbyn in the U.K. and Bernie Sanders in the U.S. Whether this is related to the decline of traditional news media outlets such as print newspapers, and the rise of alternative online news sources – sometimes erroneously labelled 'fake news' – is a subject of ongoing research. But certainly, if the argument is that politics and other areas of public life and culture are increasingly shaped by the media and by 'media logic', then we need to register that changes in the overall media ecology can be expected in turn to reshape those relationships.

Conclusion

In considering the various media-centric approaches to understanding the relationship of media to the wider society, my purpose has not necessarily been to advocate on behalf of these approaches. As is widely acknowledged (e.g. Meyrowitz, 1994: 70-73), there are a common set of critiques of media-centrism, including questions of technological determinism, an absence of consideration of

institutionalized power relations, and the question of social and political choice related to the development and uses of technologies. In this respect, Raymond Williams' critique of Marshall McLuhan continues to have contemporary resonance. There is also the difference of time scale. As Meyrowitz observed, the observation that the rise of print culture was associated with a long-term decline of religious authority 'would give little comfort to the family of William Carter who, after printing a pro-Catholic pamphlet in Protestant-dominated England in 1584, was promptly hanged' (Meyrowitz, 1994: 72).

My purpose has been instead to suggest that a new journal dealing with media theory should be open to consideration of those perspectives on the media that come from within the study of media itself. Concepts such as media-centrism, the mediasphere, medium theory, media ecologies and mediatization challenge some of the taken-for-granted assumptions of more traditional social theories as applied to the media, such as the primacy of news to the public sphere, or the idea that technologies are always subject to purposive human agency. Even concepts that have been central to contemporary cultural studies, such as Stuart Hall's notion of hegemony, register a degree of ambivalence about the structures of representation that frame social and economic relations. A new *Media Theory* journal could be an exciting space in which to engage in more speculative accounts of where our media technologies may be leading us socially, culturally, politically and economically. If so, it will be an exciting addition to the communication and media studies field.

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