

Finding our subject: Media Practice, Structure and Communication

I confirm that this is all my own work, and that where the material of others has been used it has been fully cited.

Abstract

*Media practice cannot be properly understood separately from its various contexts*¹. This can be taken as relevant in a number of ways: in terms of treating 'media' as an object separate from other practices, in terms of treating the study of media as a set of academic practices separate from a set of wider contexts, and in terms of treating communication as being separate from those engaging in it. The latter is often enacted by not paying attention to how communication is pre-supposed in academic practice. This third point follows on from and relates to the first two. In this paper I try and explain how, outlining the tensions between the formalisation of 'media' and 'communication' in academic practice, and a wider academic project seemingly based on various interpretations of democratic ethics.

A practice approach to media implies not taking media as a separate *a priori* kind. This is what is implied when we take media as some sort of fixed structure or category. Fixing media in this way tends to involve defining media as somehow separate from agents, subjects and other practices. This kind of reification of media risks obstructing an understanding of the relationships between media practice and other kinds of practices. Also at risk is an understanding of the ways in which media practices generate the forms that tend to be labelled as 'media' structures. These tensions point towards worthwhile areas for empirical enquiry that are obscured by defining media in a fixed way.

However these kinds of internal considerations are not sufficient for contextualising media practices as an academic approach. It is not as if we are operating in a value-free environment disconnected from any wider politics. 'We' (as a community of academic practitioners) also need to attempt to understand what motivates us to look at practice in the first place, what makes us single out media as an object of inquiry, and what are some of the likely intellectual and political contexts for this selective focus. This is the first set of issues that I will look into.

Addressing these wider questions gives us some background against which to examine the ways in which we define *media practice* within our own academic practices. I think a good approach to this is to take the following line of enquiry: Are there specific aspects of the media that typify them as differing so markedly from other forms of practice *a priori*? Alternatively do we need to be more careful with our analytical language, in order to be more sensitive as to how these distinctions are worked through in practice, by those engaging in those practices? In other words are such definitions better taken as part of our empirical enquiry rather than something resolvable at an analytical stage?

¹ 'Contexts' are difficult to find in practice, since they tend not to be objects sitting out there waiting to be found. They tend to be things attributed to other things, as part of defining an object in relation to its surroundings (Dilley, 1999.) This does not, however, mean that efforts towards contextualisation, or towards a more holistic approach to inquiry are without value.

I would argue for the latter position, and would say that this position has implications for how we focus our empirical work, how we deal with being self critical of our own analytical language and practices, as well as for how we understand the investigation of media practice in terms of some broader intellectual project. I give what amounts to a fairly personal point of view, in the hope of provoking a broader debate capable of relating these areas of concern to one another.

Democracy as a context for 'media' and 'practice'.

In order to give the study of media practices some context, we need to take a step back. Why do we care what people think? Surely we (this is a generalised, possibly Eurocentric, 'we') could make do with a society planned rationally and technically around the facts we can determine, and leave it at that?

Well perhaps we care because of some form or another of democratic political sentiment. We believe the will of the people, whoever they may be, to be of value and significance, because of a kind of democratic ethic, perhaps founded on some variation of a Kantian sentiment, that people are to be treated as ends in themselves and not just means to an end. Is this too sweeping a statement?

If we take a look at media studies, we can see that it arose at a time when democracy was becoming a political reality that the ruling classes in America were getting used to. In his book Edward Bernays lays out the need, in very honest terms, for the ruling classes to steer the masses via 'propaganda' in order to have any hope of social order within the potential chaos that is democracy (Bernays, 1928 see also Chomsky, 1997). Having served on the Creel commission set up by Truman to persuade the American public to enter the first world war, Bernays went on to become one of the founding figures in the public relations industry. Early academics involved in debating the media, such as John Dewey and Walter Lippman, were impressed by the activities of the Creel commission, and adhered to the idea that the intelligentsia should work actively to provide leadership for mass opinion (Chomsky, 1997.)

Thus the early Media and Communications work that Lippman, Dewey and figures like Lasswell engaged in, explicitly concerned itself with questions of democracy, and a voting public informed by good quality public debate, whatever the criteria were that were applied to that. (Carey, 1989: 22.) But the underlying agreed upon was the importance of public debate in a democracy.

More recent work on communications in development (Servaes, Jacobson & White, 1996 also O'Siochru) makes this strand even more explicit, discussing issues of 'participation' in communication as a right and a good, surely based on an ethic of what democracy is, or should be. This is of interest considering how strongly contemporary development debates are oriented towards issues of governance nowadays (Bastian, 1997; Leftwich, 1994).²

² These governance agendas bear strongly on questions of democracy and democratic debate, and yet have received little critical attention from within Media Studies, or the Anthropology of Media, despite a considerable literature within the Anthropology of Development.

If you look at Anthropology, and practice approaches in Anthropology, the picture is less clear. I will limit myself to the observation that the intense interest in questions of representation and voice for the other (e.g. Clifford & Marcus, 1986) must bear some relation to a democratic and Kantian ethic of some sort. To put it plainly once again, why do we care so much about what people think?

The objections to a society purely composed of rational planning extend into practice approaches, which can be seen as a response to a rational objectivist or technical approach to social 'reality.' Whilst practice approaches have been presented as breaking down a false distinction between objectivism and subjectivism (Bourdieu, 1990) it is clear that the hegemonic view that is being addressed is a rational, technical and objectivist one, that relegates "subjectivity" to the second division. So practice theories themselves can be seen as a response to democratic concerns over what people think. They also allow the investigation of how the ways in which people think and act are constitutive of the social, thus underlining the point that such things make a difference in measurable and appreciable ways.

But what are the implications of this 'democratic' context, in terms of academically approaching media as practice? Some of the debates around democracy have quite a strong bearing on how we might understand such work as part of a wider academic project.

A few of the critiques of democratic theory and practice share a common theme that can be typified crudely by using terms from economic anthropology (Wilk, 1996: 3-12). Approaches to democracy are broadly speaking critiqued for tending towards *formalism*, to focussing on the forms and routines of democracy, as being universal and abstracted away from specific instances. Such formalism is given priority over *substantivism*, where attention is paid to substantive examples of democratic practice, as embedded in people's life-worlds and recognisable day-to-day practices. This is a crude typification, but I will try and illustrate it with some examples.

Media, and democracy, in practice

Once again we find the paradox dominating the whole of social action: freedom exists because society does not achieve constitution as a structural objective order; but any social action tends towards the constitution of that impossible object, and thus towards the elimination of the conditions of liberty itself.

(Laclau, 1990 in Keenan, 2003: 102)

Why does Keenan, writing on the problems of democracy, deploy such a suggestively similar quote as the following one used by Askew, writing on the emergence of the Anthropology of Media as a sub-discipline?

Meaning can never finally be fixed. If meaning could be fixed by representation,

then there would be no change - and so no counter strategies or interventions. Of course we do make strenuous attempts to fix meaning - that is precisely what the strategies of stereotyping are aspiring to do... but ultimately meaning begins to slip and slide, it begins to drift, or be wrenched, into new directions.

(Hall, 1997: 270, quoted in Askew, 2002: 6)

This raises some questions: How are these quotes linked, and why do I consider this linkage significant in understanding media practices. And why, following on from this, is there a link between debates on the Anthropology of Media and the nature of democracy?

Well firstly it is no real accident that these quotes are linked, since Hall, one of the founding fathers of cultural studies, explicitly cites Laclau as one of his major theoretical influences (Slack, 1996). This has become a significant part of the understanding of media practice, since cultural studies strongly influenced the early work on audiences, which led toward the adoption of ethnographic methods in Media Studies. Debates between Morley (1992,) Fiske (1987) and Ang (1996) on the constitution of audiences, hinge very much on where, and how meaning is fixed, loosened and 'wrenched in new directions.'

Another question is: why does Keenan cite Laclau in his treatise on the problems of democracy as an ideal? One good reason is that Laclau dedicates his work to the realisation of a form of radical democratic struggle, one that hinges on the radical open-ness of 'meanings.' Despite the emphasis on 'articulation', Laclau's work was not, first and foremost, about communication. It focuses on what a socialist strategy might look like in the face of power seen in terms of hegemony (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985.) This strategy is explicitly aimed at informing both the politics of Practice and the practice of Politics, hence the titles of his works ranging from 'New revolutions of our times' to 'Hegemony and Socialist Strategy.' This socialist strategy was to be a radicalisation of democracy, particularly extending democratic practice to every aspect of people's lives.

What is ironic in this is that this work has been criticised precisely for not addressing how such democratic sentiments might work in practice. It tends to focus on the importance of the open-ness and disputability of all meanings or interpretations as a key element of pluralistic democratic practice. Alan Keenan points out that there are certain minimum requirements for establishing democratic practice. These include determining who 'we the people' are and having some agreement as to how 'we' are to be ruled (Keenan, 2003: 140-143).

Even if these are not conditions often met in practice, they are a requirement in terms of how democracy is most often defined in theory. This presents an *apriori* problem for a theoretical approach such as Laclau and Mouffe's, centring so much on open-ness: How is democracy to be established in practice when this requires substantive

determinations in order for this to occur? These substantive determinations are not easily reconcilable with ongoing radical open-ness and un-finalisability. Specifically, how can radical open-ness lead to the types of determinations required for putting democracy into practice?

Laclau's work is formalist in the sense of focussing on *a priori* theoretical issues without placing enough emphasis on how these *a priori* theoretical issues might be addressed in practice. Thus his implied formalism tends to obscure how democracy might operate substantively, in practice. However he does not seem to be alone in this tendency, since this formalism seems to be a tendency observable in many instances of how democracy is practiced.

Abrahamsen, in her survey of the unfolding of governance programmes in Africa, points out how democracy as a formal procedure does little to guarantee substantive improvements in people's day-to-day lives. Despite the rolling out of democracy in Africa, the main concerns that people might have, e.g. for schooling, healthcare and livelihoods as is the current received wisdom on human needs, have not been well met (Abrahamsen, 2000.)

This is partly due to a formalistic approach to economics taken by international financial institutions like the World Bank and IMF (Stiglitz, 2002). This economic formalism precludes governments from 'squandering' money on large-scale welfare programmes, via the policy packages which are attached to access to international finance. Democracy in such cases seems to involve not giving the people what they want. This is part of a more general tendency in international law and politics, with civil and political rights systematically privileged in international law, over social cultural and economic rights (Sengupta, 2000).

My overall contention is that in terms of both 'media' and 'practice' we are operating in a political and intellectual context that is generally premised on some set of democratic ethics. This is not to universalise a particular form of democracy, to impose it on the rest of the world, as is criticised in post-development discourses (Escobar, 1995). I am making observations about what seem to be variations in democratic ethics found running through the many of the academic contexts relevant to considering media as practices. As I have outlined it, these include theories of practice, reflexive approaches to anthropology, mainstream media studies, as well as the kinds of media and cultural and audience reception studies that most closely border on the ethnographic approaches of an Anthropology of media.

I am not proposing any model of democracy as universal. Rather what I am doing is criticising a tendency towards hegemony within these 'democratic' contexts of opting for the formal (or universal) over the substantive. This follows on from my earlier work considering the ways in which 'liberal subjects' are universalised within the English-language media (Taghioff, 2005.) But what (on earth) has this got to do with media studies and media as practice? To recapitulate a little, Media scholars have focussed a lot of attention on the role of public debate in democracy. But in the process, media has been formalised away from other types of practice, becoming viewed as formal structures with their own essential properties. There seems to be a strong parallel to approaching democracy in formalistic terms, since it systematically excludes the rest of people's life-worlds from the study of the media.

In this way people's life-worlds are rendered as separate from issues of formal democratic public debate, and thus the formalisation of democracy is furthered. All this has profoundly disturbing implications for any sense of democracy where 'we the people' is taken to mean all of the 6 billion or so people we estimate to live on this planet. Practice approaches to the media can contribute to the re-embedding of questions of power and communication within other concerns and practices, and so can render the study of media and communication as more substantive issues.

This brings us on to our second and third concerns, namely those of what are the problems with studying media as structure rather than practice, and what are the implications in terms of how we understand communication as operating in our own analytical language. Since others are dealing with this area in more depth, I will limit myself to taking a very specific route through this territory, looking at the relationships between structure-oriented approaches and the fixing and mechanisation of communicative practice that this tends to imply.

Firstly I will consider what the notion of structure necessarily implies in terms of how we understand communication as operating. I will look at the *a priori* problems with this. Then I will look at what this implies in terms of the relationship between structural approaches and how we understand communication, and what this means in terms of academic practice and empirical enquiry.

Structure and the mechanisation of communication

A structural approach to the media would tend to treat the media as a category with some set of characteristics that it, as some sort of coherent object, confirms to. However such a view has a number of problems associated with it. The first is the diversity of what is referred to as 'the media' as well as the diversity of points of view that are implicated with the practices that end up lumped together as being 'the media'.

But, to look at things from another angle, how might an idea of 'media as structure' be at all workable when considered as a part of practice-based approaches? This can be thought through in terms of asking how 'the media' might be passed on as a fixed category, whilst still viewing this category as something embedded in social practice.

The problem can be formulated from the following starting point: ideas do not tend to reproduce themselves, like mystical computer viruses. 'The media' as an abstract category lacks the apparatus for reproducing itself, it cannot speak - it has no voice-box- and it cannot write as it has no hands. There is little solution to this problem other than admitting that 'ideas' and 'structures' - and social orders more generally - are passed on in practice, via what is most often called 'communication' in its various forms.

This problem raises a number of issues. The first is that all practices carry traces not just of their 'practical' relationship to external material, but also traces of their intelligibility as things passed on between people. As such all practices carry communicative aspects as traces of their 'reproductive history' as well as part of their

conditions of possibility of being 'social' practices. Intelligibility as a practice is necessary since a social practice is a way of doing things that is publicly recognised of being of some sort of type. Practices must be passed on between people, and then recognised amongst them, so issues of communication and intelligibility must be part and parcel of them.

This implies that 'media' and 'communication' practices are not *a priori* of another kind than other practices. There is merely a difference of emphasis and degree, and of how a practice is publicly recognised. In the case of media and communication practices, the issue of intelligibility is fore-grounded. This implies that the distinctions between 'media' and other things must be investigated empirically, in practice, rather than be assumed *a priori* as a part of our analytical language.

This is particularly tricky because assumptions about communication are a necessary part of any theorising, since theorising implies structure and order to some extent, since there is a claim built into theorising that the world confirms in some predictable manner to some set of abstract categories. From a practice perspective, these categories, like any other, face the ubiquitous problem of how they are passed on socially. Just like a structural view of 'the Media', the assumptions of structure built into theorising must also pass through the eye of the needle that is 'communication'. An implied structural view, within theorising, will therefore in turn involve some implied model of communication, as a condition of possibility for the social ordering that such theorising claims to refer to.

This is problematic because communication is not something that is necessarily *a priori* oriented towards generating order and fixity. What is communicated and interpreted is necessarily selective and partial, and related to the positioning of the interpreter or communicator. It is impossible to produce a perfect copy of something else, since the copy must at least occupy a different positioning in order to be recognised as distinct from its original. So *a priori* any copy, representation or interpretation cannot be the same as its original. Some sort of transformation must have taken place (Goodman, 1976). Since communication involves both representation and interpretation, it also necessarily involves some degree of transformation as well.

In terms of social practice, communication must necessarily occur between subjects, since social practice is something recognised as being of a certain type. And such recognition is a type of agency currently exclusively attributed to social subjects. So in the reproduction of social practice, transformations occur and this is currently necessarily implicated with the positioning of agents and subjects in specific instances of practice (Hobart, 1999.)

This implies that things get changed, re-interpreted, reworked and possibly misinterpreted or ignored in the process of communication. This in turn means that 'communication' as the perfect reproduction of fixed ideas is a very fragile ideal (Hobart, 1996), something that would require a lot of active stabilisation in practice in order to be possible to even the most partial of degrees.

But what would 'communication' - of the type required by a structural view - look like? Firstly it would need to make as perfect copies as is possible of its original, and

secondly it would need to exclude the subjects and agents that might distort or transform the message. Oddly enough there is a model of communication that fits this specification very closely, one that has become very much talked about recently, that of 'information'.

To 'inform' somebody is, in everyday language, to relay a set of facts to another.³ Implied by this is a sense that the facts are relayed faithfully and transparently. In a strong interpretation this would imply that these facts are unchanged, uninflected, not emphasised in any new way, and not associated with new contexts that differ from those of their original presentation. This strong interpretation of what it is to 'inform' is seldom followed, or expected, in practice, but it gives clues as to where discourses on 'information' are drawn from.

'Information' is an idea drawn from 'information theory'. This is a very specific formulation laid out by Shannon in his seminal paper (Shannon, 1948). It describes a form of communication, where entropy (or disorder) is minimised in the transmission between machines. Here a perfect copy is striven for, and social agents or subjects are excluded, since this is explicitly machine-to-machine communication. This is a thoroughly mechanical model of how communication might propagate order or structure.

This is a more general feature of structural or pre-theorised approaches: The agents and subjects must in some way be excluded from practices of communication. In particular these exclusions will tend to be around the practices of communication that are implied in terms of how these structures, or ideas, might be passed on, propagated or instituted in practice.

This exclusion of social agents from this kind of structure-reproducing communication is necessary. Since situated agents necessarily transform what they represent, the presence of social agents in communication would tend to confound this kind of predictable reproduction of structure and order. Also, since social agents tend to be reflexive, to be able to reflect upon and modify their own practices they tend to be unpredictable. So the ways in which they transform when they represent, communicate and interpret will also tend to be unpredictable. This confounds one of the main criteria for structure, that of predictability (Hobart, 2001).

That 'information' is such a pervasive model or metaphor for communication within contemporary academic practice should be a warning to all of us. This is a metaphor which, like Reddy's conduit metaphor (Reddy, 1979), separates the communicator, the message and the content from one another, denying the active relationships and transformations that are so often characteristic of communicative practices, and of the political more generally.

Since as I discussed earlier, this kind of implied mechanisation of communication is necessarily implied in academic practice where pre-theorising or pre-interpretation is involved, then this issues of separating and reifying away from one another, message,

³ 1 impart knowledge of some fact, state or affairs, or event to; "I informed him of his rights"

2 give character or essence to; "The principles that inform modern teaching"

3 act as an informer; "She had informed on her own parents for years"

see: <http://www.wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn>

sender receiver and conduit is likely to be a pervasive implied feature of academic practices in general.

This seems like an area where it is easy for the active exercise of power to sleight itself away as structure. It also parallels a sense of people being denied democratic participation through the formalisation of what public debate might entail, surely a concern for an ethnographically oriented Media Studies. We must be careful not to obscure people's participation in the communicative aspects of practice by imposing our own formal assumptions unquestioningly⁴.

What are the implications of this for empirical enquiry?

I'd like to round up with two main sets of implications. The first relate to how we understand media practice. Since media practice is not *a priori* differing from other kinds of practice, this implies a need to investigate how practices become recognised as being *media* practices, and how people define, understand and relate to these recognitions as they engage in practice.

One way of approaching these questions is by paying attention to new and emerging forms of practice, such as the internet, blogging, texting, mobile phones, internet chat, and so on, in order to see how they become regarded as 'media,' 'communication,' 'public' or 'private' or whatever else it is that people recognise them as. Another is to pay attention to how existing forms of practice are recognised in new or differing ways. This is an ethnographic question of categories in practice, which must not get neglected if we are to be able understand media in relation to social change.

This leads us into a second concern. As discussed earlier, academic discourse is necessarily shot through with assumptions about communication, about order and about the regularisation of practice. Regularised communication, akin in some way to an information model, is required as a necessary logical pre-cursor' to order or structure. This assumed fixing of communication is required in order to set up some sense of the world corresponding to theoretical tidiness. Without this implied fixing of communication, there is little practical way of explaining how the pristine forms of

⁴ Formal assumptions about communication are built into theorisations that try and fix a human subject or agent as predictable, in order to underpin a sense of social order. Admitting participation in the complexities of communicative practice involves acknowledging how subjects and agents are able to reflexively modify their practices (Hobart, 2001) doing so as complex agents that confound both individualist and collectivist approaches (Inden, 1990.) This renders subjects or agents as highly unpredictable. An example of a formal assumption about communication can be drawn from recent discourses on trust (Fukuyama, 1995) and social capital (McLean, Schultz & Steger, 2002). The prisoner paradox that is used to illustrate how trust works is based on the premise that the parties are separated from one another, and so cannot communicate when deciding to co-operate or not. It is this implied assumption about communication (or rather a lack of it) that allows the fixing of the agents involved as predictable. In this particular theory, this comes out in terms of 'tit-for-tat' being a universal optimal strategy. There is general work to follow up here between how theories tacitly or explicitly frame agents and how these theories are mobilised in practice.

theoretical structure manage to reproduce themselves in the world, at least as it is brought into being via social practice.

The clash with formal assumptions, especially around communication, has always been an issue for studies of practice, since practice necessarily carries traces of its own intelligibility, and thus some implied sense of communication. Thus implied stabilised models of order and communication have always carried tensions with practice-based approaches, and the models of communication and intelligibility embedded within practices.

However, it is a problem heightened when dealing with media practices. We are dealing with an area that is both historically and presently implicated with questions of democracy and power, and where issues of intelligibility have more of a tendency to be fore-grounded. *A priori*, assumptions about communication, which are almost invariably embedded in academic practice, carry serious risks with them in such a context.

Firstly, we risk theoretical incoherence if part of our approach implies a model of communication likely to be contradicted by other parts of our approach, such as when a mixed structural and practice approach is taken (see Hobart, 2001.) Such contradictions are also a risk in terms of empirical enquiry, since our assumptions may well clash with what we observe. Not only is there a further danger of incoherence, but also of simply ignoring the things that do not fit with our preconceptions. This brings us on to a third risk that relates to media practice as part of a wider academic project. We risk being very 'undemocratic' if we proceed with assumptions that deny people's participation, by implicitly separating them from what they say and do.

Rather we need to investigate people's participation in media and communication practices, and use this to unravel the assumptions we have about communication. Where regularity does occur in practice, we need to look at how this is maintained. The issues considered here allow us a particular focus on how this is related to issues of communication, particularly in terms of how communication is actively regularised.

If we are to be 'democratic', to be responsive to people's attitudes and life-worlds, then it is important not to forget that things change, and that we should approach our assumptions about communication and social order in the light of this. And if we wish to question our 'democratic' impulses, what then? In any case we need to be vigilant as to how we stabilise communication in our own theories and practices, since this has implications for how we approach finding out how others stabilise theirs.

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