reports and debates

debate:

Media Studies and the 'knowledge problem'

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I want to suggest that both teaching and research in Media Studies have a 'knowledge problem' which has recently become more visible and troublesome as a result of uncertainties, tensions and regroupings in the area. All fields of study have knowledge problems of course, and although they vary in the amount of self-consciousness they display about them and their degree of engagement with them, there has been a broad shift towards paying them more attention and making such attention an explicit and central part of study discourse.

Knowledge problems concern what it is that academic inquiries seek to find out, and the kinds and quality of data and of explanatory relations which particular ideas and methods might be expected to produce. In response to them, disciplines not only engage more closely and innovatively with questions of conceptualization and technique, but also develop a reflexive, sceptical sense of their own knowledge production and its vulnerabilities. From some perspectives, this sense may be considered radical, in that those who have it are placed in the position of professional doubters rather than practitioners in relation to the disciplinary project. One effect of the sweep of postmodernist thinking in the humanities and social sciences has undoubtedly been to encourage this latter tendency.

The distinctive character of the problem – or better, the set of problems – which confronts Media Studies is due partly to the history

of this field, partly to the very diverse nature of its object of study, and partly to the particularly ambitious form of interdisciplinarity to which this diversity tends to lead. I am talking primarily about upper case 'Media Studies', a singular noun designating an institutionalized, self-conscious grouping, rather than lower case 'media studies' (studies of the media), a plural designation referencing a broader range of work distributed across humanities, social science and even technological fields.

Media Studies needs to engage with expressive form, social action and social structure. It needs to explore the political and psychological determinants and consequences of media processes, as well as their discursive and technological means. To do this, it necessarily either draws on directly, or else 'shadows' with varying degrees of explicitness, concepts and methods developed in the primary disciplines. How far does it thus constitute itself as a unified project of inquiry? Or how far does it become an *aggregation* of inquiries, which are placed into tighter or looser relationships of contiguity with each other and have greater or lesser levels of mutual awareness and tolerance? If the latter were the case, one would expect the knowledge problems themselves to be an aggregation of the problems confronted by the constitutive disciplines. They would not therefore be addressable at a general level since the field would have no general discourse of inquiry within whose terms it could consider itself. But without such a discourse, what constitutes 'core knowledge' in the area for the purposes of teaching and research training programmes? Such a question has become a very real one for many course planners and others active in institutionalizing (and, indeed, variously assessing) Media Studies.

The particular academic configuration of British Media Studies today is primarily the product of two things. First of all, a certain combination of arts and social science approaches to the analysis of the media, institutionalized in the design and teaching of the interdisciplinary Communication Studies courses of the 1970s. Secondly, the legacy of Structuralist Marxism. North American, Australian, other European and Scandinavian versions of Media Studies vary in the resemblance they bear to this formative mix, but the relationships and interconnections are never quite the same.

The arts and social science combination in Media Studies is essentially one which brings together 'criticism' and 'sociology' as modes of academic knowing. Criticism is a mode privileging *individual percipience*, in which knowledge is the product of sustained analytic attention and intellection. It has a direct, informing link with 'opinion' and, indeed, it is 'opinion' rather than 'theory' as such which is its main generator of ideas. That such opinion is, by definition, subjective (often deeply and self-declaredly so) is by no means a drawback to the larger project of intercritical activity (characterized as 'debate') In literary studies, for instance, a

powerfully rendered account of a major novelist may be prized for its 'originality', precisely for the way in which it differs from the interpretations made by other people. In order for it to be acclaimed thus, it is necessary for some assumptions to be made about what is 'there' to be the object of such 'insight', yet this does not mean that the new interpretation has then to be established as dominant in relation to others. Critical knowledge does not contain truth claims requiring supercession or even superordination of this kind.

Sociology, on the other hand, in its classic and defining empirical project, is essentially a mode privileging *method*. However cautiously it relates itself to (or distances itself from) natural science paradigms, the production of knowledge is normatively regulated by the use of procedures which are explicit, in line with intersubjective agreements on validity (even if these are only partial) and able to be replicated by those who wish to 'test' findings. What the procedures produce is, first of all, 'data', and then an analysis and explanation of this data. Both data and the analyses which are made of it (the two should not be confused) have a very different status from 'criticism'. It can be recognized, without thereby succumbing to positivism, that data carries claims to objectivity, however much these claims are qualified by recognition of both the imprecision of the research tools and the 'constructional' dimension of the research concepts themselves. Analytical constructs used in asking questions of data and in attempting to answer them have objectivity obligations as a consequence, however tentative and conditional the honouring of these may be. *Theories*, here, are mostly explanatory propositions, with considerable attention being paid to those which are open to forms of empirical testing and, then, to the bodies of analysed evidence which result.

It is part of the intellectual history of Media Studies in Britain that it was formed, not only out of an increasing recognition of the media's political and cultural significance, but out of a dissatisfaction with both the perceived inability of literary-style analyses of the media to go beyond their textualist boundaries, and the perceived inability of conventional social science to engage with the complexity of meaning-making forms. The most influential perspective for this formation was Cultural Studies, the history of which has recently received a good deal of attention, at the same time as the field of study which is covered by the term has become increasingly subject to institutional variation and plain opportunism.[1] Initially an attempt to push out English Studies (meaning and value) to the point where an interconnection with the Sociology of Culture (structure and practice) could be established, Cultural Studies was soon displaying increased autonomy as an academic (but, at this stage, exclusively research-related) project The warrant for this autonomy came neither from literary analysis nor social science. It was taken primarily from Structuralist Marxism, with the Althusserian perspective on ideology

1 The major surveys include Graeme Turner *British Cultural Studies an Introduction* (London Unwin Hyman, 1990), Patrick Bratlinger, *Crusoe's Footprint* (London Routledge, 1990), and Jim McGuigan, *Cultural Populism* (London Routledge, 1992)

and the social formation as its 'sociology', and semiotics (taken largely from Barthes and Eco) as its 'criticism'. In relation to this broad framing, a Film Studies continued to exist and develop, deriving much of its own identity from its earlier literary and art historical connections. In some institutions this was extended to become Film and Television Studies in a manner which usually (and not unproblematically) continued to privilege the Film Study agenda. The broadest, and perhaps earliest, grouping for undergraduate work was Communication Studies, which often had a strong Cultural Studies element and a core of media work, but which also tended to draw on a wider range of arts and social science perspectives on communication, including those from psychology. The rapid development of Communication Studies in the mid 1970s was in part prompted by the need for polytechnics to design attractive interdisciplinary courses which could draw on a considerable range of staff interests. Alongside these interrelated projects, there remained a Sociology of Mass Communications (updated as Media Sociology), which was still the dominant category by which the systematic study of the media had an *international* identity.[2] Moreover, despite the growth in Cultural Studies approaches, some of the best research work done in the 1970s was done from within one version or another of a sociological problematic, though very few of the researchers were at that time involved in the construction of a field at undergraduate level [3]

If the most significant question for any academic venture concerns the kind of things it wants to find out, then the Media Studies produced within the framework of Cultural Studies worked with an exceptional directness of purpose. It wanted to find out how the media worked to achieve an effective level of ideological closure on contemporary consciousness in a situation of capitalist development where direct control at the point of production and/or consumption was admitted to be far from total. This was its defining problematic, and engagement with it (initially brilliantly suggestive but, one might argue, increasingly prone to repetition and self-confirmation) produced a strongly theoretical- critical discourse linked to a subtle, typologically elaborate scheme for investigating textuality.[4] The conventional body of social scientific analysis was often deemed to be unsuitable for the new task, being irredeemably flawed both in aims and methods. A conflation of 'empiricism' with 'empirical' too frequently provided the project with that *Other* against which it defined itself epistemologically and politically, reinforcing the tendency to circular reasoning. This did not stop substantial internal rifting on questions of theorization however, quite apart from sustained and cogent criticism from researchers whose own application of Marxism suggested the need for primary attention to be given to the 'political economy' of the media and who strongly contested the increasingly hermetic terms of Cultural Studies' attention to ideology [5]

The knowledge problems affecting current Media Studies have

2 A history of interrelated institutional and research developments in the late 1970s, particularly those relating to the course validations of the Council for National Academic Awards, would be useful I merely offer a background sketch here See also Alan Durant Noises offscreen could a crisis of confidence be good for media studies?', *Screen*, vol 32 no 4 (1991), pp 407–28

3 Apart from the continuing work of an older generation of social scientists, including Jay Blumler, Denis McQuail Jeremy Tunstall and James Halloran, there was the work, among others of Philip Schlesinger Michael Tracey, Philip Elliott, Peter Golding and Graham Murdock

4 Here, Hall's stencilled papers from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies were the single most influential publications, and often more theoretically cautious than selective quotation of the key formulations might suggest

5 Graham Murdock and Peter Golding at the Leicester Centre for Mass Communication Research were chiefly identified with this position following their article 'For a political economy of mass communications' in R Miliband and J Saville (eds), *The Socialist Register 1973* (London Merlin, 1973) As the Cultural Studies perspective increased in influence through the mid 1970s the terms of their critique became stronger

therefore to be understood, first of all, as ones relating to a non-unified field in which the very different modes of criticism and sociology have been brought together but, in general, *not integrated*. Indeed, it might be said that in many studies and on many syllabuses they have not yet fully come to terms with each other. Secondly, they have to be understood in relation to a formative period of development which was dominated by debates centred on a Marxist–structuralist paradigm, in which a comprehensive materialist account of media power, independent of non-Marxist modes of study, was seen not only to be in the offing but, indeed, to be already under refinement.

Perhaps more than any other area of institutionalized inquiry, this foundational version of Media Studies has, in effect, been left marooned within the new post-Marxist, post-Structuralist context for political and social debate. One has to be careful with the inflections of 'post' here. It is not useful to talk of 'the collapse of Marxism' in a way which primarily refers to the dissolution of Communist Eastern Europe but which then smuggles in assumptions about the 'collapse' of Marxist theory and analysis. Nevertheless, materialist theory itself has had to adapt (sometimes quite radically) to changed historical circumstances and to an intellectual context increasingly aggressive towards it. Even the terms of the Political Economy perspective, robustly historical and empirical though they were, have received adjustment and may well receive more.[6] Theories of ideology have virtually disappeared from the media research agenda altogether, though not from the undergraduate syllabus, where their gloomy diagnoses are sometimes to be found in bizarre combination with the cheerful populism which has become a more recent perspectival option.

An often ambivalent, running engagement with postmodernism has provided Media Studies with one avenue for the continuation, beyond Structuralist Marxism, of a semi-autonomous (and self-defining) critical discourse. However, there has been a discernible shift away from unifying high theory, a shift which has revealed more strongly the character of Media Studies as a divided field, running an arts and social science project together in ways which are often uneasy. No longer able to afford itself the luxury of devising its problems to fit already available solutions, it has been returned to a re-engagement with those discipline-based knowledge problems from which it once aspired to autonomy. Nowhere is this more true than in the rise of ethnography (both productional and consumptional) as a mode of media inquiry. Although an element in early Cultural Studies, it was only in the mid 1980s that ethnography started to become a defining approach, displacing textual analysis in research if not in teaching Ethnography initially promised a way of looking at ideological reproduction 'from the sharp end',[7] but it quite quickly modulated into being the methodological correlative of a more general shift from a primary concern with researching 'power' to either an emphasis on

6 The continuing case for 'Political Economy is updated in Peter Golding and Graham Murdock, 'Culture, communications and political economy' in J Curran and M Gurevitch (eds), *Mass Media and Society* (London Arnold, 1991) See also Nicholas Garnham, *Capitalism and Communications* (London Sage, 1990), particularly his introductory essay, which as well as reflecting on recent theoretical developments also argues against those tendencies which cut the field off from the main stream of social science (p 2)

7 David Morley seems to have been the first to use the idea of ethnography' as an indication of the *kind* of approach required, in his highly original CCCS stencilled paper 'Reconceptualising the media audience (1974)

'resistance' or an expanded, contextualizing interest in the way in which media meanings are articulated within the terms of the 'everyday', the multiple lifeworlds of society. As researchers soon became aware, whilst it could be innovatively applied to the researching of media meanings, ethnographic inquiry carried with it a long history of methodological debate, both in sociology and anthropology. Indeed, many of the inquiries into audience interpretation which have been undertaken in the last decade are radically *mis*described as 'ethnography', since their relationship to researched subjects and to data is often very different from that of the broader tradition.[8] These inquiries often (and justifiably) have a particularity of research focus around mediated meanings which makes them, by comparison, 'narrow' and even 'shallow' in their specifically ethnographical engagement.

Ethnographic work has typically run into two related kinds of problem as an academic project. It can slip into *descriptivism*, rendering even thicker accounts of process but being unable to make any clear connection upwards to explanation because of a gravitational commitment to ground-level phenomena. It can also suffer from an *empiricism* whereby this commitment makes it lose sight of its own constructed, authorial character. In recent work, a third problem can be discerned – largely a product of postmodernist influence. This is an over-correction of empiricism where the self-consciousness of the researcher is raised to the point at which interest in the researcher–method–subject relationship begins to displace interest in the researched subject itself. The first and the third of these tendencies are now discernible within the new media ethnography.

Put simply, then, a post-Marxist Media Studies has been substantially shorn of those intellectual features which gave the field a degree of unity. It has been returned to a multiple knowledge problematic which draws extensively on the problems of established disciplines and then adds to them issues of combination and adaptation. Its general theories of ideological function, and the contexts of social formation and historical trajectory within which these were set, have been exposed to radical doubt (the recent upsurge of interest in the ideas of Anthony Giddens, whose conceptualizations of structure and agency have been receiving intensive debate in Sociology for well over a decade, is just one sign of current theoretical reorientation).[9] The mode of textual analysis around which a large part of the field organized itself – semiotics – has received a general theoretical questioning as well as increasingly being seen to fail in generating significant and original substantive analyses. The push out to 'ethnography', while it has produced some excellent work, is in grave danger of running into the doldrums as theoretical uncertainties reduce the consequentiality of its data or it becomes obsessed with its own authorialism.

There is yet another factor, an 'opportunity' carrying the possibility

10 This is commented on in Durant,
'Could a crisis of confidence be
good for media studies?'
Durant's polemical discussion
engages with many important
points concerning the
development of media education,
doing so from a position often
close to the one I am outlining
here His own answer to his title
question is 'yes, it could

of 'threat', currently determining the shape of work under the Media Studies heading. This is the pull of vocationalism.[10] It would be hard to deny the mutual benefits of establishing a connection between study of the media and the acquisition of practitioner/professional skills Many institutions have put considerable effort into making these connections work at the level of student experience. But too often, despite the claims about integration and complementarity in course documents, there has emerged the strongly dualistic language of 'theory' and 'practice', a language in which the whole project of academic inquiry is radically misdescribed as 'theory' and thereby pre-packaged for *potential* marginalization as a form of 'complementary study' For if invited to allocate priorities between 'theory' and 'practice' in an educational world of increasing competition and scarce resources, what manager would not find the eminent soundness of the latter more attractive than the ethereal, not to say self-indulgent, ring of the former? To put it this way is to caricature the present situation, but many Media Studies departments could testify to the way in which what looked to be a splendid partnership between academia and the 'real world' can, when aided by certain committee decisions and nervousness over revenue, quite quickly turn into a relationship of domination, affecting resources, appointments, course development and careers. The emerging recipes for the expedient combination of academic and vocational goals will clearly exert a considerable influence on the mid 1990s identity of the area.

Such a view of Media Studies, facing a new and risky future situated rather uncertainly on the fringes of the social sciences (unlike Film Studies, it cannot situate itself primarily as an 'arts' project without a potentially fatal degree of contraction) might provoke several objections. Among these, it might be argued that the shaping influence of feminism and postmodernism upon the post-Marxist character of the field needs more attention.

Feminism has contributed important new ideas to the study of media processes, particularly to an understanding of the relationships between textuality and subjectivity. It has also produced an impressive range of new knowledge about the media and has considerably raised awareness of gender inequalities at all levels of the mediation process.[11] It is arguable, however, whether it has introduced wholly new *ways* of conducting research. Its conceptual and methodological innovations (and its valuable critique of existing practice) do not, on their own, seem to provide the basis for an adequate, 'internal' reconstruction of the field.

Postmodernism has become a quite central factor within the terms of much recent media analysis, but its weirdly dual status as both a *condition* to be debated (present or not? good or bad?) and as a *perspective* for reflecting on and analysing conditions, has made its influence more a matter of climactic change than intellectual renewal.

11 See for instance, the excellent
appraisals in Liesbet van Zoonen,
Feminist Media Studies (London
Sage 1994)

It is tempting to regard 'it' (the singular entity is presumptuous) as being as much a symptom of current cultural shifts and intellectual blockages as a means of engaging with them.

Do the scale and complexity of these knowledge problems suggest that it would be best for the area to disaggregate itself into separate discipline interests? No. As a collective grouping for teaching and research activity around one of the major defining components of modern life, the category of Media Studies continues to be a valuable one There is also a great deal of good and interesting work being done under the heading (certainly as much as, if not more than, within any other academic grouping of equivalent size) though it is being done from a range of different disciplinary backgrounds, using different concepts and methods and applying sometimes entirely different criteria about permissible forms of argument, about what constitutes 'evidence' and about the conventions for connecting propositions to data. In these circumstances, we need fewer rhetorical attempts at unification and at separate intellectual identity and a wider recognition of the lack of perspectival and methodological autonomy from the mainstream of international social studies which a post-Marxist Media Studies can claim. This means, among other things, recognizing a wider range of productive contexts for researching those questions of power, representation and subjectivity/identity which were so high on the 'autonomous' agenda although not always satisfactorily investigated within its terms. It means a re-engagement with general social theory and also a re-engagement with social research method at every point where the project seeks to produce something other than a discourse of 'criticism' (which it should also continue to do, exploring questions of form, value and response, whilst being very aware of what it is doing). It is important to note that these are not in any way conservative recommendations, fitting study of the media back, after a period of eclectic adventures, into the traditional and worthy frameworks of the disciplines. For it is clear that these frameworks and their associated methods have been fundamentally challenged at a number of points (by feminist research and by concepts of cultural process among other factors) and that hardly any social studies field has remained free of introspection, debate and change. But the project of social studies inquiry has not, as some would have it, collapsed into futility or terminal self-doubt, nor has it become indistinguishable from the various perspectives and procedures of the arts and humanities. Research on media and ideas about media processes need to be centrally introduced into its remaking and into its critical engagement with contemporary modernity.

In any reassessment of Media Studies, the question of how to think beyond 'ideology' is worth a measure of separate consideration On its pivotal importance to the field as initially constituted (and therefore on the size of the hole its waning now leaves), I am fully with Christopher Williams in his recent attempt at a critical stock-taking.[12]

12 Christopher Williams After the classic, the classical and ideology the differences of realism *Screen*, vol 35, no 3 (1994), pp 275–92 Williams sets out by appearing to take issue with an earlier piece of mine but his only substantial complaint seems to be that I do not go as far as he would wish in my questioning of 1970s theory See John Corner Presumption as theory "realism in television studies *Screen*, vol 33 no 1 (1992), pp 97–102

13 Williams, 'After the classic, the classical and ideology', p 276

14 Ibid p 287

Williams wonders if it is not 'the case that ideology has become a hopelessly unusable term?' and finds that, indeed, 'repeated wielding of the clumsy club' has had a widespread deleterious influence.[13] Offering a more positive view of the future, he notes that it needs to be 'replaced' and, with quite extraordinary optimism, that 'this replacement need not, I think, be too difficult'.[14] In fact, what Williams subsequently says shows the sense of brisk remedy to be deceptive. First of all, he suggests that the concept of 'ideology' can be broadly equated with the idea of the 'social', but this would seem to be true of only the most loose and totemic of usages and hardly offers adequate 'replacement'. More indicatively, he goes on to suggest a wide variety of different conceptual alternatives, each relevant to different areas of inquiry, thus abandoning his idea of 'replacement' altogether since it was precisely the job of 'ideology' to unify ideas about meaning and power across the full range of expressive forms. Is there not more which needs rescuing from the debates about 'ideology' than Williams suggests? What the term points to is the way in which the legitimation of economic and political interests interconnects with the making of public meanings, often by way of the naturalization of the contingent. The focus on the links between representation and power, between the aesthetics and logics of signification and the forcefields of value and disposition within which subjectivities are developed, seems well worth maintaining, albeit in rethought terms. No shift to 'opinion' or 'attitude' or, following Williams' concern with textual form, to 'diction', 'expression' or 'convention' will keep a tight enough hold on the factors which need to be addressed *in their interarticulation*. Open argument about these issues, particularly as they appear (or not!) in a range of current research contexts is now, I agree with Williams, one of the most pressing requirements.

Media Studies is still a new arrival within the institutionalized orders of academic inquiry. Its house-style of boldness and disrespect, its electicism and its conceptualizing zeal have brought dividends in the context of the older, often evaluatively conservative, disciplines. But as many of these disciplines rethink themselves in the 1990s, the same qualities could quite easily work against its possibilities for steady self-assessment and for theoretical and methodological reconstruction as, precisely, a *multi*-disciplinary field of social research. Since the variety, intensity and importance of the media industries and their activities continue to increase, this would be both an academic and a political loss.